

**The Lessons Appointed  
for Use on the  
Third Sunday after the  
Epiphany**



Year A  
RCL

Hebrews 2:14-18  
Luke 2:22-40  
Psalm 84

The Collect

Almighty and everliving God, we humbly pray that, as your only-begotten Son was this day presented in the temple, so we may be presented to you with pure and clean hearts by Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

**Hebrews 2:14-18**

Since God's children share flesh and blood, Jesus himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

**Luke 2:22-40**

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, the parents of Jesus brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see

death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.

Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,  
according to your word;  
for my eyes have seen your salvation,  
which you have prepared in the presence  
of all peoples,  
a light for revelation to the Gentiles  
and for glory to your people Israel.”

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of

many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed-- and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to

their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

## SERMON

The Epistle to the Hebrews is among the most elegant in the New Testament. It really needs to be prayed, rather than read.

For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

We hear this passage only once every three years. I wonder if that reflects just how precious it is? Could it be that the compilers of the Revised Common Lectionary recognize how devastating this passage is and are at pains that we not turn it into a

commonality in the way we have done to other, more familiar, passages? Maybe. We're pretty good at turning Scripture into something we honor without consuming.

I remember a conversation with a rural policeman decades ago, when I was serving as staff attorney for the Central Kentucky Child Advocacy Council. He had said something stupid about some indefensible thing and I asked, "Do you think Jesus would do or say that?"

His answer was, "Well, that's Jesus. I'm not that good."

He's saying, "Jesus is special, see, so He has to do everything right. I'm not special, so I get a pass." That's what I mean about honoring Scripture



without consuming it. Everything in our understanding underlines what we already know by looking within – we mess stuff up. We’re sinners, or, as the policeman would have it, we’re not that good. He has that right. We’re not that good. We’re composite creatures. We carry the spark of the Holy in a fragile construct of conflicted emotions. The policeman is not as good as Jesus. You aren’t as good as Jesus. I certainly am not. But somehow, in that confession, the policeman found a get-out-of-jail-free card instead of the need to fall upon his knees and confess his sins, begging for strength and even greater dedication to the task of following Jesus. Boy! Does that sound familiar. I think that policeman lives within all of us, and speaks his

poison to us in times of great uncertainty or fear.

The word of hope and promise our text brings us today is that our conflict and struggles are not alien to our heavenly father for:

Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect... [b]ecause he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

Just stop and think about that a minute. Jesus, who IS that good, became like His brothers and sisters in every respect, even suffering a horrible death on a cross to show us how life can be lived. I know for a fact that this rural policeman had been fed this rich meal since he was no taller than a billy club but all he's done with it is to cough up a fish bone like, "Well, that's Jesus. I'm not that good.

And I don't have to be. Because I'm not Jesus, you see." He honors the good news, but never consumes it.

I'm reminded again of the words of Kalistos

Ware:

**It is not the task of Christianity to provide easy answers to every question, but to make us progressively aware of a mystery. God is not so much the object of our knowledge as the cause of our wonder.**

An awful lot of our human energy is spent on keeping God up in heaven, out of the way of our human desires. The Epistle to the Hebrews speaks against such a thought in the strongest possible terms. The thought that God would walk the earth, taking care to become like his children in every respect to make us progressively aware of the mys-

tery of life shakes the timbers of the short-hand Christianity I hear on so many lips, a Christianity which ignores the mystery Ware speaks of in favor of a heavenly God who places us on earth, saying, “Here’s your free will. Do with it as you please. If I like the results, I’ll give you something nice in heaven. If I don’t, well...” Heavenly reward isn’t the good news. The good news is that it is within our will to bring heaven close to earth. The good news is that we can impact a world of sin and confusion, and bring the love of God to bear upon His Creation.

We have lost two members. Let us think on Norm and Greg. Was the world a mess before they came? Yes, yes it was. Is the world a mess now that

they've gone? Yes, yes it is, but during their time with us, did they add to the world's store of love and comfort or to the world's store of lying, cruelty and hatred? We know the answer to that. The world's storehouse of goodness, love and tolerance, the ability of each of us to offer comfort to those in pain has increased because of the lives of these two men. Is that not a miracle? No, we can't cure the world. That's Jesus' work. We're not that good, but we CAN do what we can do, and that is to increase the world's store of love and tolerance. **THAT** we can do.

It's the old story of the boy on the beach, after a storm, tossing beached starfish back into the life-giving waves. His father laughed at his efforts.

“Son, there are thousands of dying starfish. You can’t really make a difference.” Perhaps the father was a policeman?

The boy stooped to pick up a starfish and sent it sailing into the waves, saying “I made a difference to that one.” Perhaps the boy knew Greg and Norm.

We are called to make a difference where we can. We are not called to cure but to bring comfort. We are called to name the evil we encounter and to ease the suffering we see. We’re not as good as Jesus, but we are good enough for the call we have received.

THERE is the good news, church. We are called to bring the light to the darkest parts of our world

and we are called to recognize those who bear the light, to celebrate with them in community as did Simeon and Anna the daughter of Phanuel. We are the strengthening of each of us in our pursuit of the way of Jesus. Neither are we alone in this.

For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

**AMEN**

## BENEDICTION

The policeman accepted his sinful state as an excuse to do nothing. The boy on the beach overlooked the limits of his abilities and did that of which he was capable. We are being taught today that there is no moral component to leadership, that so long as we get what we desire, it does not matter how that is done. I don't believe that. I believe we are called, each of us, to add to the store of goodness in which we live.

The Lord bless you and keep you;  
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be  
gracious to you;  
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and  
give you peace.

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Optional parts of the readings are set off in square



brackets.

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