

Lent I

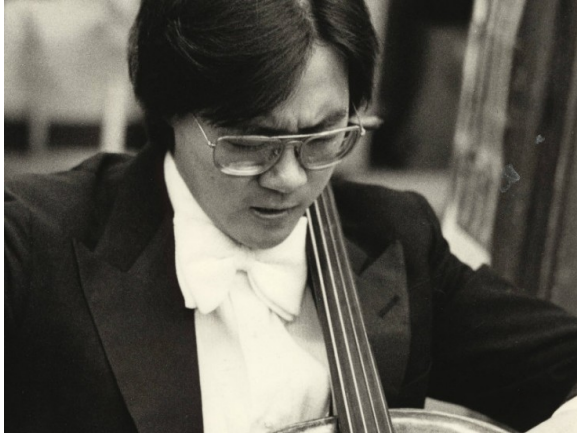
Cycle C, 3.10.19

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

Luke 4:1-13

FINDING THE MEANING BEHIND THE MELODY

When the great cellist Yo-Yo Ma was nineteen and a student at Harvard, he was already considered a world-class virtuoso. The Harvard undergrad was invited to give a concert at Manhattan's 92nd Street Y, one of New York City's great cultural venues. Yo-Yo Ma spent almost a year preparing for the concert. He was determined to give a perfect, flawless performance.



The night of the concert, his adrenaline was flowing. Accompanied by a pianist, everything was going very well. But in the middle of the two-hour concert, he discovered: *I was reaching my goal, but I was bored. I could literally have stopped and walked away, and not felt as if I had interrupted anything.* Yo-Yo Ma recalled it this way: *I realized then that perfection is not the goal of a performance. You can have a planned approach to a piece, but you also have to have something that you really want to share through the music. The goal is not perfection, but expression.*

Later that year, Yo-Yo Ma was to play a concerto by the Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich. To play the piece, Yo-Yo Ma determined he needed to learn more about Shostakovich, a composer who wrote

during the horrors of the Stalin era when, in a period of five years, a million people were imprisoned and over 700,000 executed. In an interview the musician said: *As I read, I was brought closer to the voice of Shostakovich. And I came upon the same lesson again. You realize that these are not notes for you to play perfectly. Every time you perform a work by Shostakovich, you're really looking at a whole culture and, in a sense, being an advocate for the millions who were silenced during a brutal era.*

What Yo-Yo Ma learned as a young cellist shaped his extraordinary career as a musician. He came to understand music as more than just a collection of perfectly played notes but as a greater expression of something much deeper: of love, of struggle, of pain, of triumph. To follow Christ demands the same sense of service to the "music" of the Gospel, of fidelity and commitment to our baptismal calling.

In today's gospel that leads us into our Lenten journey the devil quotes scripture to induce Jesus to betray his identity and vocation, much as Yo-Yo Ma was tempted by a desire for technical perfection to betray the deeper purpose of his music. The devil's first tack was to pervert the idea of being Son of God and turning it into entitlement, suggesting that Jesus should never have an unsatisfied appetite. *Change these stones into bread.*



In responding to the devil, Jesus doesn't deny human hungers, but he reminds us of a truth that the poor know only too well: There are things in life even more important than bread.

Then, when the devil couldn't entice Jesus on the level of physical gratification, he turned to power: *I'll give you all the kingdoms of the world... bow down and worship me.* Jesus holds firm to his dedication to God his Father – nothing and no one else will he serve. Finally, in his third round, the devil uses the Temple itself as a prop, undermining the very purpose of prayer and covenant, suggesting that Jesus should manipulate God and force him into action: *Throw yourself down... God will have his angels save you!* Jesus' response was that God expresses love on divine terms, not according to a human agenda. So what are we to take from this wrestling match between Jesus and Satan? And how can it lead us into a fruitful and meaningful Lenten season?

These temptations come at the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry. The passage opens by informing us that, filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus returned from the Jordan. That's where he was baptized by John. It was there, at the Jordan River, that the voice of God assured him of his true identity: *You are my beloved Son; in you I am well pleased.* Jesus had to grow into his identity as both Son of God and fully human person. The temptations centered on how he would do this. The temptations to selfishness, power and manipulating God were as real in Jesus' life as they are in our own. The passage ends by saying: *When the devil had finished every temptation, he departed from Jesus for a time.*

This scene in the desert reminds us that the powers of evil, those things that try to lure us away from our true self, never tire of offering cheap, attractive and corrupt ways to fulfill our real need for human sustenance, for self-expression and for genuine relationship with God and others.



I doubt if a day doesn't pass for each of us where we find ourselves in a wilderness of our own making or because of the circumstances of our lives. My own wilderness lately has been covered by clouds that mirror our gray and rainy climate: the death of four fellow priests in just a matter of weeks (Frs. Pat Goodwin, Dan Danielson, Bryan Joyce, Paul Minnihan) – some of the few progressive voices left in the Diocese; the ongoing shame and anger that I and so many of us feel over the sexual abuse crisis and its cover-up, not only in the Church but throughout society; the lack of truth-telling and integrity in our government. But it's in those desert places where we discover the Spirit of God in our lives. The same Spirit that led Jesus into the desert accompanies us, encouraging us to re-center our lives with new hope and renewed vision as we continue our journey to the Easter promise.

The Spirit anchors us and brings us back to the true source of our lives – the love of God and the support of our community as the Body of Christ in this time and place. As Yo-Yo Ma discovered the deeper way to share his music, may these forty days help us to recall and renew our vocation as followers of Jesus – not a vocation of perfection, but an expression of the power of God’s grace to change our hearts and renew our spirits.



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