

PREPARED FOR THE TEST

When Leon Wieseltier, the literary editor of *The New Republic*, was forty-four years old, his father passed away. Wieseltier had left his Jewish faith behind when he was a young man; but nonetheless, after his father died he chose to do what Jewish sons in mourning are commanded to do. Wieseltier wrote:

“In the year [following my father’s death], I said the prayer known as the Mourner’s Kaddish three times daily, during the morning service, the afternoon service, and the evening service, in a synagogue in Washington and, when I was away from home, in synagogues elsewhere. It was my duty to say it . . .”

Interestingly, the Mourner’s Kaddish, the prayer that Wieseltier prayed three times a day for a year, isn’t about grief, pain and loss. It’s not a prayer centered around the pray-er and his or her wounds. Rather, it’s a prayer about God and God’s greatness: “May his great name be blessed, always and forever. Blessed and praised and glorified and raised and exalted and honored and uplifted and lauded be the name of the Holy One.” Three times a day, every day for a year, Wieseltier prayed those words. “May his great name be blessed . . . may his great name be blessed . . . may his great name be blessed.”

Wieseltier noticed that something very unexpected was happening to him as he faithfully followed this ritual: he was being changed by the rhythm of the prayer. What’s that saying I’ve heard? “Prayer doesn’t change God; but it does change us.” Wieseltier wrote: “It wasn’t long before I realized that I could not insulate the rest of my existence from the impact of this obscure and demanding practice. The words and symbols were seeping into every part of it. As a result, a season of sorrow became a season of soul renovation.”

When Jesus was a boy, his life was filled with many religious practices and rituals. Luke records that “It was [Jesus’] custom” to go to the synagogue. He didn’t just go there to preach, to stir up the people or to exorcise demons. Jesus went to the synagogue, Sabbath after Sabbath, for the same reasons you and I go to church today: to worship and praise God in song; to hear the lessons; to learn more about the Word of God and the teachings of the Holy Scriptures; and to pray the great prayers of his Jewish faith: “May his great name be blessed . . . may his great name be blessed . . . may his great name be blessed.”

Somehow, many of us seem to have forgotten that even Jesus had to learn about his faith; even Jesus was a student. Twice in the second chapter of Luke's Gospel, we're told that Jesus grew in wisdom. He was constantly learning about his faith and his God. It shouldn't surprise us, then, to learn that when Jesus was tested by the devil out in the wilderness; when he was up against the wall and his calling and his faithfulness to God were being shaken to the core, he didn't defend himself or resist the temptations that were offered to him with clever comebacks or his own personal inner strength. Rather, Jesus leaned on the religious tradition he had been raised, nurtured and steeped in from his childhood.

In the desert, at the peak of his trials and temptations, he quoted the Hebrew Scriptures--in this case, the book of Deuteronomy--that he'd been listening to and reading his whole life. Jesus quoted truths he had learned as a youngster, recited in Sabbath School, and heard time and time again in the synagogue. The words that served our Lord well in his wilderness trial had been engraved on his heart all throughout his religious upbringing and learning. It is written. . . it is written . . . it is written . . . may his great name be blessed . . . may his great name be blessed . . . may his great name be blessed."

And so it is with us. When we're up against the wall and life presses us to the limit, the habits and rituals, the songs, prayers, Scripture passages, the sermons and Sacraments that have been engraved in our hearts through the years that we've been raised in and practiced our faith, will be there as a resource for us.

I'm pretty sure I've shared this before, but I think it's worth sharing again now. In my discussions with people about faith and religion, quite a few individuals have said to me, in so many words, "I don't need to go to church or be involved in an organized religion. I can worship God anywhere and at any time: like when I climb a mountain or take a hike through the woods; or when I'm strolling on the beach or gazing at a sunrise in the morning."

Whenever I hear such a comment, I'm very tempted (although I've never given in to that temptation!) to say, "Yes, you certainly can worship God out in nature, when you're out mountain climbing or hiking through the woods, when you're walking along the beach and look out over the deep blue Ocean, or when you witness a glorious sunrise in the morning. But do you? Do you worship God in those moments? Do you focus your attention completely on God, bless His great name, and offer thanks and praise to the One who created the natural beauty you're enjoying?"

But even if you do, it's still not the same as worshipping in a community

of like-believers. It's not the same as communally praying the prayers and singing the sacred songs of our Christian faith. It's not the same as witnessing a baptism or receiving Holy Communion alongside other Christians. It's not the same as when you receive fellowship, love, support and sustenance from other members of the Body of Christ.

Unlike solitary spiritual experiences out in nature, the shared religious experiences that happen in a church community like this one, among fellow believers, touch us, heal us, lift us, transform us, strengthen us and prepare us for the challenges and temptations that life will ultimately bring us. Not only that, but our religious tradition and communal life helps us discover our true identity, and shows us who we really are: Children of God, made in God's image and likeness.

In Judith Guest's novel *Ordinary People*, one character was a middle-aged man going through a classic mid-life crisis. Confused and adrift, every time he overheard a conversation in an elevator or a restaurant that began, "I'm the kind of person who . . ." he tuned in, hoping to gain some nugget of wisdom that could help him discover who he was and the purpose and meaning of his life. But he never did get the answer he was seeking while listening in on those discussions, and eventually he finally had to admit, "I'm the kind of man who hasn't got the foggiest idea what kind of man I am."

But Jesus knew who he was; he knew what kind of person he was. He was the one who believed that life was more than just bread; who worshiped and served God and God alone, and who didn't put the Lord to the test.

Where did Jesus get this moral and spiritual courage? Where did he get the strength of will it took to withstand the tests and temptations he experienced in the wilderness? Simply stated, Jesus had been preparing for this encounter with the Adversary his whole life--week after week in the synagogue, month after month with the Torah, year after year with the prayers of his faith tradition: "May his great name be blessed . . . may his great name be blessed . . . may his great name be blessed."

Some years ago, a man named Hugh Thompson was given an honorary degree. You may not recognize that name, but if you're old enough, you probably remember the horrific My Lai massacre that occurred during the Vietnam War. On March 16th, 1968, Thompson was a young helicopter pilot flying patrol over the countryside of Vietnam.

When he and his crew flew over the village of My Lai, they saw a nightmare taking place below them. United States Army Troops in Charlie Company, under the constant pressure of danger and the insanity of guerrilla warfare, had lost control of their discipline, reason, and humanity, and began

slaughtering unarmed civilians in that village, most of whom were women, children and elderly men. 504 people had already been killed. Thompson set his helicopter down between the troops and the remaining villagers. Then, at great risk to himself, he got out of the helicopter and confronted the officer in charge, Lt. William Calley. Thompson airlifted the few villagers still alive out of My Lai, and also radioed a report of the scene that resulted in a halt to the action, thus saving many civilian lives.

Standing on the platform at the University commencement, Thompson was given the microphone, and he spoke to the question on everyone's minds. How did he find the moral courage and strength to do what he did that day? His answer surprised the audience of graduates, and brought them to a thoughtful silence.

He said, "I'd like to thank my mother and father for trying to instill in me the difference between right and wrong. We were country people. I was born and raised in Stone Mountain, Georgia, and we had very little. But one thing we did have was the Golden Rule. My parents taught me early, 'Do unto others what you would have them do unto you.' That's why I did what I did that day." Thompson ended his address by saying, "It's hard to put certain things into words. But you're going to have to make many decisions in your life. Please make the right decisions, because we're depending on you. God bless you all."

Why did Hugh Thompson do what he did? Where did he find the moral courage to confront a terrible, horrendous wrong at the risk of his own life? It was the words that were taught to him in childhood, by his parents, in Sunday School class, sitting in a church pew listening to his pastor preach, reading the Bible, and kneeling in prayer before the presence of the Almighty:

"Do unto others . . . Do unto others . . . Do unto others."

"It is written . . . It is written . . . It is written."

"May his great name be blessed . . . "May his great name be blessed . . .
"May his great name be blessed."

My dear friends, many of us have spent our whole lives immersed in the words, Sacraments, rituals, prayers and traditions of our Christian faith. Others of us have had less experience and learning as disciples of Jesus. But all of us have enough experience and learning to understand that life is often difficult and painful, and can push us up against a wall at times. We're all going to be tempted and tested and possibly reach what seems like our breaking point. We will feel as though we can't stand it anymore, that we don't have the strength to hang on any longer, and that we're in danger of giving in and failing the test. So, what do we do?

Certainly, and very importantly, we should reach out to the Lord in prayer

and ask for God's assistance, God's strength, God's protection and will to help us in our time of trial. And God will respond to our pleas--of that I have complete and total faith. But there's something else we can turn to. And that is our religious upbringing: the things we were taught by our parents and in Sunday School; the passages of Holy Scripture we learned that offer us hope and lift our spirits; the encouraging and helpful things we've heard in past sermons; the traditional prayers and hymns that Christians through the years have turned to in their times of need; the Sacraments that feed and nurture us; and the fellowship and love of like-believers that support us and reassure us that we're not alone in our time of trial.

During this holy season of Lent, may we remember the things we have learned throughout our years as people of faith and disciples of Christ. And may we continue to grow spiritually and learn things in our religious tradition that will be helpful to us and strengthen us as we strive to be faithful to Jesus' call. Because then, when we experience the inevitable trials and temptations of human existence, we will be spiritually prepared like Jesus was and will also be able to pass the test. Amen.