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Sermon 27 February 2022

Title: Give it Up for Lent 1: an introduction

- Good morning church family—I want to welcome you again to LargsNaz online—it is so good to be with you today—we hope that your time with us has been a blessing to you—as always, wherever you are, we’re glad you’re here.
- It has certainly been an interesting week here in Largs—I believe we’ve seen just about every kind of weather there is over the past few days—everything except a heat wave, I guess—we’ve had sunny days and storms and gales and rain and sleet and snow—we even had thundersnow at one point—and folks in Glasgow were awakened in the middle of the night by a tremendous thunderclap—and I read that some of them didn’t even know what they’d heard it was so loud
- But this past Monday was an unexpectedly beautiful day, and Pastor Tasha and I used our day off to take a walk up to one of our favourite spots, the woodland estate at Noddleburn—it’s a shady, wooded area that is beautiful all year long, but this time of year, when Spring is just beginning to show signs of its impending arrival, it is particularly magical, almost other-worldly—I remember the first time we sort of stumbled upon the area a couple of years ago—you walk down this path and when you step into the

wood there's a very definite, palpable feeling that you are entering a separate place, a sort of sanctuary—you have crossed a threshold, passed through a liminal zone, into a wild place—and this time of year the leaves of the trees are filling out and creating a cathedral-like canopy, the ground is almost entirely carpeted with the deep verdant foliage of wild garlic—and what isn't covered with wild garlic is covered with snow drops and bluebells and daffodils—and there are mushrooms for foraging—on Monday we gathered about 2 pounds of wood ear mushrooms and a small batch of scarlet elf cup mushrooms, as well as a bag-full of wild garlic—some of which will be featured on our brunch menu soon I'm sure—and we also had a little picnic eating some of what we had just picked there--and that is part of the miraculous quality of that place—there you are reminded of the way that God's creation can—and does-- provide sustenance, without expectation of exchange—the way grace just gives and gives and God's steadfast love endures forever—the way that nature works and the way that we can unplug and disconnect from our schedules and our agendas and our business--and our busy-ness-- and experience the essential truth that we are a part of God's created order and we are blessed by God's provision—we can be reminded that we are not simply consumers dependent upon the market—and upon markets--shops and economies and politics and social structures—because escaping just for a little while into a wild place—a wilderness—reminds us of our mission and purpose—whose we are and what we are to be about doing—and then we can return to the everyday--the ordinary—to our

ordinary time—renewed and refreshed and empowered by a visit to an extra-ordinary place

- As we walked for a while and dwelled for a while in that place I remembered that some 220 years ago William Wordsworth penned words that are still worth repeating when he wrote that -- The world is too much with us; late and soon, Getting and spending we lay waste our powers; Little we see in Nature that is ours; We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon! . . . For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
- And it's a good thing every now and then to get back in tune—to be moved, to be guided and provided for, to be driven out into a wild place
- Now I know that some folks would like to unplug and live their whole lives off the grid—and some do—but it gets harder and harder to do that as we are so connected, so plugged in—mostly through our devices—through the internet and social media and Alexa and our phones and even some of our cars keep track of where we go and even how well we drive to get there—how fast we go and whether we obey the rules of the road—and most of us aren't called to live that sort of unplugged life—but all of us, if we are followers of Jesus, are called to go into the world and make disciples—we are all called to take up our cross and follow Jesus—to follow him into the gritty sacrificial reality of a life lived for others --to build the Kingdom--to bring redemption and announce the good news of the gospel—to proclaim good news to the poor and freedom for the prisoner and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free and proclaim the year of the Lord's favour

just like Jesus did—and just like Jesus did, in order to do that effectively we need to prepare ourselves—sometimes we need to unplug and depend on God alone—to put our existence and our purpose into clear focus for a while—to clear away all the distraction and get down to the bare bones of what life is about—because in the midst of the crowded busy-ness of life it's easy to forget about life's most important questions, to lay them aside—it's easy to distract ourselves

- But as we heard in the passage of scripture from Mark's gospel that Pastor Tasha shared with us, the very first thing Jesus does after being baptized, after that voice from heaven announces that He is the Son of God is to go off by himself, out into the wilderness with the wild animals for 40 days to be tempted and tested.
- Those 40 days, sometimes called Jesus' Temptation in the Wilderness, not only remind us of the 40 years that God provided for the children of Israel in the wilderness, but they are also the basis for the season that we are about to enter, the season known as Lent.
- As you probably know, Lent describes the 40 days before Easter, a period that begins on Ash Wednesday—that's this coming Wednesday, the 2nd of March—and if you're thinking ahead, you probably realize that between the 2nd of March and the 17th of April, that's Easter, there are more than 40 days—and that's because in most churches the Sundays in Lent don't count as part of the 40 days—Sundays are traditionally understood to be feast days, when we celebrate the resurrection, and so are not part of the austerity

of Lent. And just as Jesus spent those 40 days in preparation for his public ministry, the church emphasizes preparing ourselves not only for Easter, but also traditionally for baptism, and also to minister to others—Lent is a time to practice those spiritual disciplines like prayer and repentance and fasting or self-denial--practices that deepen our spiritual maturity and our commitment to a life that reflects the kind of life that Jesus lived.

- And so, just on a superficial level, sometimes you'll hear people talk about what they're "giving up" for Lent—chocolate or alcohol or red meat—sort of like the way people use New Year's Day as a time to make resolutions to stop doing something that's not healthy—and for some folks, Lent provides a convenient chance for a "do-over" of the things they resolved to do back on the first of January, but they didn't stick. For a lot of folks, Lent is a time during the year when for 40 days they stop doing things that they shouldn't be doing 365 days a year. Now because Lent, which begins on Ash Wednesday, is associated with "giving up" rich food and drink, the day before Ash Wednesday is called Fat Tuesday, or *Mardi Gras* in French—a lot of people call it Pancake Day here in the UK—I've heard folks say that it's a day when you could use up the flour and sugar and butter and eggs and fat and oil and syrup in your house before Lent started, and you will notice that there are pancakes on the menu at our Sunday brunch today—now you know why—we're celebrating 2 days early—and remember that Sundays are feast days so you don't need to feel any obligation to abstain from enjoying what you're served—now in some places, they do a lot more than just eat a lot of

pancakes--in places like New Orleans, Mardi Gras is an excuse to have a big party and get up to all sorts of gluttony and debauchery—and that may be why Fat Tuesday is also known as Shrove Tuesday—“shrove” refers to forgiveness-- and some folks need forgiveness for the things they get up to on that day.

- And so I’m sure you have noticed from our graphic that we are beginning a new sermon series today, and this sermon series, that will take us right up to Holy Week, the week before Easter, is called “Give it up for Lent.”
- And you might think that it’s called that because people give things up during Lent, but that’s only half right. The phrase “give it up” in the title of our sermon series is a *double entendre*—it has two meanings—on the one hand it does refer to the practice of self-denial that is associated with the season of Lent, but on the other hand you may have heard an emcee or the host of a television show use the phrase “give it up” when they introduce a performer or a guest on their show—I remember there was a comedian named Arsenio Hall back in the US several decades ago, and he would say that all the time—he’d say, “please welcome my next guest, give it up for Jack Nicholson,” or “give it up for the Beach Boys,”—and what he meant by that was that he was inviting the audience to applaud, to show their appreciation—and I hope that over the next 6 weeks, we are able to “give it up for Lent” as well—that we are able to come to appreciate what this season is all about and why it’s worth acknowledging.

- Now in some Evangelical circles, especially among Nazarene and Methodist folks, whenever you start talking about Lent, there will be somebody who says something like “Well you know John Wesley didn’t believe in Lent.” And just in case you have ever heard someone say this, or in case you ever DO hear someone say that, I want to let you know that is not a true statement. It is however, an understandable misunderstanding based on the fact that in 1874, John Wesley abridged the Book of Common Prayer that was used in Anglican services here in the UK—John Wesley was an Anglican, remember—to create a prayer book to be used for Sunday services among the growing population of people called Methodists in America—and in this Methodist prayer book, Wesley made some changes to the contents in the period before Easter—now Wesley didn’t alter the readings or the prayers for those Sundays but he did change the names of those Sundays—instead of “The first Sunday in Lent,” he used “The Eleventh Sunday after Christmas,” and he continued to use “Sundays after Christmas” until the 6th Sunday in Lent, which he called the “Sunday Next Before Easter.” So he omitted the mention of Lent altogether as far as the names of those Sundays were concerned, and he also omitted Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent—he also omitted Maundy Thursday from Holy Week—now, Wesley never said specifically why he omitted Lent, but he did say that he left out most of the “so-called holy days” because, as he put it, “at present (they) answer no valuable end.” And John Wesley could say that because of a couple of things—first of all, most of the American Methodists had been Anglicans and

still attended Anglican churches for their public worship and so there would have been no danger of their forgetting to celebrate or acknowledge the holy days, but also, and more importantly when it came to Lent, the practices and attitudes associated with the 40 days leading up to Easter were already prescribed for the people called Methodists in 1784—at the “present” that John Wesley was talking about—and what I mean by that is that Methodists, first of all, were supposed to fast on a regular, ongoing basis—in fact there were general rules that Methodists were to live by and that was one of them—John Wesley fasted at least two days every single week—and the Methodists met in groups called bands every week where they would confess their sins and seek forgiveness—every week—and they also had watchnight services and covenant renewal services several times throughout the year that were intense times of self-examination and re-commitment—in short, in 1784, the people called Methodists were living as if it were Lent all year long—and so, at PRESENT, in 1784, Wesley didn’t think including Lent in the new Methodist prayer book was necessary—

- But it is no longer 1784, and at present, in 2022, we live in a culture that not only has forgotten about the traditions that we as a church celebrate throughout the liturgical year, but a lot of folks don’t have any idea that there even is a church calendar that is different from the secular calendar—we live in a thoroughly secularized society that not only has little interest in knowing that we are about to be IN the season called Lent but is also often directly opposed to the very ideas that Lent reminds us of-- self-denial and

repentance and humility before God and sacrifice and discipline--- not to mention the concept that there is meaning to be found somewhere other than in the mundane pursuits of wealth and pleasure and consumption and production and security and status and creature comforts—you mention “fasting” to most folks today and they think about improving their physical fitness not their spiritual fitness —about reducing their weight and not about increasing their faith—at present, it seems to me that ours is a world we need every now and then to be driven out of—so that we might prepare and re-focus and re-commit to its redemption—and that is what the season of Lent is all about.

- And so it is not surprising then that the gospel of Mark tells us that after he was baptized, Jesus was driven out—verse 12-- And the Spirit immediately—immediately—remember that’s one of Mark’s favourite words, *euthus*—immediately—just then—the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness.
- Mark doesn’t tell us that Jesus “decided” to go into the wilderness—or that he “took a notion to go into the wilderness” or that he felt like it—no, Jesus is guided and directed by the Spirit and it was the Spirit who drove Jesus out into the wilderness—away from the crowd—away from those folks He had been sent to serve and to save—and this is key—when we follow the Spirit’s direction it’s not necessarily going to be all work work work, not always “be productive, get things done--sometimes it’s rest, sometimes it’s pray and fast--sometimes it’s unplug and go without

- And if you are paying close attention to the text you may have noticed that Mark tells us that the Spirit drives Jesus to go out into the wilderness—but he’s told us in verse 4 that John is in the wilderness as well—so how is it that the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness when he’s already IN the wilderness?
- Here’s how—the word that Mark uses that is translated “wilderness” is *eremos*—and what it literally means is a place that is solitary, or desolate, or unpopulated—and so *eremos* is not necessarily a geographical location, like the Noddleburn woodland estate or 5 miles south of Nazareth, or on the west bank of the Jordan river—*eremos* is a place that is unpopulated or uncultivated—it is a place where people, the crowds and the society and the noise of everyday life is NOT—and so in verse 4, John appears in the wilderness—in the *eremos*—but in verse 5, when people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, John is still in the same place, but he’s not in the *eremos*, in the wilderness, in the solitary, unpopulated place—any more—and so when Jesus is driven into the *eremos*, what Mark is telling us is not so much about Jesus’ location but about the quality of being alone and being solitary--being by oneself—and if you think about it, isn’t that when we’re most likely to be tempted—when we’re most susceptible to temptation? Think about when you’re alone, when any of us are truly alone—when there’s no one else around to see what we’re doing-- those are the times when our true motives are revealed-- when it is disclosed who we really are--when there’s not anybody around see what

you're doing—have you ever heard the question asked “What would you do if you knew no one would ever find out?” Who you are when you're by yourself entirely, by yourself completely, by yourself in solitary confinement-- that reveals who you truly are.

- Now Mark doesn't give us all the details that Luke and Matthew does—we'll look at them next week-- but Mark does tell us that Jesus is taken into the wilderness and tempted by Satan--and he's with wild animals and he's waited on by the angels--
- Jesus is with supernatural beings and wild animals in the *eremos*—the nature of this place the Spirit has driven him into is distinct not only because of what IS there, but because of what is NOT there—no other people, no crowds, no civilization, no cultivation—this is a place without human influence or rules or opinion or status or hierarchy—
- the wilderness is a place WITHOUT—and Lent is a time when we go without in order to bring into sharp focus our relationship with God alone—when we detach ourselves from the temporal and the immediate in order to strengthen our relationship with the eternal
- We live in a world that doesn't like to go without—a world that tells us we don't have to go without—a world that tells us “you can have it all,” you don't need to sacrifice, you don't need to wait—if you want something, take it, buy it, eat it, consume it—we are a consumer society—but Lent reminds us that we are not simply consumers—that life is more than just consumption

- And believing the lie that we don't need to go without anything, ever, is at the very heart of the story of the Fall, the story of original sin, the idea that there is something that we can't go without, that forbidden fruit, something that we've been commanded to go without—
- The Spirit drove Jesus to a place without, and sometimes the Spirit drives us to those places as well
- And so Lent is a reminder that from time to time we need to find the wild places, the solitary places where we might wrestle with our temptations and where we might prove ourselves worthy--places where only God can provide for us—places where God reveals the purpose of our lives and the mission He has called us to and gives us the strength not to stay in the solitary place but to return to the world with a renewed vision to serve, to follow, to take up our cross-- to offer ourselves up to be used up-- to be lifted up and finally to be raised up in glory—let's give it up for Lent.