

Sermon for March 8, 2015 – Lent 3

Exodus 20:1-6 (NKJV)

Theme: The LORD is a jealous God

- 1) *Who deserves your love – having delivered you from the house of bondage (1,2)*
- 2) *Who demands your fear – for He alone is God. (3-5)*
- 3) *Who encourages your trust – promising mercy and every blessing to all who love Him (6)*

And God spoke all these words, saying: ² "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. ³ "You shall have no other gods before Me. ⁴ "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; ⁵ you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, ⁶ but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. (Exo 20:1-6 NKJ)

Is being jealous a good or bad thing? I guess it depends what we mean? If we define it as being envious or suspicious, then it would be a bad thing. If, however, we define it as being fiercely protective, than it can be a good thing.

When God says: *I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God*, He is certainly not envious, or suspicious. He is, rather, fiercely protective of his honor, his name and the people who bear his name. Just as a good father or mother will watch over their children to protect them from harm, so the LORD watches over us. And just as a good father or mother will demand respect from their children – that they listen and obey them - so the LORD demands the same from us.

Let us consider these truths in a greater detail, under the theme: **The LORD is a jealous God**, *who deserves your love, Who demands your fear, and who encourages your trust.*

Part One: Who deserves your love – having delivered you from the house of bondage (1,2)

Our sermon text takes place at Mt. Sinai – 2 months after Israel's exodus from Egypt. Just picture the scene: Around 2 million Israelites stand at the base of a rugged desert mountain, which is enveloped by a thick, dark cloud. Lightning flashes and thunder crashes. Angelic trumpets get louder and louder as a great fire descends on the mountain, causing it to quake and smoke. God has come, showing forth his terrible might. The people tremble at this fearful sight as Moses ascends the mountain.¹

And from the mountain, for all two million people to hear, *God spoke all these words*: the 10 Commandments that He wanted the Israelites to obey. All the commandments deal with showing love – first and foremost to God, and then to our fellow man.

And what reason do the Israelites have to show such love? God tells them in the very first words he speaks from the mountain: *"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.*

The LORD was very jealous of Israel's love for him because of the love he demonstrated in saving them. Right before our text takes place, the LORD told the people through Moses: ⁴ *'You have seen what I did to*

the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. ⁵ Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. ⁶ And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.ⁱⁱ In other words, God didn't just save Israel from something, but also for something: to be the objects of his love and the reflection of his glory on this earth.

Because of how God saved and honored Israel, He has every right to be jealous for their love. He also has every right to be jealous for our love. Why? Because of how He rescued us from our bondage to sin.

No, we don't see the fire and smoke, hear the trumpets and thunder or feel the earth shake – but that doesn't mean that God isn't here. *"For where two or three are gathered together in My name,"* Jesus says, *"I am there in the midst of them."* ⁱⁱⁱ The LORD, then, is most certainly here, reminding us through His Word and Sacrament about how He graciously saved us from our bondage to sin, death, and the power of the devil.

For, when we were hopelessly lost in sin – doomed to everlasting destruction in hell – God saw our plight and decided to save us. How? By sending Jesus, his only begotten Son, to earn for us, by his perfect keeping of the law, the righteousness we need to stand before God. Jesus then took all our sins upon himself and went to the cross – suffering and dying for them all. He rose again from the dead, showing that our sins have been paid for in full. Through the preaching of His Word, the Holy Spirit led us to repent of our sins – awakening faith in our hearts to trust His Good News of salvation. In Baptism God washed us clean from all sin, and declared us to be his dearly loved children.

And just as every good parent wants their children to obey them out of love and to realize that all the rules they set up are for their protection, so the LORD wants us to obey Him out of thanks for the great love He has for us. This is always the Christian's reason for keeping the commandments: not to earn God's love and favor, nor out of fear of punishment, but in response to the great mercy God has shown us by delivering us from sin, death and the power of the devil so that we might be his own special people through whom He is glorified.

Part Two: *Who demands your fear – for He alone is God.*

And this is why the LORD demands that we fear him, for he alone is God, as He himself says: ³ *"You shall have no other gods before Me.* ⁴ *"You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; ⁵ you shall not bow down to them nor serve them.*

God is very jealous of his honor – and rightly so. We consider it a great shame when someone pretends to have served in the military when he hasn't. It is even a greater shame to ascribe things like creation, protection and salvation to anyone who isn't the LORD; for only He can do such great things.

And the LORD wants us to know this for our own sakes. This is why he says so emphatically: "You shall have no others gods."

Now you might be thinking: "Well, this is an easy commandment to keep. I proudly consider myself a Christian and would never dream of worshipping Allah, Buddha, or whatever other god there might be. I would never dream of saying a prayer to Mary or lighting a candle to any saint."

Good, I am glad if you would never even consider worshipping any such gods, but that doesn't mean you

have kept this commandment. You see, whatever we fear, love and trust in above all else is our god. So if we labor hard for money, thinking that our security is found in our bank account, money has become our god. If the Scriptures convince us that a certain church has the truth, but we will not become a member of that church out of fear of what our family or friends might say, they have become our god. If we choose to spend our time engaged in sports, hobbies or leisure activities we love at the expense of worship and Bible study, those things have become our gods – and the LORD hates it. Yes, you heard me right, the LORD absolutely hates it when we put him on the back burner of our lives.

You might wonder, “What’s the big deal. I still love Him even if I pursue these other things. He should understand that.” No he shouldn’t; because to fear, love or trust anything above him is an insult to the highest degree. It’s as disgusting as a married woman flirting with other men – claiming she is doing no harm to her husband.

For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God

The LORD is fiercely protective of the honor He deserves. He demands our fear – not in the sense that we are afraid of him, but that we respect His righteousness, mercy and power. He wants us to find refuge in him, and not our bank accounts, for only he has the power to give and take away. He wants us to be more concerned about what He thinks of us than what our family and friends do. The worst thing people can do is kill our bodies. The LORD *is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.*^{iv} He wants us to pursue Him and His Word as our highest treasure and gain, as the Scriptures say: *The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.*^v

For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me.

What does the LORD mean by this statement? It does not mean that God will send any child to hell merely because his mother or father was an unbeliever. The Scriptures are clear: *The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son.*^{vi}

What it means, rather, is that when God provides earthly chastisement for sin, it will often affect a future generation. For example, when the Israelites sinned by revolting against God’s command at the border of Canaan, God punished the Israelites by having them wander in the desert for 40 years. This punishment affected the children, grand-children and great grandchildren of those who sinned. Those who recognized that this was from the LORD and repented were forgiven. Those who would continue in the sins of their fathers would suffer the same fate as their parents.

God is deadly serious about sin. His righteousness has not changed. We worship the same LORD Old Testament Israel worshiped, a LORD who demands our fear (our respect, honor and obedience). Why? Because He alone is God; and because He alone is our merciful Savior.

Part Three: *Who encourages your trust – promising mercy and every blessing to all who love Him.*

The LORD is not only jealous for the honor that is due him, He is also fiercely protective of those who fear, love and trust in him above all things, as our text says:

For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God . . . showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.

The “thousands” to whom God shows mercy should probably be understood as “thousands of generations.”

Let me explain why:

Abraham was a man who exhibited incredible faith in the LORD's promises, and the LORD counted this faith as righteousness. For centuries the LORD pointed to his promise to Abraham as the reason for his patience and protection of Israel and Judah – even when they sinned. Yes, God's earthly anger may certainly affect the children of those who hate him, but – as seen in the example of Abraham - the LORD's divine mercy is extended to the thousand generations of those who love Him – those who both believe in him and live that faith through obedience.

God promises his divine mercy throughout life - watching over his dearly loved followers and keeping them safe from every evil attack. He promises to bless both them and their children with the greatest blessing of all: Himself. He does this, not because they have earned or deserved it, but because of His great mercy and love that sent His Son to suffer and die for every sin that has ever or will ever be committed, so that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: the LORD your God is a jealous God who (having rescued you from sin and declared you to be his own child in baptism) deserves your love, who demands your fear and encourages your trust. What should your response be to this? Luther tells us in his Small Catechism: *God threatens to punish all who sin against [His] commandments. Therefore, we should fear His wrath and not act contrary to [His] commandments. But He promises grace and every blessing to all who keep [His] commandments. Therefore, we should also love and trust in Him and gladly do what He commands.* May the LORD send us His Spirit to help us do this – all to the glory of His saving name. Amen.

ⁱ Cf. Exodus 19:16-20 and Hebrews 12:18-21

ⁱⁱ Exodus 19:4-6, NKJV

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 18:20, NKJV

^{iv} Matthew 10:28 NKJV

^v 1 John 2:17 NIV84

^{vi} Ezekiel 18:20 NKJV