

CONSOLATIONS OF THE SEASON

Luke 2:22-40ⁱ

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Wildflower Unitarian Universalist Church, Austin, Texas

by Richard Austin Thompson

Friends, I begin today with a confession. I must admit to you that this is not the first Sunday I've preached on this text. But I suppose that after being in one pulpit or another for over forty years, you might not be all that surprised that I've repeated myself once and awhile. I have sometimes said that if there can be reruns on TV, why not in church?

But what makes this replay of the New Testament text different today is that you are different audience, with a different set of needs than those I've spoken before on this subject. Also I have become different over time. What this story once said to me has been replaced by another meaning

What I have more often than not emphasized before is the theme of arrivals and departures. Such transitions are explicit in these verses. There was the arrival of the Christ child. There was the old priest Simeon, who prayed, "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace." He was in other words ready to die because his hopes had been fulfilled.

But it was his hope which now becomes the focal point of my attention – the hope Simeon had "for the consolation of Israel." That expectation meant the coming of a Messiah, "the Lord's Christ," who would console the chosen people for all of the suffering which they had undergone. With that fulfillment, then Simeon was able to rest in peace. In Latin this text has from the fifth century been given the title "Nunc Dimittis," literally meaning "now depart."

That is something of what consolation meant in this biblical time and place. But what does consolation mean to us? What is our need for it? And what are the resources by which we may avail ourselves of it?

When it comes to the contemporary meaning of consolation, we perhaps do well to note how the word does not have an altogether positive connotation. For example, we speak of consolation prizes – for those who don't place in a contest.

But actually consolation has a much stronger meaning than that. That power comes through in Greek word for consolation used in the text. It

is "paraklesis," as in "Paraklete," the term used for the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, literally one who "stands beside" people to provide strength and cheer. That original meaning is closer to what some of us have experienced in Hospice bereavement programs, where solace is offered, but the result of the grief process is found to be hope.

So that gives some sense of the meaning of consolation. But how seriously are we in need of it? The fact is that humans in every age have been in profound need of it. . Just because we are human beings, we know that we will be suffering loss – loss from death of loved ones, loss of health, wealth, self-confidence, of faith, ultimately the loss of our own life. We humans are the only creatures in animal kingdom – as far as we know – to realize that we are going to die.

This morning's reading from the Hindu faith catches that poignancy:

Keeping step with that restless, rapid music,
seasons come dancing and pass away.

So the theory has arisen that religions are so universal, beliefs in God or gods so world-wide throughout history, in order to assuage the pain of our mortality. A recent front-page story of Time magazine featured the research which suggests that there might be a "spirituality gene" which has evolved to ameliorate the pain which comes from knowing that life is transient

However, even if that theory proves true, there is still no reason to deny a reality to which that spirituality is a response. Likewise, explaining how the eye works in beholding art is not to deny the beauty which is beheld.

So the need for consoling has always been a given for human beings. Yet in our age, the need for consolation has taken a particularly poignant turn. May I suggest that 9/11 has become the occasion not only for an endless fear-mongering, but for a corporate grieving which seems to have no end. There is a pall which has since hung heavy over our land, caused not just by the attacks themselves, but by the destructive response which has exacerbated terrorism – both on the part of others and of ourselves, as more innocent people have died in Iraq than were killed in the World Trade Center. Even the results of the last election have left multitudes depressed.

Now I realize that there may be different political views in this congregation, but I suspect that you are less like the Presbyterians

who have sometimes been described as The Republican Party at prayer. Consolation is, nevertheless, a need for persons of all parties in the face of the world's tragedies.

As we continue to seek consolation, there are certainly resources which readily present themselves. There is the support of friends and family. Indeed Christmas seems to be the season of consolation, often because of its association with home. That's why you keep hearing the song over the media and in department stores while shopping, "I'll be Home for Christmas." To be sure, the warmth of hearth and home can be comforting, a respite from the stress of life.

Yet just last week I was visiting the in the home of a family, after leading in the memorial service for a wife and mother who died suddenly of a heart attack. She was the glue which held the contending members of the family together. Now that she is gone, all the latent hostilities surfaced. One daughter quite explicitly told me, I just don't want to go home for Christmas. So it often happens that there needs to a consolation for the painful conflict arising within a family.

Hopefully, it may be the religious community which offers the balm needed.

I am reminded of a church I also learned about recently which sponsors a Blue Christmas service. It is for those who have no families, or who have suffered the loss of a loved one, or of a job, or who are otherwise grieving at a time when others are celebrating. Those who have attended attest to how healing it is to find a place of worship which honestly acknowledges the sorrow they are feeling. There seems to be no genuine and lasting consolation without first confronting the truth of one's loss. Hope must be built upon reality, without denying anything.

I was pleased to read in a recent issue of The Christian Science Monitor that hundreds of Unitarian Universalist Churches around the country have helped form small groups, which provide support to their members who are hurting. An instance which was cited was of a man who had been diagnosed with a terminal illness. The five others in his small group gave him strong encouragement to reconcile with his family who had become estranged since learning that he was gay. One of the group members reported that some of them had bridged the gap by phoning reluctant family members and facilitating meetings before he died. I commend this congregation for your having

established the pattern of small groups, which is to fulfill the petition in Francis of Assisi's beloved prayer:

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled, as to console.

And yet congregations themselves oftentimes need consolation. I suspect that you as Wildflower Unitarian Universalist Church have had some need this year. I understand that you lost your very short-term interim pastor earlier this year in an unexpected and sad way. Whatever the circumstances may have been and however varied the response may have been, there is no question that it is essential to be as true to the grief process in life together, as it is an individual's life. There is always the temptation to deny the need for grief work, to go on as if nothing had happened, or to make light of it.

Now I am not denying the importance of keeping a sense of humor about any situation of loss. It's why it's not unseemly for there to be laughter at a wake. That applies to pastors' departures, for whatever reason.

There's the proverbial story of the minister who was at such odds with his congregation that when he announced from the pulpit that had accepted a call to another church, all the parishioners arose in unison and began to sing "What a Friend We Have in Jesus"!

Certainly, we are going to need all the perspective which humor gives us to make our way through the dark days which may well lie ahead for our post- 9/11 nation and world. At this point, I have found consolation in what Martin Luther King Jr. affirmed when, in the face of a racism which seemed impossible to overcome, he declared, "The arc of history may be long, but inevitably it bends toward justice." That was his Simeon-like consolation, based on the conviction that God's power was stronger than death; that was his *Nunc Dimittis*. So he was able to depart in peace.

The verse from today's hymn expresses that same conviction in this way:

Dawn in every broken soul, as vision that can see the whole...

I would only add that God could be thought as the Divine Synergy, in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts; but a Synergy with a heart.

Without that inner experience of the Paraklete, of the Spirit standing beside him, King stated that he could never have led in the non-violent civil rights struggle. Such an assurance was contained in his speech accepting The Nobel Prize, made forty-years ago just this last Friday.

Another prophet of our era, who stood and marched beside King, is William Sloane Coffin Jr., one-time Chaplain at Yale and later head of SANE, the nuclear freeze organization. What Coffin confesses in his most recent book Credo is that social action is not enough, any more than pious bromides are not enough to offer lasting comfort.

It's no accident that of all the sermons Coffin preached, none has been more requested than the one entitled "Alex's Death." It was the about the accidental death of his son. What subsequently infuriated Coffin was the well-meaning re-assurance offered by those who said that the tragic happening must have been God's will. So Coffin wrote, "My own consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex died; rather it was in believing that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God's heart was the first all to break."

In like manner Henri Nouwen, a 20th century leader of spiritual formation for persons of all faiths, wrote A Letter of Consolation to his father six months after the death of Henri's mother. He observed, "The first Christmas without mother...we felt her absence in a new way...The pain we now feels shows how deep, full, intimate her love was...Is this consolation? It appears the opposite...But there is no other way...The same love that makes us mourn will free us to live in hope.

So is the consolation of the season experienced by those whose deceased loved ones are internalized, emotionally relocated within the heart, so making possible a re-creation, a new life ahead. Nicolas Evans expresses this consolation in his novel Horse Jumper, where he includes this poem, "Walk Within You":

If I be the first of us to die, let grief not blacken your sky.
Be bold yet modest in your grieving. There is a change, not a leaving.
For just as death is part of life, the dead live on in the living,
And all the riches of our journey, he moments shared, mysteries explored,
The steady layering of memories stored,

The things that made us laugh or weep or sing,
The joy of sunlit snow or first unfurling spring,
The wordless language of look and touch, each giving, each taking -
These are not flowers that fade, nor trees that fall and crumble.
Nor are they stone. For even stone cannot the wind and rain
withstand.
Mighty mountain peaks in time reduce to sand.
What we were, we are. What we had, we have.
A conjoined past imperishably present.
So when you walk the woods where once we walked together,
Be still. Close your eyes. Breathe.
Listen for the footfall in your heart.
I am not gone, but merely walk within you.

Now let us depart in peace, with the arrival of the One whose
consoling presence continues to dwell with us, as we become consolers
in his name. Amen.

ⁱ Luke2:22-40

22: And when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were
accomplished, they brought him to Jerusalem, to present him to the Lord;

23: (As it is written in the law of the Lord, Every male that openeth the womb shall be
called holy to the Lord;)

24: And to offer a sacrifice according to that which is said in the law of the Lord, A pair of
turtledoves, or two young pigeons.

25: And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same
man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Ghost was
upon him.

26: And it was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death, before
he had seen the Lord's Christ.

27: And he came by the Spirit into the temple: and when the parents brought in the child
Jesus, to do for him after the custom of the law,

28: Then took he him up in his arms, and blessed God, and said,

29: Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word:

30: For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,
31: Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people;
32: A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.
33: And Joseph and his mother marvelled at those things which were spoken of him.
34: And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against;
35: (Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.
36: And there was one Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Aser: she was of a great age, and had lived with an husband seven years from her virginity;
37: And she was a widow of about fourscore and four years, which departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day.
38: And she coming in that instant gave thanks likewise unto the Lord, and spake of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem.
39: And when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own city Nazareth.
40: And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him.