

## **“I Love Me”**

**Sermon by Dan Harrison, Pastor, Church of the Covenant 3/24/19**

*Matthew 4:1-7*

Two weeks ago, as we embarked on this season of Lent, we discussed Jesus’ own self-isolation in the wilderness for forty days. How he extracted himself from his community, to be alone, and while alone encountered the temptation to once again insert himself back into society prematurely—by first being offered food while fasting. He resisted the temptation by quoting wisdom scripture, “Thou shalt not live on bread alone.” This would be something he’d later allude to once again when talking with the Samaritan woman at the well when he told his disciples he food they didn’t know about—referring to something much deeper than just material sustenance, but something more spiritually filling. Jesus operated in a realm that transcended mere survival; he wanted to truly live.

In my time as a young man living in Mexico, I felt isolation in language and culture for the first few months. I could not understand the people around me, and they could not understand me. A breakthrough moment came when I had exhausted all the money I had brought with me and the family that looked after me, who had in effected adopted me, ran out of their own funds as well—and with it food had run out. It pained me most when the family decidedly took their last bowl of beans (which was less beans and more simply a bean broth) and handed it to me—even with their much younger children watching as I slurped at the salty bit of liquid, conflicted expressions of compassionate hospitality and hunger on their faces. They gave all they had. Then we sat in silence on the dirt floor together, distracting ourselves from our hunger by being quiet and still, in and out of sleep, frequently fanning off the summer flies which were also hungry. In those moments, we too found God, in both our isolation and in company with one another.

Jesus’ second temptation according to the Gospel of Matthew is an interesting one. After having resisted the desire to satisfy his hunger, Jesus was taken to the highest point of the temple in Jerusalem, and from there Satan tempted him to end his life, or at least to try to end it. Jesus resisted.

The question then becomes, why would Jesus have been so tempted? My first encounter with such despair came when I was teaching English at the University of Nevada, where an international student of mine who was in my English 101 class suddenly stopped coming to class. The student was named Boon and had barely been out of Japan for two months by then, and now hadn’t come to my class or any of his classes apparently in more than a week. I inquired with his fellow students who knew him. They said that he was really depressed. Eventually, I mustered enough courage to go and find him in the bowels of UNR’s extensive dormitory system. With the help of others, I was able to eventually locate him. He seemed shocked to see me, his teacher in his dorm room. He had a guitar in the corner. I picked it up and we talked and exchanged songs that we both knew, at times singing together. At the end of my visit, he thanked me. And he came to every class after that. All it took it seems in that instance was a bit of care and reminding Boon of the fact that the despair will pass; there is hope on the horizon. How naïve I was though, to think that’s all it takes. You and I know now that it takes much, much more. Life can be so much more complicated at times.

While in Reno, Ruth and I and our kids became very close to a family there. So close that after we later moved to Kuwait, when we would make occasional visits back in the US, we would often stay with them. Like any couple, our friends had their fair share of relational problems but seemed to always work through them—which was a private affair of course. However, one time Harry, all of a sudden reached out to us by email while we were in Kuwait. He needed help, guidance. His marriage was falling apart he said. His wife had moved out with the kids and he felt desperate; he was at the end of his rope. I counseled him the best I could from the other side of the world. I encouraged him to find hope on the horizon, much like I had counseled Boon that day a couple years before. But after a few email exchanges, I didn't receive anymore from our friend Harry. We would soon learn that Harry had died to suicide. He had ordered a bottle of sleeping pills, took them all, and never woke up. We would later learn from other communications he had left that apparently he had attempted suicide in hopes that someone would find him and resuscitate him. He had evidently studied exactly how many pills he needed to take to be resuscitated. He wanted to live, but he wanted to be wanted. In essence, he tested God, in his own way. I didn't fully understand this temptation of Jesus' until processing Harry's own test, or reflecting on Boon's.

Jesus had been alone for 40 days. He was apparently in despair of some sort, longing for love, for care... otherwise it would not have truly been a temptation, right? So, we can assume Jesus struggled with feelings of absolute loneliness. In his own isolation, he was tempted to end it by taking his own life. This is a profound realization for those who can accept it. Jesus struggled with depression, struggled with self-worth. Jesus was offered an easy-out, and resisted. I think of Harry's test mirroring that of Jesus' in many ways. Harry wanted someone to find him, someone to rescue him—and this is the case for many victims of suicide. They secretly wanted to be found, to be saved. And Satan offers Jesus the same: "Throw yourself down this tower, and God will save you... right? God loves you, right?" And I can only imagine in Harry's mind, he might have told himself something similar: "Leave the message on your wife's phone telling her you're going to take all these pills. She will come. She truly loves you, and she will rescue you." She didn't get the message in time. He died. He was a local celebrity, a beloved radio personality, and the whole city mourned his passing. I, of course, took it personally, because he reached out to me and I have always felt I didn't do enough to save him—as his friend, as his pastor. But after examining Jesus' own battle with loneliness and self-worth, I realized, there is grace—enough grace for us all. Let us not test one another regarding our love for each other. Let us not test God. Let us instead rest in the knowledge that we love and are loved. But it begins with self-love. Do you love you? A question I have posed for us before. I bring it back up simply because I believe the answer at our lowest of times is too many times, simply "no." As I have taken us through this exercise previously, I still feel it necessary to do so again. Close your eyes and repeat after me: "I love me. I love me."

With your eyes still closed, find the silence within. Find the peace that your very being craves. It's there. You are loved. God loves you. God created you. Of course God loves you. Do you love you? In the quiet, in the isolation find peace, find communion with your Creator. Know you are loved. You may open your eyes now. Find peace today, find God's rest in your living. Shalom