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This past Wednesday, Feb. 26, marked the beginning of the season we call Lent. The name comes from the old English word “lencten,” which means spring season or “lengthen,” as in the days grow longer.

In the church, Lent is a time of preparation, a time to ready ourselves for the glory of Resurrection Sunday, commonly known as Easter. It’s meant to be a time of reflection, a period of 40 days — at least that’s the number when you subtract the Sundays — between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday.

And why 40 days? It corresponds with the amount of time Jesus wandered in the wilderness as he prepared himself for his ministry. Just as Jesus prepared himself for the glory ahead, we use Lent to prepare ourselves for the glory of resurrection.

But like Jesus, we first must go through the valleys that eventually give way to Calvary, to a tomb, and eventually to a large stone rolled away from that tomb.

Throughout most of Lent, “In Layman’s Terms” is going to shift its schedule a bit. Instead of being available on Fridays, we’ll be available Mondays. And instead of discipleship stories or Biblical reflections, we’ll be joined by Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr., episcopal leader for the Great Plains Conference. He’s joining me to talk about the seven final sayings of Christ as he hung on the cross. That starts Monday, March 2.

So I thought this episode it might be helpful to explain what Lent is and to share with you where the people who developed the concept of Lent — whomever those people were — got the idea.

It goes back to Jesus being tempted in the wilderness. Our text this week is Matthew 4:1-11. If you’re unfamiliar with the Bible, this is the first book in what we call the New Testament, roughly a little less than two-thirds of the way back from the beginning of the Bible. Feel free to read along in your Bible or on one of the apps available. You Version and BibleGateway are two of my favorites, and both are free in the Apple app store or on Google Play!

I’ll be reading from the Common English Bible.

Then the Spirit led Jesus up into the wilderness so that the devil might tempt him. After Jesus had fasted for forty days and forty nights, he was starving. The tempter came to him and said, “Since you are God’s Son, command these stones to become bread.” Jesus replied, “It’s written, People won’t live only by bread, but by every word spoken by God.”

After that the devil brought him into the holy city and stood him at the highest point of the temple. He said to him, “Since you are God’s Son, throw yourself down; for it is written, I will command

my angels concerning you, and they will take you up in their hands so that you won't hit your foot on a stone."

Jesus replied, "Again it's written, Don't test the Lord your God."

Then the devil brought him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. He said, "I'll give you all these if you bow down and worship me."

Jesus responded, "Go away, Satan, because it's written, You will worship the Lord your God and serve only him." The devil left him, and angels came and took care of him.

Jesus is tempted three times: First, it was with food, specifically bread. Second, it was to throw himself from the top of the Temple. Third, it was all the kingdoms of the world.

What do these three things mean for us today?

I would argue that they represent things we struggle with in our present-day world:

- Putting ourselves first.
- Taking advantage of others.
- Wealth/Selfishness.

I'll explain my thinking on this when we return to "In Layman's Terms" in just a few moments.

#### COMMERCIAL BREAK

Welcome back to "In Layman's Terms." This episode, we're talking about Lent and how we came to set aside this 40-day period to reflect and prepare for the glory of Easter.

Before the break, I shared Matthew 4:1-11, which tells of a 40-day period during which Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness. I explained that I think these match up with three challenges we face as people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### **Putting Ourselves First**

First, in verses 2 through 4, Jesus is tempted with food. Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River, and then he ventures off to the wilderness to prepare himself for ministry. During this time, he fasts — still a staple of Lent today, though for most people it's going without food for a single day or even a single meal. It's a time of self-denial. This is where the concept of "giving something up for Lent" comes from.

Anyway, Jesus is starving, and Satan comes to tempt Him by suggesting Jesus just turn the stones into bread. There are lots of rocks in this area. While I visited the Holy Land in 2019, we traveled to the mountains around Jericho, where it's believed these events in Matthew chapter 4 took place. It's a steep, rocky place. I've posted a photo of a monastery above Jericho from my journey there so you can see this area for yourself. You'll find it on [ToddSeifert.com](http://ToddSeifert.com).

Jesus responds not with doing what the devil suggested but instead quoting scripture — specifically Deuteronomy 8:3 — by saying, "It's written, people won't live only by bread, but by every word spoken by God."

If ever there was a time — at least prior to the crucifixion — when Jesus could have and should have put himself first, it's now, when he's famished from fasting for so long. Yet, he doesn't

allow the devil to have satisfaction. Jesus refuses to put His needs first. He's already focused on the task He is to complete. Three years before hanging on the cross, Jesus knows that the journey to Calvary — also known as Golgotha or "the Skull" — begins now, in this moment of temptation.

I don't know about you, but Jesus' actions make me feel weak that I can't steer clear of my daily Coke Zero from the Kwik Shop on the way to the office. I don't need that drink. In fact, it's probably better for me not to drink it. But unlike Jesus, I give in to the temptation. I put myself ahead of others who could benefit from that daily expenditure of \$1.64. Satan holds out a 32 or 44 ounce cup, depending on the day, and more often than not, I take it.

Jesus wouldn't do that. So during Lent, I'm going to try to avoid the daily Coke Zero in the morning to remind me of Jesus heroically turning down food after a long fast.

### **Taking advantage of others**

Next, we move on to Matthew 4:5-7. This time, the devil transports Jesus from the area around Jericho to the Temple in the Holy City of Jerusalem. The devil tells Jesus to jump because God would dispense angels to save Him.

It seems like an odd temptation, but Jesus turns it into another teaching moment for us. In this case, I think Jesus is teaching us not to take advantage of others.

Let me explain.

Yes, Jesus could have made a big show of himself by throwing himself off the highest point in the Temple. And yes, God would have saved Him. But that would have taken advantage of God. It would have cheapened the relationship Jesus had with His heavenly Father.

Again, Jesus quotes scripture, this time Deuteronomy 6:16, when He says, "Don't test the Lord your God."

I think it's easy to see that lesson in this portion of our scripture today. Don't test God. Our Creator doesn't need any exams, no quizzes, no means of showing God's love for us. Jesus is more than enough proof.

So as I read this text through a 21<sup>st</sup> century lens, I see it telling us to value our relationships, not to cheapen them by taking advantage of someone, even when they may be more than happy to do what we want them to do.

Show them respect, just as Jesus showed respect to God.

### **Power and Prestige**

The final temptation comes atop a high mountain. We're back to that mountain just outside Jericho now. From this vantage point, the devil is showing Jesus the kingdoms of the world and trying to cut a deal: Jesus, if you bow down, all of this is yours.

OK, I have to pause for a second to point out how ridiculous this offer is. First of all, Jesus already IS the king of all of those kingdoms. And I think Satan is well aware of it. I think this is a desperation offer, a "Hail Mary" pass of sorts. Satan is hoping Jesus will put power and prestige — with the wealth that comes with it — over his mission to bring salvation to all humankind.

I have this vision in my head of Jesus looking down from the mountain and thinking: "Why should I bow to this guy? This is already all mine anyway."

Jesus basically tells Satan to beat it, and He quotes scripture one more time, Deuteronomy 6:13 this time, and says "It's written, You will worship the Lord your God and serve only him."

Mic drop. Satan is defeated.

Unfortunately, we often allow Satan to stay engaged in the world because unlike Jesus, we give in. Too often we see power, we crave prestige. And we'll do almost anything to accomplish those two things. Heck, society encourages it!

But through His actions, Jesus teaches us not to seek these things and instead to put God first and serve only God.

Easier said than done, right?

Maybe there's more hope than you thought.

Another aspect of Lent is deepening our relationship with Christ. And we do that through what many Christians know as spiritual disciplines. There are several, but I want to focus on three and encourage you to try them for these 40 days.

They are: Prayer, reading scripture and attending worship.

Some people are intimidated by prayer. I don't think you should be. Don't try to say some high-and-mighty prayer like you might hear from a pastor during a church service. Just talk to God. Say, "Hello God," and then just tell God what you're feeling. You don't have to ask for anything. You don't have to promise anything. Just talk. It can be out loud or it can be in your head.

God will hear it either way. Do that for 40 days, and I bet you feel better about things.

Next is reading scripture. If you aren't used to reading the Bible, don't go too far too fast. Start simply. I recommend reading the book of Luke and then Acts. By doing so, you'll read two books by the same author, so you'll have a coherent narrative of the life of Jesus and what happened in the first 35 or so years after his death and resurrection. If you read those together, in order, you go through 52 chapters over 47 days — it's OK to add back in those Sundays. That's doable and will get you acquainted with key concepts of Jesus' teachings and how His followers in the early church carried on with His mission.

Finally, find a place to worship. I realize I'm biased, but seek out a United Methodist Church in your community. Look up churches near you by going to [www.greatplainsumc.org/churches](http://www.greatplainsumc.org/churches). Enter in your zip code or city name, and you'll see churches within a certain radius that you provide. All are welcome in our churches.

Don't worry. You're not there to immediately join a committee or help lead worship. You're just going to learn more about Jesus. Make a commitment to go for the seven weeks of Lent. That's seven Sundays.

If you have gone to church before but haven't in a while, now is a great time to get back in the habit and to build new relationships — or maybe revisit some old ones.

You'll hear a sermon. You'll sing a few hymns. You'll pray. You'll meet new people.

You will have gotten off to a new start in your faith journey.

Jesus fasted for 40 days to prepare himself for His journey toward the cross.

Lent is our chance to start our journey toward Him.

If you have any questions about what you've heard in this episode, or if something is telling you it's time to start a real relationship with Christ, send me an email at [tseifert@greatplainsumc.org](mailto:tseifert@greatplainsumc.org). I'll be happy to answer questions or to help you start your journey toward Jesus. If I can't be of help, I will find a pastor near where you live who can help.

That's it for this episode of "In Layman's Terms." Again, starting next Monday and going through the week after Easter, I'll have seven special episodes where I'll be joined by Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr. of the Great Plains Conference. The bishop and I will explore the seven final sayings of Christ from the cross.  
I hope you'll join us.

*Todd Seifert is communications director for the Great Plains Conference of the United Methodist Church and has served as a Bible teacher in local churches for more than 20 years. Listen to his ["In Layman's Terms" podcast](#). To hear past episodes, go to [www.toddseifert.com](http://www.toddseifert.com). Any opinions expressed are the author's alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Great Plains Annual Conference or The United Methodist Church. Follow him on Twitter, [@ToddSeifert](#).*