

Our Paradoxical God

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Preacher: Rev. Jonathan St. Clair

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My name is August Fern. This morning we're going to have a reading from the book of Deuteronomy, various selections from chapter 4 as printed in the liturgy. The words we're hearing are the words of Moses as he's speaking to the Israelites before they crossed the Jordan, starting with verse 5.

See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.

What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?

[1 : 28] Only be careful and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them fade from your heart as long as you live.

Teach them to your children and to their children after them. Remember the day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, when he said to me, assemble the people before me to hear my words so that they may learn to revere me as long as they live in the land and may teach them to their children.

You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain while it blazed with fire to the very heavens with black clouds and deep darkness. Then the Lord spoke to you out of the fire.

You heard the sound of words but saw no form. There was only a voice. He declared to you his covenant, the Ten Commandments, which he commanded you to follow, and then wrote them on two stone tablets.

And the Lord directed me at that time to teach you the decrees and laws you are to follow in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess. You saw no form of any kind the day the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire.

[2 : 45] Therefore watch yourselves very carefully so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape. Now verse 23.

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.

Verse 31. 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.

Ask now about the former days, long before your time, from the day God created human beings on the earth. Ask from one end of the heavens to the other.

Has anything so great as this ever happened? Or has anything like it ever been heard of? Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire as you have and lived?

[3 : 49] Has any God ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation by testings, by signs, and by wonders? By war? By mighty hand and an outstretched arm?

Or by great and awesome deeds? Like all the things the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? Verse 39. Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth below.

There is no other. The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the word of our God stands forever. Good morning, Christ Church.

If you're new with us, we're delighted to have you. My name is Jonathan. And if you want to know what I've been up to the past two weeks, I'm now a volunteer cross-country coach at my kids' school and have been recruiting kindergarten to eighth grade students to come and run with us and wooing them with popsicles at the end of practices and trying to get their parents to sign up on Team Snap and get jerseys and spirit gear and all this great stuff.

I think now we're going to have about 40 plus kids come and run with us on the next four or five Friday nights. And it's been a lot of fun, but it's also a great deal of effort to form a team.

[5 : 36] Has anybody here tried to form a team? It takes a lot of effort to get all these different people moving in the same direction and to get these kids kind of ready for speed and for distance and to just get them up to the starting line of that first race to be ready to run their best race to their fullest potential.

I've also enjoyed thinking about great cross-country slogans on T-shirts. For example, our sport is your sport's punishment. Thought that was a good one.

Running is a mental sport and we are all insane. Or if we played tag, you'd be it forever, which I kind of like that one. But I like this analogy of forming a team and getting people up through the starting line.

And it has great resonance for me as a pastor launching a church into a new ministry year. How do you get all these individual people into a cohesive group moving in the same direction for the same purpose?

And I kind of think about my experience as a cross-country coach or as a pastor as like one one millionth of what Moses must have been feeling here at the edge of the promised land, trying to get the people of God up to that starting line and ready to move into the race that God had marked out for them.

[6 : 58] Because that's what is happening in Deuteronomy. Moses is getting the next generations of the people of God ready to run this race with perseverance and with joy that God has set out before them.

And Jesus, I think, as we talked last week, he loved this book so much. Quoted this book more than any other book, I think, because it's such a clear revelation of who his father is.

Such a clear revelation of the character and the nature of God, of his heart and his will for us, of what he wants from us, his people, how he wants us to run this race that he's setting before us.

So with that, let's dive in this morning to Deuteronomy 4 and this great farewell address from Moses in the last month of his life. What does he have to say to the people of God?

And I think here in Deuteronomy 4, he wants us to know that our mysterious God has a jealous love that makes us different.

[8 : 13] And I want to explore for a minute the fact that we have a mysterious God because Moses says in verse 10, he says, Remember the day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, that is Mount Sinai.

Remember that day when he said to me, assemble the people before me to hear my words so that they may learn to revere me as long as they live in the land and may teach them to their children.

The people of God had two intense encounters with Yahweh, with the Lord. And these were their primary sources of their knowledge of God.

The one experience was the exodus from Egypt. And the other experience was the covenant that God made with them at Sinai. And this formed the framework for Israel's faith, just as for the Christian paradigm as the incarnation of Jesus on the one hand and the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus on the other hand.

And Moses is inviting us into this framework. He's inviting us to relive this moment at Mount Sinai because this defining foundational event was a profoundly moving experience of the mysterious presence of the Lord.

[9 : 31] And Moses, as he helps us remember it, he's emphatic that God, the God of the Bible is not an either or God. He's a both and God.

He's not a one-dimensional God. He's a multi-dimensional God. And the people of God are called to know this dynamic, personal, relational, incomparable being that cannot be reduced down to either this or that.

And here's what I mean. Moses wants us to know this God is both imminent and transcendent. He's both near and he's awesome.

Look at what he says in verse seven. He says, what other nation is so great as to have their gods near to them the way the Lord our God is near us?

Whenever we pray to him, there's an intimate closeness. We call out and God's right there listening. He's near to us. And yet, listen to verse 33.

[10 : 33] Moses says, has any other people heard the voice of God out of fire as you have and lived? He balances God's nearness with the fact that he's so awesome and majestic in his power that if you were to plug into him, it would blow your circuits.

I mean, how can anybody hear God and survive that encounter? How can they live through that experience? Or again, Moses says in verse eight, he says, what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I'm setting before you today?

Here is God right here giving you this ongoing quiet guidance through this righteous body of teaching the scriptures breathed out from his spirit into your spirit.

He's right here with us. And yet, it's balanced with verse 34 where he says, has any God ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation by testings, signs, and wonders, war, a mighty hand, and outstretched armor by great and awesome deeds like the things the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?

The quiet guidance of God in the scriptures is balanced and matched by this drama of his mighty hand and his outstretched arm and these wonderful works of God to rescue his people.

[12 : 00] God, Moses says, who's not to be taken lightly or to be trifled with. Moses is saying to the people, look, you should have confidence in God because he's so near to you.

He's so close to you. He's right here filling all things everywhere around us and within us. And yet, not only should you have confidence in God, but you should have reverence for this God who is awesome, who's wondrous, who's incredible in his power, who's way more than we can handle.

And Moses tells us that this God who's both imminent and transcendent, this God who's both near and awesome, he is both knowable and incomprehensible.

And Moses goes on and he says, this God is both fire and a voice. This God is both a fire and a voice.

He says in verse 11, you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain while it blazed with fire to the very heavens with black clouds and deep darkness. This is a detailed, vivid memory that Moses wants to become our memory.

[13 : 12] Even those of us who were not there, he says, imagine this mountain, Mount Sinai, that's glowing with the light of fire. Its brightness contrasted with all the surrounding darkness.

And five times in this text, Moses likens God to a fire, right? Which is consistent with Genesis 15, God shows up to Abraham as a, he reveals himself as a blazing torch.

Exodus three, God shows up to Moses in what? A burning bush. Exodus 13, God reveals himself to Israel and he leads them out of Egypt as a pillar of fire.

Why fire? I don't know, but I just, I love, I love this fact because I've been a pyromaniac since I was a very young child. I just loved striking that match and seeing, you know, the flame come to life.

Some of you have heard me talk about sewer ball. As an adolescent, we would take the manhole cover off. We'd pour some gasoline down the sewer. We'd soak a tennis ball in gasoline, light it on fire, and then we'd kind of play putt-putt and hope that we could get that flaming ball into the sewer.

[14 : 24] And when it happened, there was just a pillar of fire that would come up. How am I not in jail right now? How am I alive?

How am I a pastor? I don't know. But I've always loved fire. And you think about these four elements, earth, water, wind, and fire. Why does God reveal himself as fire?

You know, your child comes to you, wants to play. Do you give them a hose and some dirt or do you give them wood and lighter fluid, right? The fire imagery, the fire likeness of God, it engages our senses.

We can see the brightness. We can feel the heat. We can hear the roar. There's a formless, luminous, mysterious beauty that beckons us from a fire to come closer and to get warm.

And yet, there's a powerful danger that says, don't come too close or you're gonna get burned. This fire on Mount Sinai needs no fuel to burn.

[15 : 29] Just as God needs nothing in himself or outside of himself to be, he just is. He's this infinite source of self-sufficient power. Moses says, you are before a fiery God.

But this fiery God is not a silent God. He's a God who speaks. Verse 12. He says, then the Lord spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form.

There was only a voice. This is a God who speaks. He's a personal, relational God who reveals and communicates himself to us, which means we're to be a people not so much of the eye.

We're to be a people of the ear, a people who learn to listen because God is calling out to us from his interior, inmost being, through his voice, through his word, trying to get into our interior, inmost being.

God is reaching out to us because he wants to be known by us. And this is so deep. This is so rich. Moses is saying, God, the God who is a transcendent, awesome fire, he cannot be grasped or comprehended by the greatest theologian.

[16 : 42] And yet this God is also such an imminent and near voice that's speaking to us. He can be known and adored by the smallest child. And Moses says, this voice of Sinai is speaking not only to that generation, but to every generation.

He's calling out to us and it's ours to learn to trust this voice. It's ours to learn to trust this word that's speaking to us.

I love the gospels. We have four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. But John 1, 1 says this, in the beginning was the word. And the word was with God and the word was God.

The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only son and who came from the father full of grace and truth.

In Jesus, John says, we finally and fully meet this mysterious God who is both transcendent and eminent, who is awesome and who's near, who is a fire and who is a voice.

[17 : 50] In Jesus, the divine fire takes on human form and a human face and a human voice. In Jesus, this divine nature of God is woven into human nature and he's calling out to us from his inmost being, calling out our names, saying to each one of us, I want you to come follow me.

Come follow me. And that's the question maybe for some of us today who are here exploring the Christian faith and what it's all about. Are you hearing this voice, the voice of this mysterious God calling out your name?

Moses says that our mysterious God, he has a jealous love. Our mysterious God has a jealous love.

And this is where Moses goes next in verse 15. He says, you saw no form of any kind the day the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire. Therefore, watch yourselves very carefully so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape.

Why? Because God says, I can tolerate no reductionist images of me and no rival powers beside me. On the one hand, God is saying, I am unrepresentable.

[19 : 16] Anything you would try to construct, whatever you could imagine, I'm more powerful than that. Whatever you could create, I'm more majestic than that. Whatever size you could make an idol, I'm way bigger than that.

God is saying, I am not static. I'm not immobile. I'm not deaf or dumb or unfeeling or unthinking, which every idol in the end actually is.

God says, no, I'm not manageable. I'm not limited. You can't contain me or control me. You can't pin God down in space, time, and matter, and say, well, God, this is your time and this is your space.

This is your day and this is your place and all the rest belongs to us. God says, no, all of it is mine. God says, all of it is filled with my glory. All of it is filled with my presence. You can't reduce me or try to reproduce me.

He says, I'll tolerate no reductionist images on the one hand and on the other hand, the ancient Near East was full of gods, full of gods that oversaw various realms, oversaw various human needs.

[20 : 26] You had the gods of healing, the gods of agriculture and the god of commerce, the god of war, the god of relationships and love and fertility and in order to make your life work, you had to bow down.

You had to depend on these gods for your vitality and your success and God is saying here, I don't want you to turn to any substitute powers for your needs.

Why? Because I am the lord of all realms and I am the lord of all needs and I want you to come to me and depend upon me for everything, for all of your needs. I can tolerate no reductionist images and no rival powers and why can't he tolerate these things?

Because he says, I'm jealous. I'm a jealous God. Verse 23, 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. There are actually many places in the Bible where it just says that God's name is Jealous with a capital J and I know it's completely off-putting for most of us for our modern sensibilities.

[21 : 43] Why? Is he jealous? Is he insecure? Is he egocentric? Is he paranoid? What's up with God being jealous? But there are two ways that we can use that word.

One way is jealousy is a synonym for envy. So I'm jealous of your good looks. I'm jealous of your money. Meaning that I want to have them and I don't want you to have them.

That's one form of jealousy that's kind of an egocentric self-absorbed kind of jealousy. But the other way to use this word is what it means here in Hebrew.

It literally means to become intensely red. I am a God who becomes intensely red. And that signals a passionate commitment, a zealous allegiance behind which and beneath which sits the structure of a covenant.

If you want to get Presbyterians really excited and see them become Pentecostal just use this word covenant. We name our churches and our schools covenant this and covenant that but that's because God says here in verse 23 the Lord God don't forget that he made a covenant with you.

[22 : 55] Western society is increasingly short on covenantal relationships but the scriptures say that this is the only way that we can relate to God is through a covenant.

Well what is a covenant? A covenant is far more personal and intimate than a contractual relationship and yet a covenant is far more binding and solemn and accountable than a friendship and there are really only two forms of covenantal relationships left in Western society.

The first is the parent-child relationship. Some of you are parents so you can imagine yourself being a parent and I want you to imagine your cute beautiful son or daughter becomes a teenager. A teenage son or daughter who develops a pattern of lying and cheating and stealing and how does that make you feel as a parent?

Does that make you feel warm and fuzzy on the inside? Does that make you feel indifferent or does it cause you to become intensely red? You become intensely red not so much because you're angry at that child of course you are but because you're angry for your child.

you're angry because of the thing that's destroying your loved one and your relationship with them. You're angry because you love them. This is what one woman says she says love detests what destroys the beloved.

[24 : 20] Real love stands against the deception the lie the sin that destroys. The more a father loves his son the more he hates in him the drunkard the liar the traitor.

Anger isn't the opposite of love. Hate is and the final form of hate is indifference. The Bible teaches us that God is this loyal parent with a fiercely protective familial bond that will tolerate nothing that's destroying the well-being of his children.

That's what it means that he's a jealous God. But there's also this other relationship not just the parent-child relationship but the covenantal relationship of marriage.

And if you're if you have a spouse or you're interested in having a spouse imagine what you would feel if you found that your spouse had become more intimate with someone other than you you would become intensely red.

You would because of your passionate commitment because of your zealous allegiance you would want to rescue your beloved you would want to rescue your relationship with them and the scriptures tell us as well that God is a faithful spouse who has a marital commitment to his people that will tolerate no rivals and no competitors in this relationship.

[25 : 46] If God is our highest good how can he be anything but jealous how can he possibly be indifferent when he sees us his people resorting to cheap alternatives that are so much less than he is and so far beneath us people who are made in the image of God people who are the beloved children of God we all of us myself included experience imperfect jealousy that's so tainted with self interest it's hard for us to imagine but what if there is one being one perfect parent one perfect spouse who so selflessly sacrificially committed himself to the good of his loved ones that if something went wrong he would be filled with a pure positive redeeming jealousy for us I think

C.S. Lewis says it so well in his book *The Problem of Pain* he says what is this love of God and love is such an amorphous term is it not Lewis helps us define it he says what is this love of God it is not a senile benevolence that drowsily wishes you to be happy in your own way it's not the cold philanthropy of a conscientious magistrate it's not the care of a host who feels himself responsible for the comfort of his guests no the love of God is the consuming fire itself the love that made the world persistent as an artist's love love for his work and despotic as a man's love for a dog provident and venerable as a father's love for a child jealous inexorable exactly love love between sexes and what I want to remind us today is that Jesus most fully reveals this covenant love of our jealous

God 1 John 3 16 says this is how we know what love is Jesus Christ laid down his life for us when he was crucified on his cross, Jesus is acting like a parent who's throwing himself in front of the bus of sin and death that's barreling down the road, threatening to kill us, his beloved children. When Jesus is crucified on the cross, he's acting like a spouse who is out of his mind with crazy love to do anything, anything it would take to bring his beloved back home to himself. On the cross, Jesus is becoming intensely red in a passionate commitment to his blood, a zealous allegiance to give himself completely body and soul for our well-being. God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit has shown that he'll stop at absolutely nothing. He will spare no expense to rescue us, to love us, to bless us because he's a jealous God. And in Christ crucified, we see this God who is both a jealous God and a merciful God showing us what love really is by laying down his life for us. And that's the question for us today. Are we clinging to this crucified one as the fullest, most complete image of this invisible, mysterious God? Moses says, our mysterious God has a jealous love that makes us different or that makes us weird. Our mysterious God has a jealous love. Let's just go with that. Weird is better. That makes us weird. And I'll close with this. This is what caught my attention listening to

Moses' sermon this week and just taking notes on his own preaching. Moses expects the next generations that are going to come along as the people of God and enter into the promised land, he expects them to develop a counterculture. He expects them to establish a contrast society, to become an intentionally peculiar people with a distinctive way of life that's recognizably different and strange, that's readily distinguishable from the identities and vocations of the surrounding nations. Listen to what he says in verse six. He says, observe these laws of God carefully for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations who will hear about all these decrees and say, surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I'm setting before you today? Moses looks at the surrounding peoples, the surrounding cultures of the ancient world, and he says, they're going to be dazzled by what they see lived out among you, the people of God in your life together. The ideal nation in the ancient world was based on, you know, having great size and great wealth and great military power, and

Israel had none of those things. Israel was small, it was weak, it was poor, it had no military. These were recently freed slaves who've been wandering in the wilderness, but God says to them through Moses, he says, your greatness is going to be your wisdom, that you live according to the wisdom of God woven into this world. Your greatness is going to be your spiritual understanding and your moral discernment.

[31 : 46] Your greatness is going to be your intimate covenant relationship with this God who is near you to bless and protect you. Your greatness is going to be the righteous character of God embodied embodied in your communal life together, embodied in your neighborly love, embodied in your justice, especially toward the poor and the vulnerable. And as I think about this counterculture, as I think about this contrast society of the people of God, I get excited about that. I don't know about you, but I want to be a part of a great church. I want to be a part of a peculiar church, a church that is like causing people to ask, where is this coming from? Where is all this wisdom and righteousness?

Where is all this understanding coming from? Don't you want to be a part of a church that's a counterculture here in Berkeley and Oakland? And I just want us to, as we're going through the book of Deuteronomy, as Moses lays this out, I want us to imagine what that looks like. I think what it looks like is us as a people having hearts that are on fire with the burning love of God in our midst, his love that is jealous, his love that is merciful, his love that is renewing. We have our hearts burning with the love of God. And because of that, we have an attractive life. We have a provocative life. People look in upon us and they see there is God's burning love embodied in their love for one another.

There I see there's God's love embodied in their love for their neighbors and even for their enemies, their political enemies, their ideological enemies. I see the love of God among these people.

When people get close to us, they would feel the burning of God's wisdom and understanding among us. When people get close to us, they would feel the burning of God's presence and his nearness in our midst. When people get around us, they would feel the burning of his righteousness and justice being enacted by us. And oh, the people would say, as Moses expects them to say, wow, we are illuminated.

By the burning light, we are warmed by the blazing heat of your God that's burning in your midst. When the mysterious God is among us, when his jealous love has set us on fire, we will be a people who are just different. A people who may look strange, who may look weird, but when we get close enough, you know, this is the very heart of God, the very love of God that's become real and alive among this community of people. That's what I want. Don't you want that? Let's pray for that.

[34 : 57] In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we ask, Lord, make this true for me. Make this true for us. Make us a people with your fire in our midst. Make us a people with your voice speaking in our midst. Make us a people who look like you and act like you and feel like you in every way possible.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.