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Heb2/Candlemas
“Test Case”

In the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

The Letter to the Hebrews is a long series of reflections on Jesus.

We don't know who wrote the letter, but we do know that the author wanted to show how the message of Jesus and his life and death fit into the worldview of the Hebrew Scriptures—the writings we refer to as the Old Testament.

The Letter to the Hebrews accepts that Jesus was himself a Jew and that he came to bring salvation to his people. As today's Second Lesson puts it, “For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham.”

Yet Christ also brought a way of salvation that stretched beyond the people of Israel—a way of salvation that was offered to the entire world.

The key for the author of the Letter to the Hebrews was how Christ managed to do that. The Letter explains that Jesus “had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect...” In other words, Jesus had to become like all human beings.

That was the only way he could help us humans to solve the problems of living a human life. So, the Letter to the Hebrews concludes, “Because [Christ] himself was *tested* by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.”

Now this notion of “testing” is common in the Hebrew Scriptures. The people of Israel believed that many of the problems that they faced as a nation had been sent to them by God. These problems were intended to test their faith.

If the Hebrews trusted in God, they would be able to pass their tests and solve their problems and go on to live fruitful lives.

Now, seeing life's challenges as “tests” can be very helpful, because our everyday existence does provide us with many different kinds of trials.

We need to confront the sins and mistakes of other people—like the rival in business who cheats to win a contract. We are challenged by the material world—by threatening phenomena beyond our control, such as hurricanes and earthquakes and disease—not to mention polar vortexes!

We are further tested by the various goals that we set for ourselves—and by the mistakes that we make as we try to accomplish these goals.

Once we use this model to look at what's challenging us, then we need to see how God fits in. And here, the trick is to *avoid* seeing God as like a teacher who is in charge of a class that is taking an exam.

A lot of people have this idea of God as a kind of cosmic classroom monitor. But God can't be like this and still be the loving God who wants us to be happy and flourish.

God isn't looking to grade us for our performances in living a good life. God doesn't take pleasure in those occasions when we fail to do the things that we know that we ought to do.

God isn't like Santa Claus—“making a list and checking it twice, going to find out who's naughty or nice.” This wouldn't be an attractive picture of God. That wouldn't be a merciful and loving God.

A better way to conceive of God is to see him at the other side of the testing process: God is more like a coach who is trying to pull us through the match and make sure that we win it! Instead of making the process difficult, God is trying to help us *pass* the tests of life.

You may remember reading about *Terry Waite* who was held captive for almost five years by Muslim radicals in Lebanon. Waite served as a peace-making envoy for the Archbishop of Canterbury; I once met him when I was working in Rome and he was traveling to one of his negotiation meetings.

Terry Waite knew what it meant to be tested! Imagine all those years in prison—most of them in solitary confinement. To occupy his time, Waite would go through in his mind the words he remembered from the Book of Common Prayer.

He had learned many prayers by heart when he was going to an Anglican school and attending daily chapel services. As he recalled the venerable English language of the Prayer Book—the poetry, the “thee’s” and “thou’s”—those words helped him to maintain his mental stability.

“Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid...” The words of these prayers gave him confidence that he wasn’t alone in his cell. Thoughts of his creator sustained his hope that he would eventually be free.

Fortunately, we aren’t likely to be tested as Terry Waite was. But we can be encouraged by his example when we face our own challenges.

Brief prayers to God in moments of crisis can give us strength. Christians in the Orthodox tradition like to say what they call, the Jesus Prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.” Some Orthodox believers say the prayer not just during tense moments but hundreds of times throughout the day.

Christians in the Roman Catholic or Anglo-Catholic traditions might for their part repeat the Rosary—or the Angelus which our church bells every day at noon and 6 o’clock remind us of.

Both the Rosary and the Angelus include the Hail Mary which begins, “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you,” and asks for Christ’s mother to offer prayers for us.

And while God is cheering us on, God teaches us. Many people find that they learn priceless lessons from their struggles with adversity. Terry Waite believed that his faith was actually strengthened by his ordeal. In his years of solitude, he had to rely on God, and he found that this made him feel closer to God.

A recent episode of the television show, *60 Minutes* featured an unusual architect who as an adult became blind.

The architect admitted that, in some ways, he was grateful that he had been deprived of his sight. Because of his disability, the man was able to design buildings for the visually-impaired that functioned much better than those designed by sighted architects.

This story makes us think of the lines from the Letter to the Hebrews: “Because [Jesus] himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.”

If you have at some point struggled to overcome some addiction, you are better able to advise someone under the sway of that temptation. You know the trigger points—the occasions when the power of a bad habit is greatest.

The test for *the prophet Simeon*, by contrast, didn’t involve what he had to do. It was not doing that weighed upon him. He needed to wait.

At the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, which we are celebrating today as “Candlemas,” the prophet Simeon was sitting in the Temple when Jesus arrived with his parents. The Bible says that Simeon was “waiting for the consolation of Israel.”

When Mary and Joseph brought Jesus into the Temple, Simeon’s wait was over. The prophet received his consolation. He passed his test.

As Simeon said, he saw “a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of his people, Israel.”

And now unto God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit be ascribed as is most justly due all might, majesty, power, dominion, and praise, now and forever. Amen.