

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

3rd Sunday of Advent
Year A

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Text: Deut. 6:13/Luke 10:27

Title: “Under Wraps: God is Jealous”

(Show video clip)

This may be the one time of year that people participate in some kind of recognition—however faint it may be for some—that there is more to Christmas than wish lists and going in to debt to fulfill them. I’ve been in stores and heard “O, Holy Night” sung by Bing Crosby or Josh Groban. I’ve seen signs reading “Merry Christmas”, heard people greet each other this way, too. Even one of my favorite children’s programs, “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” has Santa shouting “Merry Christmas” to the world. The word Christmas comes from the old English “Criste maesse”, meaning the service of worship commemorating the birth of Christ. It reminds me of a greeting our Jewish brothers and sisters use each Saturday when they say to one another, “Good Sabbath.” If someone came from another planet, they might think that a lot of humans are devout followers of Christ this time of year. They might think that a lot of people are exuberantly close to the God known in Jesus Christ.

Thinking about this matter of closeness to God, it occurred to me that Lynn and I have two nephews, my brother’s and sister-in-law’s sons. We were very close to them when they were little. When they were small boys we took them on vacation with us between Christmas and New Year’s when I would usually take a week of vacation. We have only one child, a son, so they were good company for Josh. So they’d come with us and we’d go ice fishing. The boys would skate on the ice or just be outside playing in the snow. As they got a bit older I’d take them out in the woods with .22s and pellet guns and we’d shoot cans or the inevitable junk people would dump in the woods. They’d make smoothies in the blender and experiment with their own recipes, play board games, and we’d eat ice cream, lots of ice cream. I love those boys.

Yet, as often happens in life, once they grew older and began to discover cars and girls, the weekly getaways stopped. Life became busier and we became more disconnected. One of the boys is always gracious and loving whenever we would reconnect for a time, but the other boy grew distant. The other boy seemed not to care much if we saw each other. He just seemed to be off on his own in his own world, doing what he wanted to do. And so I am left with this longing to reconnect with that little boy I learned to love from the time he was a baby. I am left wanting something more from an adult who once upon a time sat in my lap and let me read to

him. I still love that boy.

As we near the day we celebrate the coming of God in Jesus, the Christ, I wonder if God feels something like that with us. I wonder if God having watched us grow and loved us, watches people putting their lists together, wandering about the stores or scanning store web pages, very disconnected from the One whose birth is the reason we celebrate. I wonder about God's longing to be in relationship with us again. What might that mean for us to embrace God come in Jesus Christ? What does it mean to turn toward the One who loved us from the time we were conceived and before?

The biblical story as a whole has to do with God's desire to be in relationship with human beings like us. In the book of Exodus we have the story of a people God frees from the oppression of slavery in Egypt through a leader named Moses. As the newly freed people make their way in this new life God has given them, they come to Mt. Sinai and God issues the 10 Commandments, the very first of which is: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Deut. 5:7). In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses builds on that first commandment:

13 The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear. 14 Do not follow other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who are all around you, 15 because the Lord your God, who is present with you, is a jealous God.
(Deuteronomy 6:13-15)

God is jealous? The way we use that word in our culture usually isn't very positive. Jealousy in a marriage, for example, is not usually a positive development and has led to the destruction of more than one relationship. To be jealous can mean someone is "...hostile toward a rival or one believed to enjoy an advantage," according to Merriam Webster. It can also mean someone is "...disposed to suspect rivalry or unfaithfulness" (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/jealous>), that someone in the relationship is not being honest and has more than one person to whom he or she has given himself or herself. To be jealous is not normally a life-affirming feeling.

Yet, the word used for jealous in Hebrew is "qin'ah". According to a Hebrew-English Lexicon it has to do with "colour produced in [the] face by deep emotion" (p. 888, A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament). A closely related Arabic word identifies the particular color to be red. So the face becoming red by deep emotion is what it might mean to be "qin'ah" or jealous. God is red-in-the-face when it comes to us, maybe in the way one lover is flushed in the face when reuniting with the one loved after a long absence. There is intense emotion and passion in this love God has for us and so God is jealous, especially when our attentions are given to other lesser gods.

Jesus is teaching in the Gospel According to Luke when a lawyer stood up to put him to the test. He asks Jesus a question:

"Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus responded with his own questions: "What is written in the law? What do you

read there?”

The lawyer answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus concludes, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

It’s called the first commandment or greatest commandment because in Matthew’s Gospel the dialogue goes a bit differently. There a lawyer asks not how to inherit eternal life but he asks:

36 “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

[Jesus responds directly:]...“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the greatest and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22:36-40)

Of all the religious rules, there is one single commandment that undergirds all the others. To return the love of this passionate, red-faced God come in Jesus, the Christ. To love God above all else leads to eternal life--“the life that really is life” according to 1 Timothy (1 Timothy 6:19). To love God more deeply and passionately than the lists we make or the desires we have for whatever material gift we might think is so special and hoped for, that is what God wants from us more than anything else.

A young boy was staying at his grandparents’ house. He always had difficulty going to bed. He was always afraid of something: noises, the dark, silence. So the grandfather took him upstairs, put him in his bed and went back downstairs to watch TV. It wasn’t long and the boy was crying out.

“Grandpa, I can’t sleep. I’m afraid.”

The grandfather didn’t want to give in the boy’s fear and rush up to the boy, so he responded, “Don’t worry I’m right down here.”

“But grandpa, I need someone with me.”

“God is with you, Joey. Remember God loves you.”

“I know God loves me, grandpa, but I need someone with skin on.”

Jesus gave the greatest commandment to love God with all that we are and all that we have in response to God’s love for us, knowing too that we need someone with skin on which is what we believe the incarnation is all about. God comes in the babe-in-a-manger with skin on that we might love God with the kind of passion with which God loves us. And just in case it wasn’t clear how we might express our love for God, there is this second commandment that is like the first: love your neighbor as yourself. The two commandments are connected. One doesn’t come without the other.

I appreciated the story in the Advent study material in which the author—who happens to

be a pastor--shares the story of a family tradition of gathering at their home on opening night of football season. He always orders some buffalo wings and they all gather around the TV to watch the game. So he did his usual thing and order the wings from his favorite place, ordered them online and paid for them. When he got to the place to pick up his order he noticed the line was unusually long.

It was a small place and the guy behind the counter was the only one there. The employee was a regular, though, and whenever he'd been there before he was always friendly, respectful of people. Always smiling and courteous to the customers, he never failed to get the orders right and he routinely asked customers about their day and how things were going for them.

But this time it was different. This time it was clear the man was stressed. He was slamming doors and flinging bowls. No usual smile. Finally, in the midst of the pressure he'd had enough and he snapped. He stopped what he was doing and looked at everyone waiting in line and said, "I make fifty-four dollars a day after taxes. Fifty-four dollars a day. Which one of you wants to come back here and do this job for that?"

No one said a word. Obviously, everyone waiting felt awkward. It also seemed fairly obvious judging from the cars parked outside that everyone in that line made more than \$54 a day.

"Which one of you is Andy?" he asked.

"Oh no, not good," the guy thought, but he stepped to the counter a bit hesitant.

"You ordered online," he said. "You've paid, and your wings are in the bag on the counter. You can take them and go."

The pastor did as he was told, happy to be out of the tension of the place. But then questions came to his mind, questions he didn't ask for but they came nonetheless: "What are you going to do about the whole situation?"

"Me? Nothing. I'm off duty," he replied to Jesus' internal question. But Christ wasn't letting him off so easily: "How many times have you thought of complimenting him or telling his supervisor how well he does his job?" He'd thought about it many times but just didn't do it, so when he got home he got online and sent a complimentary note to the man's supervisor through the website and prepared to enjoy his wings.

Apparently that still wasn't enough: "If you really loved him, you'd do more, Andy."

The next day he called the wings place, asked when that employee was working and put together a plan. He told the story on social media and asked his friends, "Would you love on this guy" He posted a date, time, and location, and asked his friends to put a love flash mob into action: "Go by and tell him 'I am praying for you' or just say 'hi'—whatever comes to mind."

The love flash mob happened. Some stopped in to tell him they were praying for him. Someone brought him cupcakes. Someone else took him balloons. Someone else gave him a grocery store gift card. At the end of the day, a church member went to the place to have some wings with his son and he asked the guy, "How was your day?"

"It's been amazing," the worker said. "Business is good, and I got cupcakes and balloons—all because a pastor told a story. It has been unbelievable! I'd love to thank him."

The church member gave the worker the pastor's number, and he called the pastor. They talked and the next time the pastor went into the place, he introduced himself. The man came out from behind the counter and gave the pastor a hug, a ritual that is now routine every time he goes into that restaurant to pick up his usual wings.

Andy wrote that “God was jealous for me to stop what I was doing and to put his love into action, to show his love to someone else in a small way that made a huge difference in his heart and in my own. I learned that when we put God’s plans ahead of our own—when we say ‘yes ‘to God—he will move, and amazing things will happen” (pp56-57).

As much as we hear and say “Merry ‘Criste maesse”, this season can be rough on people. For some it brings depression more than joy for a variety of reasons. It’s a period, too, in which we can easily lose track of the central origins of it all: the coming of God with skin on to remind us that we are loved beyond measure, the kind of love that is jealous for us to return God’s love for us expressed in Jesus the Christ.

Can you imagine that God come in the babe in a manger wants you to draw near with the kind of joyful, passionate love with which you are loved by God? How might God be speaking to you that challenges you to return that love expressed in Jesus’ life? As you offer that joyful greeting “Merry ‘Criste maesse” consider listening to the voice of God calling you to put God’s love into action even as you embrace the ways in which God expresses love for you.