

Lent I

Cycle C, 3.10.19

Deuteronomy 26:4-10/Romans 10:8-13/

Luke 4:1-13

CENTER MORE ON THE THINGS THAT MATTER

You wouldn't think that you could hear a powerful gospel invitation to the Lenten Season in a TV commercial, but you can. And I did... several times this week. The actor Ewan McGregor, who played Obi-won Kenobi in the Star Wars prequel, is walking through movie sets in a studio that's making commercials for various products like cars, TVs and perfume. This is his monologue:



"Stuff! We love stuff and there's some really great stuff out there, but I doubt that any of us will look back on our lives and think: *I wish I'd gotten a slightly sportier SUV... or bought an even thinner TV... or found a trendier scent. Or, I wish I'd discover a crunchier chip, found a lighter lite beer, or had an even smarter smart phone.* (Looking directly into the camera, he says) *Do you think any of us will look back in our lives and regret the things we didn't buy? ... or the places we didn't go?* The back door of the recording studio opens and McGregor walks onto a vast expanse of a beach on the edge of the ocean, two children running into the water under the watchful eyes of their parents. It's a commercial for Expedia, the travel app, and the tag line on the screen says: *Save more on the things that matter.*

I think it's a great invitation to our Lenten journey with this season's call to fast and abstinence and reducing our dependence on material things. The big difference between McGregor's commercial and our Lenten invitation is that our door leads us not onto a sunny beach where kids frolic in the sand, but onto a dry arid desert to be tested by the devil. Our Gospel scene takes place just after Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. Recall that when Jesus came up from the water, the heavens opened and the Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove, as a voice said: *You are my beloved son; in you I am well pleased.* The next chapter of Luke's gospel finds Jesus led by the Spirit into the desert where he is presented with three challenges as Jesus struggles to live as a faithful son of God – the same struggle that each of us, as faithful sons and daughters of God, experience in our daily walk with the Lord. Can we trust God's love in the barren places of our lives? When serious illness assails us? When your child or spouse disappoints you? When plans you carefully made fail? When you fail to live up to your own expectations?

In the desert the tempter urges Jesus to **selfish individualism**. The challenge to change stone into bread focuses on self-preservation. It wasn't just a question of hunger. It was asking what kind of life would Jesus choose—a life of privilege and comfort? Or would he risk personal security to serve others and rely on the community of Faith? If he put his personal needs and desires first he would undermine his mission. Later in the Gospel Jesus would send his disciples out on mission without anything, no walking stick, no purse, no extra sandals -- only reliance on the power of the Gospel.

The next thing the devil offers Jesus is the kingdoms of the earth. To gain these Jesus would have **to accept the methods of the powerful**—fear and coercion – the same thing that is at play in the Russian invasion of the Ukraine. But if Jesus was not going to live for himself alone, he was not going to seek power over others. The only power Jesus wields is the persuasive force of love. In the last temptation the devil tries to **camouflage falsehoods in the language of religious faithfulness**.



Like those who pedal the gospel of financial success promising wealth and comfort but forgetting the call of Jesus to share in his suffering and cross. Jesus chooses to accept truth and reality. Our faith in God is not an impenetrable shield. We are still vulnerable. The accidents and hardships of life do affect those who are faithful sons and daughters of God. Whatever happens must be God's will not Jesus' and not our own will.

This Lent we face the same struggles as did Jesus. Can we set aside ease and comfort and take on inconvenience and discomfort for the sake of love? Can we learn to let go of privilege to rely solely on the power of God? Can we stop reshaping our religious faith to suit our personal preferences, rather than convert our hearts and minds to the will of God? This Lent may the Spirit of Jesus help us resist the

temptation to be self-serving and rise to the collective good of the people of God. The tag line on the TV commercial for Expedia says: *Save more on the things that matter*. Our Lenten tagline would have to be adjusted and aligned with Jesus' desert experience:

Pray more about the things that matter.

*Shape your heart more
around the things that matter.*

*Live each day more in tune
with the things that matter.*

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A PERSONAL ANNOUNCEMENT

In 1997, I was serving as Associate Pastor at Corpus Christi Church on Park Boulevard in Piedmont. I received a call from the nun who was the chair of the Bishop's personnel board, asking if I would consider moving to Lafayette to be the Parochial Administrator at St. Perpetua Parish.



I told her I didn't think that would be a very good idea. I explained that the Corpus Christi community had just completed a Capital Campaign to raise funds for a major seismic retrofitting of the church and school buildings, as well as a much-needed renovation of the worship space. The background stage was set, architects and contractors had been interviewed and

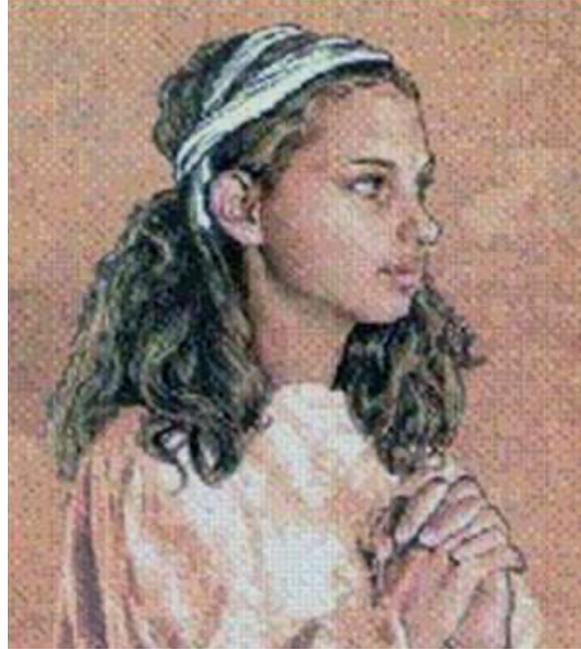
selected, and the actual physical work was about to begin. Besides, I didn't know where Lafayette and St. Perpetua were.... except that they were on the other side of the tunnel, and I didn't go through the tunnel unless absolutely necessary.

Sister said, *"Well, what if Bishop Cummins asks you himself,"* and I said *"I could tell him No as easily I told you, Sister."* Bishop Cummins called the next day and said that there was a need here in Lafayette and he thought I would be a good candidate to fill the position. So, since I'm an Oblate of St. Francis de Sales, not a diocesan priest, I called my Provincial Superior in Toledo and talked to him about it. He said: *"Well, you've been an Assistant Pastor in three parishes, and assistant pastors do all the dirty work anyway. Go be your own boss."* That was July, 1997.



Now, after a thousand plus Baptisms, hundreds of First Eucharists and Confirmations, 450 funerals, many of whom had become dear friends over the years, and 65 Weddings of inspiring young couples -- 24 ½ years of engaging parish life, including fun-filled Oktoberfests and delicious Knights of Columbus' Crab Feeds, exciting School Auctions, consistent outreach effort to the poor, prayerful and intimate daily Mass with committed parishioners in the Chapel and our weekly inspiring Eucharistic celebrations that have enriched my ministry and my soul, it's time for me to bring this chapter to a

close. July will mark 25 years here with you at St. Perpetua. It's much longer than most clergy ever serve in one ministerial setting – but I've tried to fly under the radar so the last three bishops didn't know I was here, in the most beautiful setting of northern California.



Monday is the Feast of St. Perpetua, our parish patroness, whom I've grown very fond of over the years. I thought it an appropriate time to make a formal announcement about my intended transition so we all have a few months to adjust. My initial hope, after leaving St. Perpetua, was to spend a few months on sabbatical, doing some traveling, educational seminars, retreats and such, and then move closer to the men and ministries of my religious order, the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales. But serious arthritis issues with my left ankle will require more surgery and several months of recuperation once a diagnosis is confirmed, so the sabbatical is on hold for a while, but departure in July is certain.

In the meantime, there's still much for us to do. I'd appreciate your participation in the Synodal listening sessions that Pope Francis initiated and that we're sponsoring online this month. We also have received the results from the Diocesan online survey – the Disciple Maker Index – that nearly 300 of you filled out, and we need to digest and disseminate that information as the Diocese is reviewing all its parishes and ministries.

Our parish school is interviewing for a new principal; Mrs. Karen Goodshaw is leaving the position after 14 years of dedicated leadership to the school and parish. I'm personally so grateful for her ministry here. After many years of inquiries and requests by parishioners and a commitment of a couple generous donors, stained glass windows for the church are being fabricated and should be ready for installation in the next couple months. The windows will depict an inspiring theme: *the glory and beauty of Creation*. That theme is close to the hearts of all of us, biblical in its roots, promoted by Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si*, and vital for the preservation and continuation of life on our planet.

It's also imperative for us to continue to reduce the diocesan debt on our fantastic Community Center, including calling on those who have not yet contributed. So the work and ministry of our parish goes on and will continue into the future – a future that is always graced by God and made possible by the faith, hope and love of amazing people like you whom I've been privileged to serve. Thanks to the collaboration over the years of so many capable pastoral staff members, dedicated volunteers and active ministries and parishioners, St. Perpetua Community, once a "hidden secret" in the hills of Lafayette, is known as a welcoming place where the Kingdom of God flourishes.

I'm so humbled and thankful to be a part of your lives and the life and history of this community. Thank you.

John Kasper, OSFS