

Trinity United Methodist Church

December 15, 2019

“Under Wraps: God Is Jealous”

Pastor Dan Elmore

Scripture: Deuteronomy 4:23-31

Be careful not to forget the covenant of the Lord your God that he made with you; do not make for yourselves an idol in the form of anything the Lord your God has forbidden. For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.

After you have had children and grandchildren and have lived in the land a long time—if you then become corrupt and make any kind of idol, doing evil in the eyes of the Lord your God and arousing his anger, I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you this day that you will quickly perish from the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess. You will not live there long but will certainly be destroyed. The Lord will scatter you among the peoples, and only a few of you will survive among the nations to which the Lord will drive you. There you will worship man-made gods of wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or eat or smell. But if from there you seek the Lord your God, you will find him if you seek him with all your heart and with all your soul. When you are in distress and all these things have happened to you, then in later days you will return to the Lord your God and obey him. For the Lord your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant with your ancestors, which he confirmed to them by oath.

Sermon

Would you pray with me as we get underway this morning? Open our ears and our hearts, oh Lord. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we

need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

This is the third Sunday of Advent and the third Sunday in our sermon series, *Under Wraps: The Gift We Never Expected*. The idea is that maybe we've become all too familiar with the Christmas story, as we realized a couple weeks ago. We put together the stories from Matthew and Luke of the wise men and the shepherds; we shove it all in one nativity scene together and call it another year.

We also have typical Advent themes of peace, hope, joy, and love. But even in Biblical times between the pages of the Old and the New Testament, the people of God, the Hebrews and the Israelites, knew that they had been promised the Messiah, God's chosen one. He was going to show up and right all the wrongs and save Israel as a people and make everything right once and for all. Many of them thought they knew how it would play out, what to expect, that the Messiah would come in as a knight on a noble steed, riding along with people behind them, clop-clop-clop-clop, coconuts—anyway... bad reference. They thought that that's how things would play out. But instead God sent His Son Himself, taking on flesh and entering the world as a baby boy, the last thing that any of them expected.

And so the first week we talked about how God is **expectant**. That God expects us to come from Him. God expects great things of us, just as we should expect great things of God in our lives as well.

Last week we talked about how God is **dangerous**. How God enters our world rather meek and mild, but God enters our lives and disrupts our plans, tears down our defenses, and makes us dangerous to the status quo of darkness and despair in this world around us as His light lives in each of us.

And today we're talking about how God is **jealous**. That's right, God is *jealous*. Typically we think of being jealous in a more negative way. The story is of a young man who was rather impatient looking, standing on the sidewalk in front of one of the boutique shops like we have many of over on Main Street

here in town. So he approached an attractive young woman walking by and asked her, “Would you talk with me for a minute?” And she cautiously asked him, “Why?” He said, “Well, you see, my wife has been in this store for a long time now, but I know that she will come out really quickly if she sees me talking to you.” (Laughter)

And the roles can easily be reversed. I had a girlfriend in college who got me out on the dance floor at a reception by dancing with other guys. I was trying to be Mr. Wallflower, like usual. We can be jealous of each other in those ways.

We can be jealous of another’s success, like when a co-worker gets the promotion that we thought we deserved. We can be jealous of the advantages of others. *If only I had what they had.*

But there’s other, less negative ways to be jealous. One of them is to be vigilant in maintaining or guarding something. Such as we might say that Americans are jealous of our freedoms and our rights.

And then there’s the Biblical way of being jealous, of being intolerant of unfaithfulness or rivalry. It’s this kind of jealousy that we read about in today’s Scripture reading from Deuteronomy chapter 4. The Israelites are about to cross over the Jordan into the Promised Land, and Moses is giving them last-minute instructions, reminding them of the many laws that God gave them from Mount Sinai and how God had been with them every step of the way and how God would continue to do so.

So Moses says, “Be careful not to forget the covenant of the Lord your God that He made with you. Do not make for yourselves an idol in the form of anything the Lord your God has forbidden, for the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.” Moses is saying, remember that first Commandment? Y’all remember the first Commandment? No other gods before Me.

In case you forgot, and in case *they* forgot, Moses goes over them again in Deuteronomy chapter 5, the next chapter. And the first one, indeed, states, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of

slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me.” Moses says, remember this, because God is a consuming fire. God will burn everything that competes for Him in our lives up to a crisp. In other words, any time we put someone or something else in our lives before God, God gets jealous.

When Moses first received the Ten Commandments and the rest of the law on Mount Sinai, he spent so long with God on the mountain, the people waiting for him to come back down the mountain down below grew so impatient with him that they formed the golden calf to worship instead. And so God in His jealousy made them wander through the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land twice as long as originally planned.

Later, when Israel’s first king, Saul, got impatient and didn’t wait on Samuel, God’s prophet, to show up before going into battle as God instructed, God in His jealousy then rejected Saul as king. And then the prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah and the others point to the exile, the fall of Israel, as God allowing these things to happen because of His jealous intolerance of their unfaithfulness. Yikes... sounds kind of like God is harsh, doesn’t it?

Well, the good news is God’s jealousy is ultimately for our benefit. Just as a parent would be jealous of their child’s health and well-being, doing whatever it takes to protect and to provide, even practicing tough love.

In today’s reading, Moses told the people and us about how this jealousy of God would play out. He says, first of all, don’t even go there, worshipping or serving anything else but God. He’s a consuming fire, He’s jealous, and He doesn’t play around. And then Moses goes on. He says, after you’ve had children and grandchildren and have lived in the land a long time—in other words, after you’ve become good and comfortable church people—if you then become corrupt and make an idol of any kind, doing evil in the eyes of the Lord your God and arousing His anger, I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you this day, for you will quickly perish from the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess. You will not live there long, but you will certainly be destroyed. Moses goes on to foretell the exile and being scattered. But then he says *but*, and it’s a big *but*... He says *but* if from there you seek the Lord your God, you will find Him, if you seek Him with all your heart and with all

your soul. When you are in distress and all these things have happened to you, then in later days you will return to the Lord your God and obey Him. For the Lord your God is a merciful God. He will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant with your ancestors which he confirmed to them by oath.

You see, friends, God is jealous, but even in His jealousy, God is merciful. And you might be sitting there thinking, come on, get to the point. What does all of this have to do with Christmas? You see, God is *jealous for us*, especially when we turn away. But in His mercy, God provides the way for us to return to Him. For God so loved the world that He sent his one and only Son, who went on to say, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but through Me.”

And so we might be the ones who find that we’ve wandered away. That we’ve made an idol or idols in our lives. But if from wherever we are on our journey we seek the Lord our God, we *will* find Him if we seek Him with all our heart and soul. For you see, God is jealous for us, and He will do whatever it takes, even entering our world as one of us, dying for us, and raising us to new life once again.

There was a story I read recently that I think illustrates this quite well. The story is told of a man who stopped into a pub to watch the late football games. Another man came in and slid up into the space next to him and ordered a drink, late 50s, maybe, wearing a Steelers shirt. Asked they could turn one of the TVs to the game, but he wasn’t really watching. He wanted to talk. He made jokes with the guy on his left and with me on his right. He seemed like one of those affable guys who isn’t going to let you dive into your phone for too long. He introduced himself to me and to the dude on his other side. The other dude was half-watching the Raiders game and buried in his phone, and I had no particular rooting interest, so I put down the phone and tuned in to Mr. Steelers.

We got to talking. He polished off a shot and a beer, and he backed us up for another round. We had about zero in common on the surface. I worked in marketing; he was a cop that ran juvie programs. His kids have kids. My son is 12. The other dude wanted no part in the conversation, so it was just the two of

us talking, me and Mr. Steelers. He divorced when his four kids were little, worked a variety of jobs and careers to get through those years. Bought back his old house post-divorce to be near his kids and lived in the basement for six months while his ex-wife and her new husband lived upstairs.

On the surface he was the same sort of stoic as my grandfather: Firm handshake, looked you in the eye. Been through stuff, seen stuff, went on about it. But he was a little glassy-eyed, and not from the drinks. And so we did what men in bars do: We half-watched, and we talked.

Turns out he put up his Christmas tree today, and it was the first year he did it himself, without any of his kids there. He spent the day going through boxes, pulling out ornaments, thumbing through pictures of Christmases past. It had been a day of joyful ache. I get all that.

I told him a bit about my son and my own path and all the things that have gotten me from where I once was to where I am now, and we talked about the bigger picture. On the surface, me and this guy couldn't have been more different. There was nothing remotely similar about our career paths. But below that we were pretty darn similar. His father was an accountant, mine a lawyer, and we both rejected all of that. We both hit midlife and divorce and took roads less traveled to be around our kids: The ex-cop and the guy who worked in marketing. If we had nowhere to go and all night to get there, there would have been shots until we were telling drunken stories about our kids. But I'm driving, and he was expecting company.

And then his company arrived. It was his son, a fireman. Works here in town. Couldn't make it to decorate today because he was working. His father made sure he got a bar seat while the father stood. Asked if he was hungry and made sure he ordered some food. And then things got a bit quiet. The guy who had clearly wanted the company and wanted the conversation got quiet. The son had a burger. His father stood at the bar between us in the same place he had been before his son had arrived. They chatted a little bit; small talk.

And then I realized: The son had on a Steelers hat to match his dad's Steelers shirt. His father showing up early, asking for them to change the TVs to the game, scoping out some space at the bar. It was never about the game.

This is their thing. To the son, it's just meeting his dad as always at the place they meet up. It's regular. To the dad, though, it's the thing that he put down those boxes of old pictures and found his jersey and headed out early for.

The father said very little while they were next to me, and all I could think was, I wonder if he knows how much his father loves him. I don't know. You can never see into others' lives from the outside. I hope for his sake he does, though. That's a dad who loves his kids, soaks up their company, misses them when they're gone, and probably says little of all that.

When he first walked in, I looked at his Steelers shirt and thought it felt a little off. He wasn't a diehard fan, I could tell. It was never about the Steelers, though. It was about the *together* more than the watching.

As a father, that's something I can totally understand. I wonder if his son knows. I hope he does.

You see, *God is jealous for us*, enough to do whatever it takes for us. What might we be jealous of in our lives for him? What might we be vigilant in maintaining? Maybe it's getting up a little earlier to have some extra quiet time with our Father. Maybe it's turning off the TV earlier in the evening to spend more time in God's word. Maybe it's reorienting our finances to make sure we're giving faithfully. Maybe it's fasting during lunch break a day a week, not just to shed the holiday pounds, but to spend a few extra moments in prayer with our Father. Because He's jealous for us, because He loves us so much.

Thanks be to God. Amen.