

Sermon Draft

Text: Mark 1:29–39

Sermon: “Christ Our Consolation”

Epiphany is a season of light and life. These realities are intimately tied to the Lord Christ, who is the embodiment of both these divine gifts. He dwelled among us and is among us still. By his Word, light and life break in on those who sit at his feet in the Divine Service. During the season of Epiphany, we focus on those demonstrations of divine authority that lead us to identify Jesus correctly. Christmas tells us that “God became man.” Epiphany tells us that this man is God. To be sure, the whole life of Christ is an epiphany, a revelation of God’s glory.

Christ’s Church on earth is home to many remarkably rich works of art. Marvelous theology can be captured through art, art that faithfully depicts deep truth and inspires the heart and mind.

There is a church in Sweden (Sofia Albertina Kyrka in Landskrona) that beautifully seizes on the divine reality that fills our Gospel lesson from Mark.

There is a painting above the altar in this church: huddled around the risen messianic figure of Christ is a multitude of people in various states of anguish. The painting is by Carl Bloch. The title of the painting is Christus Consolator. A consolator is “one who consoles.”

Consolator, as a word, is obsolete, according to Merriam-Webster. It is true; we don’t hear that word anymore. The word we do hear is consolation, and it is almost synonymous with loser. Who here has ever received a consolation prize? Were you ever genuinely consoled by a “consolation prize”? You just lost in front of gobs of people and someone extends to you a purple ribbon not blue, not red, not white, but purple. Go home and console yourself with this purple consolation prize; you lost.

There was a commercial from years past that I remember. A father and son were leaving the hockey rink. The announcer introduced us to Pete, still in his gear. He was the goalie who let the puck get by him and consequently lost the game.

The dad, who felt his son's anguish but who also knew that life is much more than hockey, offered his son a wintergreen Life Savers candy. The son grudgingly took what his dad offered. The dad told his son that when Dad fumbled and lost his high school's big game, it took a whole roll of similar Life Savers candies to make him feel better. The son turned to his dad and smiled and asked him if he had a whole roll. The dad consoled his son by reminding him there would be other games. Then the scene ended, and the announcer told the viewer how to interrupt the scene: Life Savers candies are a part of life.

A roll of wintergreen Life Savers candies may be useful for some occasions, but the people in the Christus Consolator painting do not strike me as those who could make do with a mint. A prisoner in chains is looking for relief from his sins. A cripple has seemingly lost the will to live. A man so poor and skinny wonders where he can find hope. A widow huddles beneath the fold of Christ's garment. An orphan looks out at us, forlorn.

A doubting-Thomas type wrestles with his skepticism. None of the figures in the painting is a biblical character. Instead, they are representatives of the countless people through the ages who have encountered Christ the Consolator. ***“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest”*** (Matthew 11:28).

We find refuge in him, the Consolator. In Him we find rest, he affords us the supreme comfort of his love, his forgiveness, his death and resurrection, his life, and his heaven.

Jesus strides into a sickroom. Peter’s mother-in-law is suffering with a “great fever,” according to St. Luke a high fever. In those days, before antibiotics, such fevers were a genuine and immediate threat to life. This woman is left nameless. This is a surprise, but not an accident. Early Church Fathers, those who were taught by the disciples, say that Mark was closely associated with Peter.

Of course, Mark knows Peter's mother-in-law's name; yet he does not use it. Why? Mark is telling us something. Mark is telling us that the Lord Christ attends the anonymous, the forgotten, the nameless, faceless individual who is in need of consolation. She offers no prayer, she makes no overture toward the Lord, yet he comes to her. He is the one who takes initiative with us, to serve us, to extend life to us. He does not grow faint or weary in his pursuit of us. Nor does he turn away when the road to serve us becomes perilous. He comes to us in our "back rooms," suffering with our own perilous fevers.

An exchange takes place: her sickness and his health. He takes what is ours and gives to us what is his. Sickness, demon-possession, disease, sin, and death he came to take it all. No magic wand, no incantation, or presto-chango mumbo jumbo. He took her by the hand and lifted her up. The fever left her. More than one biblical writer tells us about this blessed exchange.

Isaiah writes, ***“Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows”*** (Isaiah 53:4). Matthew writes, ***“He took our illnesses and bore our diseases”*** (Matthew 8:17). Paul tells us that Christ became poor with our poverty, he became sin with all of our transgressions, he became dead with the death of the whole human race. He takes what robs us of our humanity, and he restores us with his virtue, his blessing, his victory, his truth, his love. That is consolation.

This life is very often not pretty, not comfortable, not fun. People look for consolation. People hunt high and low for every conceivable way to cope with trouble in life, and they light upon something that they think will turn things around. An adulterous relationship, a bottle, gambling, clothing, makeovers, food, shopping sprees, travel, vanity, vanity, vanity. Looking for consolation in these things not only does not help but very often makes the problem worse. It may deaden the pain temporarily, but it does not console. Our Lord brings us something more.

Jesus took the woman by the hand and lifted her up. That exact same phrase is used one other time in the Gospel narratives: for Jairus's daughter, his dead daughter. She, too, had no name. She lay in the back of the house, a twelve-year-old, lifeless. The situation was not one that a wintergreen Life Savers candy could resolve for Jairus and his wife. Christus Consolator moved directly to the child's side, took her by the hand, and raised her up: "**Child, arise**" (Luke 8:54). Resurrection is consolation.

The Lord's empty tomb is divine consolation for sinners who know that death is real.

"I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Jesus the Consoler said that. He served Simon's mother-in-law with his life. She received it, and then she got up to serve others.

What better way to understand our lives? What better way to understand what takes place in this Divine Service and then what takes place out there, in that world where we will walk?

He serves us, here. Christus Consolator serves us through the Word, the preached Word that we hear, at this altar where he gives us his body and blood. He consoles us with his resurrection and sends us out to serve our fellow man. The great fever of our sin is not on us. We are forgiven. Our shame has been removed, our guilt atoned for. We are embraced by the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit. We have been made new in Christ's blood. All this is consolation of the highest order.

On the holy cross, as he bore the fractious weight of man's horrible deeds, there was none to console him. Sacred head, horribly wounded, with grief and shame weighed down. In that act, in that sacrifice, our eternal consolation was in view. To bless us and sustain us, he died; the Son of God Almighty died. To console us in whatever grief this world brings, the Lord of heaven and earth died. Receiving his consolation, we mount up; courage is born of his consolation courage and strength and fortitude and hope.

His consolation provides momentum; we walk toward heaven,
each day closer to consolation in a cup that runneth over. We shall
run in this life, the race marked out for us; we shall run and not be
weary. We walk toward heaven. We will not faint. Christus
Consolator is with us.

Amen