

The Ten Commandments Series
“Commandments 1-3: Our Jealous God”
Sermon on Exodus 20:1-7 (10/18 & 10/19/14)
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“And God spoke all these words: ‘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. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them;

“for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand [generations] of those who love me and keep my commandments. You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.”

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“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. You shall not make for yourself an idol ... You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God...” “For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God.”

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I've got to be honest with you upfront: That little phrase right there has never been one of my favorites in the Bible: *“For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God.”* I've always kind of bristled when I read that.

Jealousy is so *ugly*...and I don't want to associate it with the beautiful God I love and think I know so much about.

In fact, I dislike the idea of God being a “jealous God” so much so that, last week when we read the Ten Commandments in worship, I intentionally left out the verses that include that phrase. We just skipped right over them.

We all have parts of the Bible we wish were not in there...and this is one of the parts I have so often wished I never had to face. *“I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God...”*

I wish we didn't have to read those words.

I wish they weren't in there. But they are. And, after ignoring them last week, I realized that, *this week*, it would be irresponsible of us to ignore them again. Because, in all honesty, those words are perhaps some of the most important words for us to read, to hear, and to attempt to understand.

I recently checked-out dictionary.com and it defines “jealousy” in this way:

“[jealousy is] resentment against a rival ... or against another's success” or “[jealousy is] mental uneasiness from suspicion or fear of rivalry, unfaithfulness, etc., as in love or [goals].”¹

Resentment. Suspicion. Fear of rivalry. Fear of unfaithfulness. Jealousy. Though we hate to admit it, we have all experienced – or we *will* all experience – jealousy.

It's the twinge in our gut...the flush in our cheeks..that catch in our throat...the panic in our heart when we feel that we're losing our hold on something we thought belonged to us.

Jealousy can make us think, feel, and do ugly, ugly things – some of which seem small while others seem catastrophic. It's the man who resorts to stalking the woman he thinks he loves...and it's the girl who can't stand to see her boyfriend sharing a laugh with her female friends.

Once jealousy takes hold of us, we can become like slaves to it, powerless under its control. It can cause us to sabotage friendships, romantic relationships, family dynamics, and career goals. Indeed jealousy is an ugly, ugly thing...and so I always hated when I would read in the Bible that our God is a *jealous* God.

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The very beginning of the Bible – Genesis chapter 1 – teaches us about a God who created this entire universe: all of its glory and majesty, its power and its beauty. God called it all into being and called it *good*...out of love.

Throughout Genesis and Exodus, we meet a God who calls a people to be a holy people, a witness to the world of God's glory and love. We see a God who delivers this people from slavery in Egypt and who brings them out of slavery into freedom in a promised land. And God does this out of love for them.

When I read the stories of God's relationship with the Israelites in Genesis and Exodus, I fall in love with this God over and over again: I see God continue to guide and bless this people even when they struggle to be faithful to that same God. I see *that* God and I am reminded of how often God has done that very thing for me: when I've been unfaithful, when I've been disobedient, when I've struggled in my own love *for* and commitment *to* God, God always finds a way to remind me, “Jenny, I'm still here – come back. I love you and I want what's best for you.”

Over and over again, I am reminded of God's love for me and for this world...and so I've hated the phrase “I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God.” “No, no,” I've said to God, “jealousy is an ugly *human* thing – *you* can't be that way. *You* don't get be ugly like we do.”

¹ From www.dictionary.com

But, you know what? I've learned over the years that telling God who to be or how to behave is really just not that smart...because usually, when I've told God to do or be one thing, it doesn't take long before God says to me, "Jenny, which one of the two of us created the heavens and the earth? And which one of the two of us is all-knowing and all-powerful? Because the last time I checked, it wasn't you."

So this last week I had some conversation with God about what it means to be *jealous* – and how *God's* jealousy is a different kind of jealousy than our human jealousy.

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Several years ago, a pastor friend of mine told me about *The Workbook on the Ten Commandments* by United Methodist pastors Maxie Dunham and his daughter Kimberly Dunham Reisman. You've perhaps noticed the insert in your bulletin full of quotes from this book.

It's really easy to read each of the Ten Commandments and to just kind of gloss over the way each one of them is already intricately part of our own lives. Reading *The Workbook on the Ten Commandments* helped me to think about the ways in which God personally challenges *me* with each of The Ten.

The quotes that you see on that insert are there for you to explore in your own spiritual life this coming week. Of course, I wish I could have included all of those quotes somewhere in this sermon and that I could have taken the time to flesh them all out...but I assume you want to go home at some point before the day is over! So I chose instead to print them and to trust God will speak to you as you read and ponder them on your own.

I hope, through these quotes, you'll come to a fuller understanding of the first three commandments because I'm really not even going to touch on them individually in this sermon.

Rather, I'm considering them as a unit within the Ten Commandments, each of them reminding us to put God *first* in our hearts and lives...and each of them reminding us of that phrase I have so often hated: "I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God."

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In their *Workbook on the Ten Commandments*, Maxie Dunham and Kimberly Dunham Reisman point out that, "in the Old Testament, this word *jealousy* does not connect with the human emotion we associate with envy, pettiness, and suspicion. Rather it means that God cares about us and therefore is not indifferent to what we do and how we live. *Jealousy* in this sense is as much a part of the nature of God as are God's love and forgiveness. God is passionately identified and involved with us."²

² *The Workbook on the Ten Commandments*. p. 54.

And that reminded me of the final dictionary.com definition of “jealousy” which was “vigilance in maintaining or guarding something.”

So...our creator God is passionately identified and involved with us and, at the same time, is vigilant in maintaining and guarding us. God created us...so God is passionately identified and involved with us... God is vigilant in maintaining and guarding us. *That*, my friends, is divine jealousy.

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People often use the words “envy” and “jealousy” interchangeably – and they are similar words and similar feelings, for sure. But I once heard them defined differently from one another in a way I found very helpful: *envy* is when you want something that belongs to someone *else*...and *jealousy* is when you are fearful you might lose something that belongs to *you*.

Defined this way, *envy* can be about a person or a thing you want – your friends' house, your co-worker's promotion, your sibling's perfect-seeming children. But *jealousy* is more likely to always be about a person: the best friend who spends less and less time with you when they fall in love or the spouse with a wandering eye. *Jealousy* is about the fear of losing someone who is desperately important to you – losing them to *something* or *someone* else.

And when we think about jealousy in that sense, we can begin to understand divine jealousy. When *we* get jealous, our jealousy is often irrational and based on unfounded insecurities – this is not always the case, but it often is. When *we* get jealous, we can respond in ways that sabotage the very relationships we feared we might be losing.

Sometimes we stake our claim on people who do not belong to us, or we become overly possessive and our relationships suffer. That's what can happen when *we* get jealous. But *God's* jealousy is different.

See, we humans belong to *God* in a way that nothing and no *one* can belong to *us*. We are *God's* possessions and only *God* truly understands what it means to be our gracious and loving owner.

Only *God* truly understands jealousy that is good and beautiful – jealousy that is about being vigilant in maintaining and guarding us... jealousy that is about constantly guiding us and directing us and providing us with hope and care...offering this in a way that no human being ever can.

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Several years ago, I first heard John Mark McMillan's worship song “How He Loves.” Like many more contemporary Christian worship songs, “How He Loves” begins quietly and then builds in both volume and passion.

When I think about these first three of the Ten Commandments, I can't help but think about the song "How He Loves" because its opening lyrics are, "He is jealous for me / loves like a hurricane / I am a tree bending beneath the weight of His wind and mercy."

"He is jealous for me / loves like a hurricane / I am a tree bending beneath the weight of His wind and mercy."

Isn't that a powerful image? That God's love is comparable to the winds of a hurricane: powerful, all-encompassing love that is strong enough to *bend* us with mercy, but that doesn't break us.

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"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. You shall not make for yourself an idol ... You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God..." "For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God."

[Sing] "He is jealous for me. Loves like a hurricane, I am a tree bending beneath the weight of his wind and mercy ... He is jealous for me..."

Our God truly is jealous – for me, for you, for everyone outside of this sanctuary here in Bismarck and for everyone everywhere around this big, wide world.

Passionately identified and involved with us. Vigilant in maintaining and guarding us. Our God *is* jealous for us. And that jealousy is good news for you and for me.

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The Ten Commandments begin with a reminder of how God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt: *"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."* That is why God deserved to be first in the lives of the Israelites...and *that* is why God deserves to be first in our lives as well.

Because the same God who worked overtime to deliver the Israelites from slavery in Egypt is the God who is working overtime to deliver *us* from *our* slavery: from our mistakes, our sin, our chaos, our confusion, our pain.

The same God who was jealous for the Israelites thousands of years ago is the God who is jealous for each of us – terribly, powerfully, and oh-so-lovingly...jealous.

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No one and no thing deserves first priority in our hearts and lives because it is only God who is infinite in wisdom and power.

Only God has the complete picture of who we are and where we should be headed...and when *someone* or *something* gets in the way of that,

God reaches down to earth in a fit of jealous love and attempts to save us in a way that no one else can.

That is why God deserves to be first in our lives. And *that* is what these first three commandments are all about: putting God first – because that is what God does for us...God puts *us* first.

Because we belong to God. And God is jealous for us. Amen.