

Sermon for March 8, 2015 (Lent 3, Year B)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary

Texts: Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; John 2:13-22

Know what: God's jealousy fights against the danger of idolatry in every generation

So what: we cannot use God for our own purposes

Now what: love God for God's own sake

Title: A Jealous God

"You shall have no other gods before me...You shall not bow down to them or worship them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God" (Exodus 20:3,5).

My friends, it can be stated that the central problem of humanity which is confronted throughout all of the Bible – from Genesis all the way through the Revelation to John – is the destructive power of idolatry.

The counterweight to that dangerous force is the jealousy of God.

The jealousy of God.

But what does it actually mean for us to consider and to understand that God is jealous? And how do we understand this jealousy as a GOOD thing, as a positive and life-giving force?

Thanks be to God! Today we have come to the reading of the covenant made at Sinai. We can't read all of it today – the meeting at Sinai takes up 6 entire chapters in Exodus! So this morning we have returned to the Decalogue – the 10 words – spoken by God from the smoky, thick darkness which shrouded the mountain in mystery.

"I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."

Everything begins here. The one who speaks is the God who acts, who liberates, who rescues, and now, the God who demands and promises.

What we are confronted with is a free God who brings the chosen people into the disciplines of a sustainable life of shared freedom.

As Walter Brueggeman aptly describes it, “[the LORD] seizes initiative to establish the relation. This text concerns the freedom of God [who is] utterly untamed and undomesticated” (The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume 1: p. 838).

But that makes most of us VERY uncomfortable! And here’s the rub. We humans like to be in control. We want to know the rules of the game. In general, we like everything much better when all is predictable and calm and safe.

The Lord Jesus walks into the Temple just before Passover – Pesach – and he explodes in a flurry of action that is untamed, undomesticated, unpredictable.

In every generation since then, people have asked, “Why did Jesus drive the money changers out of the Temple?”

My friends, there is no answer to this question, just as there never is an answer to the question of “why”.

But I do know this: Jesus was not anti-temple. Let’s be clear about that. As a faithful, observant Jew, our Lord gathered with his people at the Temple at least once a year. And the apostles were certainly not against the Temple! In Acts, we read that the first community of Jesus followers after Pentecost “spent much time together in the Temple” (Acts 2:46). Likewise, Paul, when he went up to Jerusalem with his offering for the apostles, he went into the Temple to offer sacrifices and to undergo all of the Temple rituals (Acts 24:17-18).

This is not an anti-temple story. Again, I have no easy answer as to why the Lord did this, but what I suspect is that it has something to do with the jealous passion of God. Jesus was walking in the well-worn path of prophetic criticism of Temple worship. The prophets before him had always been quite skeptical of the Temple.

Now, what is the problem with Temple worship?

It is none other than the danger of idolatry.

Religion, when established and proscribed, easily becomes the means to an end.

I think that we all know how this works.

If you say a certain prayer with the right amount of faith, then you will be healed.

If you light these certain candles, then good things will happen to you.
If you pray in a certain direction, then God will be pleased.
If you pray THIS prayer to THIS saint, then you will find whatever it is that you lost.
If you sacrifice this animal, then your sins will be forgiven.
And on and on it goes.

But what does any of this have to do with the God who brought us out of the house of slavery, who made a covenant with us?

This is what the sacred text declares to us:

This is a God who will not be co-opted as an instrument for our hopes and plans.

No, we do not get to define our relationship with this God. We do not get to set the terms. They are set by God, and we can accept those terms... OR we can reject them.

On Tuesday of last week (March 3), the Church celebrated the life and witness of John and Charles Wesley, and we spoke together at length about their legacy at our Thursday healing Eucharist.

John and Charles Wesley were the leaders of a powerful movement within the Church of England in the 1700s. This was the very first movement which we can properly identify as an evangelical revival designed to reach the urban masses.

Cynical observers denigrated them as “Methodists” but the title stuck, and Methodism remains as a global movement in the Church even in our own day.

Do you know why the Holy Spirit compelled the Wesleys to lead this mass revival?

The 18th century saw the height of deism within the Church of England. Deism was the faith that imagined God as the great watch-maker who set the universe in motion according to immutable laws and then withdrew from direct involvement in creation.

In that climate, then, the Church became the means by which the great structures of British society were continued and maintained in perpetuity, according to the eternal designs of God. So it was posited and taught.

Each citizen then had a duty to support the Church, because it was the glue which supported the monarchy, upheld the great ruling families who governed British society, and taught each person their duty within their social class. This was the great hierarchy of life which God established and which the Church worked assiduously to maintain.

But I wonder, as did the Wesleys: what does this have to do with the God who fought against and overcame Pharoah, who tore Egyptian society apart, who led a ragtag group of slaves to freedom in a radical new society? What does this have to do with a Messiah who drove the merchants and bankers out of the Temple?

In 18th century England, God was co-opted as a necessary tool to support the status quo. But, my friends, the LORD is a jealous God. God is not a means to an end. God IS the end – and the ONLY end that matters!

So God inspired the Wesleys to speak to the people and to call them back to love the LORD their God with all their heart.

To love God. And love is not about duty and class, but about passion, energy, commitment, loyalty.

The danger of Temple worship, as the prophets always suspected, is that the people can follow the rules, sacrifice the appropriate animals, place the correct coins in the Temple treasury, and then think that they have demonstrated their love for God by doing their duty.

This is nothing less than a form of idolatry, which seeks to replace the untamed, undomesticated God of the Exodus with a safe and predictable deity whose favor can be bought or sold.

Idols are dangerous because they tempt us with power – power to control things, like our health or our future or our success or the weather or the actions of others.

Idols promise us power to CONTROL something.

The God of the covenant calls us to BECOME something.

So what does it actually mean for us to understand that God is a jealous God?

And how do we love this God with all our heart?

Perhaps it means that we respect the freedom of God to act as God sees fit.
That means giving up our desire for control. It is, after all, only an illusion.

So let God be God, free and wild.
And let God be the One who speaks to us in mystery and power.
We can never control where and when and how God will speak.

But because God has spoken, we do know something about the why of God.
Why did God speak at Sinai, and why does God speak to us now?

To create a community of free people who love God and who love one another.

To create a community of freed slaves who are a living witness to the power of love
to transform humanity and to overcome the seemingly endless cycle of sin and
brokenness and abuse.

THIS is who God has called us to become, and God is jealously passionate to ensure
that we fulfill our destiny. May it be so. Amen.