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Sermon 13 March 2022

Title: Give it Up for Lent 2: Time's Up

- Good morning church family—we are so glad that you are spending this time together with us this morning—and we hope that this time is a blessing to you—as always, wherever you are, we're glad you're here.
- Now we are certainly glad to be back with you again in real-time—or in recorded time that is current or at least somewhat contemporary with the time that you're probably viewing this—at least the first time you view it, anyway—what I'm trying to say is that last week we published a re-run, a do-over, a repeat of an online service that we had first published some time ago—and I'm happy to let you know that today's service is not a blast from the past, it is brand-new, up-to-date, hot off the presses.
- I chose to replay last week's sermon because even though it was not a part of this particular current sermon series—it was part of the Food for Thought series that we did back in June—even though it was not part of this series, it did consider the situation that gives rise to the observance of Lent, namely the 40 days that Jesus spends in the wilderness immediately following his baptism—when he is tempted and tested by Satan—and this time of testing is reflected in the attitude of self-denial and self-examination that we exhibit especially during the 40 days before Easter. Now we needed last week's

sermon because we were unable to produce a new online service—and the reason we were unable to do that was because after 2 years of avoiding it, COVID finally paid a visit to our house. Despite all our efforts over these many months, that virus saw an opportunity—an opening, however momentary, through our preventive measures, a time when we might be exposed—and at that moment, it took that opportunity—and it didn't matter how long we had avoided infection in the past—what mattered was that at some point, and we will probably never know just when it happened, but at some point the conditions were right for that little virus to take hold—the time was right—and I read this week that infections have been increasing all over the last month or so, I saw that COVID rates in Largs and Millport had doubled in the last fortnight—and that's not hard to believe, either, we know of so many in our community and in our church family who have succumbed to infection recently—and from what we've heard, thankfully most folks have not been particularly unwell—in any other time we might just think we had a little cold or felt a little under the weather—but in these times we are currently living in, we know that infections with COVID have risen primarily because people are testing—Pastor Tasha and I have been testing at least once, sometimes 2 or 3 times every day—I am all-too- well-acquainted with that little swab that you stick up your nose—better acquainted than I ever wanted to be and let me tell you I cannot wait until these days of testing are over—but because we all get tested, because we participate in that exercise of self-examination, even though it's unpleasant, even painful sometimes—

because of that test then we don't have to wonder whether our condition is allergies or a cold or nothing at all—because when we are tested our condition is revealed—it is proven whether we are positive or negative, infected or uninfected—and we certainly appreciate your willingness to put yourself to the test during these times, because it is something that we do not just for ourselves, but for the sake of others as well.

- Now we have heard over the last 2 weeks, 2 versions of Jesus' time of testing in the wilderness—we began by looking at the gospel of Mark and we saw how in his first chapter, Mark briefly describes the 40 days that Jesus spends in the wilderness with Satan and the angels and the wild beasts—out there all by himself—and we saw that Mark doesn't give us the kind of detail that Matthew does—Matthew tells us about Jesus' fasting and the 3 temptations that Satan presents him with—the temptation to turn stones into bread, the temptation to put God to the test by putting himself in grave danger and expecting that God will get him out of it and finally the temptation to possess power over all the world and its wealth. That's in chapter 4 of Matthew's gospel, and in chapter 4 of Luke's gospel we find pretty much the same narrative—there are some differences but basically the same things are described by Luke—he reverses the order of the second and third temptations—but as we consider Luke's retelling of these events, I would like us this morning, as we also consider this time that we are in, these 40 days called Lent—during this time-- I would like to suggest 3 things that these 13

verses have to say to us about time—about time and timing—and so today's sermon is entitled "Time's Up"—

- Our first sermon in this series was called "give it up" and you'll notice that we return again and again in this series to phrases containing the word "up"—watch for them as we go along—as we work our way toward Palm and Passion Sunday when Jesus is "lifted up," and then on to Easter when Jesus is triumphantly "raised up." But today's sermon is called "time's up" because we're going to think for a little while about time—about time and timing. And as I said, I want to suggest 3 points about time that arise out of a reading of this passage of scripture and that I believe the Holy Spirit is leading me to share with you this morning.
- The first point is this—number 1:
- Our opinions and priorities do not determine God's timing.
- Now before you respond with, "but God answers our prayers and provides for us and knows what we need even before we ask" I want to clarify that I am not suggesting that our needs and our feelings and our situations and our prayers do not influence God's timing, but they do not determine God's timing—that whole "name it and claim it/call it and haul it" idea doesn't always work out—that is, sometimes we may want something to happen—we may earnestly desire something-- and what we want may be a good and a right and a beneficial thing, and sometimes we may have a particular NEED, or someone else may—and it may be an urgent need, we may be starving or in danger—living in the midst of a war-torn country—it may seem to us that

our situation is an absolute priority—that something needs to be done right now—time is of the essence—but sometimes the Holy Spirit says wait—sometimes God’s timing says just hang on—but in those times the Spirit also gives us the strength and the peace and the patience to endure a little while, and then to endure a little while longer, and then to endure a little while longer—that’s peace that passes understanding—that’s joy unspeakable and full of glory-- the half has never yet been told—

- Let me give you a couple of examples of what I’m talking about here—now we heard in last week’s sermon about how Jesus’ baptism marks the beginning of his earthly ministry—a ministry that’s only going to last a relatively short time—just two or three years—just two or three years to accomplish the most important mission that any human has ever been called to—and we know from what Luke told us back in chapter 2 of his gospel that Jesus was eager to get started—and so when he was 12 he stayed behind when his family visited Jerusalem and just about scared his parents half to death when they realized he wasn’t travelling with them—and when Mary finds him in the temple and asks him why he’s treated them this way, in the King James Version he responds “did you not know that I must be about my Father’s business?”—He’s saying, “look, I’m 12 years old now, I’ve got things I need to do—time’s a wastin’—the clock is ticking”—he is ready to get moving—but Mary takes him back to Nazareth because he’s still got some growing up to do—that’s what Luke tells us—that he grew in wisdom—he increased in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favour—and as

- we said in our last Second Helping, that fact—the fact that Jesus needed to mature, needed to grow in wisdom ought to come as a great comfort to all of us—because if Jesus could increase in wisdom and in divine favour—if Jesus had to grow and mature, then how much more so do we have to—and so when we look back on things that we’ve said or done that might have been less than beneficial, less than wise, less than full of grace during those times when we were put to the test—we need not feel embarrassed or inadequate—as long as we’re growing and maturing and getting stronger—and times of testing are times that make us mature and grow in our faith
- but Jesus was eager to get his ministry started as a 12 year old and then years later when he is baptized, it looks like things are really about to start happening—and the first thing the Spirit does is to drive him into the wilderness for 40 days—to wait—to prepare—to be tested—and from a human perspective if we were in Jesus’ situation we might be tempted to complain and think that our time was being wasted out there in the wilderness when we had important things to do, when we had places to be—like the children of Israel on their way to the Promised Land we might begin to murmur and wonder if we were just wasting away out in the middle of nowhere—wonder if we were ever going to get where we’re going-- but the truth is that when we are truly led by the Spirit, no time is ever wasted
 - In the wilderness we see Jesus hungry—starving even, having fasted for 40 days—in very real physical need—eating is a priority—it needs to happen—

but not yet—the Spirit says wait—because Jesus’ physical priorities are not the determining factor in God’s timing here—

- Jesus’ actions and his attitude are in stark contrast to the actions and attitudes of some of the Hebrew people who wandered in the wilderness for 40 years—those who complained to God and to Moses—we had it good back there in Egypt but now you’ve brought us out here to starve!
- In the wilderness—in the time of testing-- it’s easy to get fixated on the physical—the temporary—on things like food and shelter and comforts and things—all these things that we get so concerned about—these things that we worry about—and so Jesus tells his followers not to be concerned with all these things, even those things that we desperately need, because God knows what we need—Jesus said seek ye first the Kingdom of God and all these things—all these things will be added unto you—when the time is right—there will come a time to feast, but when we’re in the wilderness it’s a time to fast, to remember what really matters--- and these 40 days of Lent are a time to remember what really matters. These 40 days of Lent are a time to remember that our opinions and priorities do not determine when the time is right—the final say lies with the Spirit—our opinions and priorities do not determine God’s timing
- Now for our second point we look to a phrase that is unique to Luke’s version of this narrative, and we find it in verse 13, where Luke writes about the end of these 40 days in the wilderness—and there he says “When the devil had

finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.” The Greek there is *kairos*—an opportune time.

- Now that sounds pretty ominous, doesn't it? We can almost imagine Satan, the devil, the tempter himself, taking his leave of Jesus but saying, “you win this round, but I'll be back—you just wait”—and so Luke's reader might expect another direct confrontation between Jesus and the Devil, but it doesn't happen in Luke's gospel—but we certainly do find Jesus saying “Get thee behind me Satan” when Peter rebukes him for talking about how he's going to have to suffer—and in chapter 22 Luke tells us that Satan enters into Judas Iscariot just before he goes to the police and makes a deal with them to betray Jesus—and so even though we may not see another direct face to face encounter between the devil and Jesus in Luke's gospel, we certainly do see the devil taking advantage of some opportune times—some opportunities that arise and enable him to exploit human weakness—to thwart preventative measures and infect his target—and certainly this is what the devil has been attempting to do in the wilderness in chapter 4, though unsuccessfully—he has been attempting to exploit an opportunity, to find a time when Jesus lets his guard down, and even though he is unsuccessful, Luke demonstrates to us the *modus operandi* of the Evil One, the way Satan works—and that brings us to our second point and it's this: the Devil appears at opportune times.
- The Devil appears at opportune times.

- And if we imagine ourselves in Jesus' place there in the wilderness, no people around anywhere, it's not too difficult to imagine how Jesus might have responded differently to the Devil's offers—if we had been without food for 40 days, and we had the ability to turn stones into bread, we could rationalize why that might not be a bad idea—after all, we're starving here, and what's the harm, after all? Nobody gets hurt and we are in need, severe need, we could starve out here if we don't eat. We have an opportunity here to satisfy ourselves, to take care of ourselves—it only makes sense that we would do so—see that's how the Devil uses opportune times—the things that we are tempted by don't always look like outright sin and evil—sometimes they look like rational, practical choices—an opportunity that we can't pass up—an offer we can't refuse—it's just a little bread—and we need bread—what's the harm?
- But we can also rationalize big opportunities—not just little ones—and so we can imagine ourselves in Jesus' place also thinking about that second temptation—I could have the wealth of the world—fame and fortune and power—globally—think of all that I could do—think of all the good I could do—I could end poverty and feed the hungry and cure cancer—have you ever heard anybody talk about what they would do if they won the lottery—or if they were as rich as Bill Gates or Elon Musk or Jeff Bezos—what an opportunity—and the bigger the profit, the easier it becomes to justify and rationalize actions that are unethical and inhumane and harmful and exploitative and evil in order to get that reward—oh sure, maybe I'm a little

uncomfortable and feel a little guilty about the fact that my company uses slave labour or causes sickness and death or pollutes God's creation, but think about all the merchandise we produce—think about all the money we make---what if you were given an opportunity like that? Could you turn it down? Might be tempting not to.

- In his third temptation, the Devil takes the opportunity to question who Jesus is—to dig a little bit at his ego—and so the Devil says IF you are the Son of God, jump off the top of this temple and see if God protects you—can you imagine being in that position? For many of us it would be difficult not to bow up and say “how dare you question my identity? I’ll show you who I am—God said He’d protect me and He will—so watch this—faith over fear!”
- Oh we’ve heard that a few times over the last couple of years or so haven’t we? Faith over fear! I’m not wearing that mask or worrying about that Coronavirus—I’m a child of the Great Physician—meanwhile people were filling the intensive care units and folks were losing their grandparents and their wives and husbands and Moms and Dads because of people’s foolishness when if they’d have just opened their Bibles they’d have seen that Jesus Himself said “don’t put the lord your God to the test.”
- But the Devil uses opportune times—times when we might think we have an opportunity to gain something that we need, or something that we desire, or to elevate ourselves above other people—times when we think “this is no big deal, no one will ever find out, this isn’t hurting anyone—what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas—my wife will never know, or my husband or my kids or

my friends or my pastor—it's just a little white lie, everybody does it—
maybe it's unethical but it's highly profitable and I need the money—I
deserve this" –

- the Devil has been using opportune times since the beginning—since the Garden of Eden—doesn't that fruit look good? You know it's delicious—and it's not going to kill you—why should you go without? You've gotta eat—and you'll be like God!
- I read about an opportune time in Ukraine recently—Pastor Andriy Takhtay, who pastors a Nazarene church in Kyiv, wrote on social media that soon after the war started—when the bombs started dropping and buildings falling-- some drivers increased the price of a ride in their taxis to the trainstation 7 times—charged 7 times as much as they had just the week before—why? Because people were desperate—they'd pay whatever they had to—why not take advantage? Why not seize the opportunity? Pastor Takhtay didn't mince words—he wrote “What kind of a beast do you have to be to inflate taxi prices by 7 times during the war?”
- When things get tough—when people get tested—during times of stress and war and disaster—these are opportune times for evil—times when people start thinking about what they have to gain from the situation, how they can exploit and take advantage—but times of testing are not only opportune times for evil, they can be opportune times for good—times when folks don't just think about themselves and what they can gain but they think about others—a time when folks open their homes to their neighbours whose

homes have been destroyed, when people like Pastor Takhtay deliver food and medicine to those who can't leave their homes, when folks leave baby strollers at a train station in Poland so refugee mothers don't have to carry their children as they flee for their lives—

- And at these opportune times—these times of testing—we are all, each one of us faced with a choice—whether or not we just going to think about ourselves—about our own needs and wants and desires and egos—that's what the Devil is hoping for when he tests Jesus in the wilderness
- Jesus has an opportunity to relieve his physical hunger; to gain the wealth of the world; to be saved from death and harm and prove who He is—notice how these are all centered on the self? These are opportunities to be selfish-- but these are also opportunities to prove his condition, his selflessness, to give up his own immediate priorities to the priorities of the Kingdom—to demonstrate his worthiness and commitment to the direction of the Spirit—to choose the eternal over the temporal—opportunities to choose things that are infinite over those that are finite—the ways of heaven rather than the way of the world—and in times of testing we too have the same opportunity—the Devil may appear at opportune times but scripture tells us “resist the devil and he will flee”—but it will take some time and some testing before he does—might take 40 days—maybe more—
- 1 Peter chapter 5, beginning with verse 8 tells us: Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for

someone to devour. –waiting for opportune times—so what do we need to do? verse 9 tells us

- 9 Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.
- And here comes the promise—verse 10 And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.
- That’s the good news right there--Those opportune times when the Devil tests us don’t last forever—but on the other hand, neither do we—and that’s my last point about time, and it’s simply this: our time is limited.
- We began the 40 days of Lent on Ash Wednesday, when in Nazarene and other Christian churches all over the world we are reminded of our mortality—when the ashes are applied with the words “remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return”—and so during this time we remember that our time on this earth is not unlimited—that we are finite and death is a certainty—and so as we look toward the celebration of the resurrection on Easter Sunday, the finite 40 days of Lent remind us of the finite span of each of our lives—we are faced with the cold reality of the fact that we do not have all the time in the world—as the book of James puts it, life is a vapour that appears for a little while and then vanishes away
- And that fact is part of the reason that John Wesley was so concerned, some might say obsessed, with “redeeming the time”—making the most of the days and months and years that God gives to each one of us—because one of these

days, time is going to run out, and the opportunity to decide for ourselves how we will spend each moment of our lives will be forever past

- A few weeks ago, at Ian Morrison's celebration of life, Rev. Anne Goodwin shared a poem with us—it was called "The Dash." It was written by Linda Ellis and I want to share with you just the first 2 stanzas—the poet writes:
 - I read of a man who stood to speak
 - At the funeral of a friend
 - He referred to the dates on the tombstone
 - From the beginning...to the end

 - He noted that first came the date of birth
 - And spoke the following date with tears,
 - But he said what mattered most of all
 - Was the dash between those years
- And that poem is a reminder that all of our lives will one day be reduced--condensed, summarised, in the dash between two dates—that of our birth and our death.
- And one day, just like the 40 days of Lent will come to an end, our lives are also going to be over—and on Ash Wednesday it can seem like a long time until Easter gets here—and I'm sure that 40 days all alone in the wilderness, particularly without food, also seemed like a long time, just like 40 years wandering and hoping to get to the Promised Land one day did too—when times are hard, when we're tested and tried—life can feel like a marathon, it

can seem like life is going to run on and on for a long time-- for miles and miles before we're done, but the truth is, life is just a dash—a sprint--life is a short trip—and when it has run its course all that's going to matter is how we have finished the race—whether we have fought the good fight and kept the faith.

- If this is a time of testing for you—and I know that it is for many of us—let me encourage you this morning by saying that this can be a time when your faith is proven—this can be a time when you grow and mature and become keenly aware of the Holy Spirit's guidance—and let me assure you that the same Spirit who leads you TO the wilderness can lead you THROUGH the wilderness—and onward and upward to the day of resurrection.
- Pastor Tasha is going to lead us in the sacrament of Holy Communion in just a moment, so take this opportunity to gather the elements and prepare your hearts and minds, and in a little while we'll celebrate together.