

## Hearing Versus Listening

The verses from Deuteronomy which formed the second portion of the passage which was read is a central portion of Jewish tradition and faith; so much so that the one word description of the passage is known far beyond the religious context. Even many in the secular world with no connection to any Abrahamic tradition have heard of the Shema; many even know how it begins: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone." These first verses set up the importance of the information Moses is commanded to deliver beyond those words uttered demanding the people to hear him. The gathered people are told this information is being given to them not only for the present; not only for the current time period, but is to be kept and alive within the community forever. It is to be taught and kept by them all their lives and for all the lives of their children and their children. The heart of the message is about keeping and observing the statutes and ordinances that God has given them, those contained in the covenant relationship established at Mount Sinai shortly after they fled Egypt. This passage is a reminder that they are about to enter into the land that God promised that they could enter and occupy it as a part of that covenant promised to their ancestors—Moses is here urging them to hear and observe these things diligently so that the life they will live there "may go well and that they may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey". The Shema itself is actually only two verses long, but it contains the essentials of all you need as a foundation for following the teaching of the covenant: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." The instructions then turn to the practical matter of how to keep this instruction front and center in a person's life—to follow the instruction to keep them in your heart. These instructions include reciting them to your children and talking about them at home and away; thinking about them when you get up in the morning and when you go to bed at night. In fact, the practice of wearing them written out on a piece of paper in a box worn on the forearm or forehead is still done; just as they are commonly found in boxes on the door posts of orthodox Jewish homes. Yet as the narrative of the history of the people who entered the Promised Land unfolded, putting the Shema on paper in boxes worn or posted on door posts did not seem to accomplish what Moses or God was desiring for the people when these words were uttered. In our world today, there seems to be a lot of talking, a great deal of speech making, a great many words are being uttered—and it seems that very few people are listening to any of them—especially the words which are calling us to the teachings found in our scriptures which Jesus lifted up as the most important. So what happened to the call that God's people were given to Hear. Why hasn't the message really been heard? Since the message was recorded...it must have been heard...at least in the sense that the words are known...so what does it mean to hear and how is that different from listening....According to the standard English definition: hearing is the act or process of perceiving sounds. There are others meanings, but that is the primary

one. And in that definition we find the obvious flaw to what happens. Hearing sounds does not automatically translate into those sounds being understood, or those sounds being made meaningful or incorporated into something permanent. To listen means to make a conscious effort to hear. The people at the entrance to the Promised Land must have at least done that since they recorded the words, they made their boxes and wore or posted them. But they evidently did not make the conscious effort to understand the importance of keeping them current in the thoughts and consciousness. Since in our gospel reading from Mark, Jesus lifts the Shema up as the first and most important commandment, what is the message that we should unpack from it? The simplest way to put would be “Love God with everything that you are.” That’s not a bad attempt. The “everything” is defined (in English, at least) as the “heart” which in Hebrew anthropology would correspond more closely to our understanding of the “mind”. The Hebrews’ had no understanding of a separate “soul” which left the body, so perhaps that would correspond to our understanding of the “self” and the “might” would be with one’s strength or capacity. However the terms are analyzed and translated one by one, what is clear, what is commended, or better yet commanded is complete devotion to God. And there should be no confusion about any overly-romantic notion of what it means to “love” God. The emphasis here is on obedience, loyalty. One demonstrates love for God by what one does and what one does not do—that is, how one does or does not obey. This is not about how one does or does not feel about God. This is why the message given to the people was to keep the promise to be loyal to God and God’s ways close—much like a popular song with the lyric “you are always on my mind”. This was the way that God desired for the people to go forward into the Promised Land—in a close relationship with the One who had led and journeyed there with them. Their history as scriptures recorded it showed the people failed to keep their promises, that although they may have heard the Shema with their ears, they did not listen or process the sounds of what they heard enough to have the words written on their hearts. The prophet Isaiah wrote the Lord later promised that this would happen; and as our faith proclaims “in the fullness of time” God sent his Son to teach us the ways of the kingdom...to teach and demonstrate to us what brings God’s kingdom near. So when in his time, Jesus was asked what was most important to remember about what God had revealed, Jesus lifted up the words of the Shema. And then he added one more thing from the list of commandments which is found in Leviticus 19 among a relisting of the Ten Commandments and other “ordinances” related to ethical community living which Jesus termed the second most important thing. This second item was also very brief: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus then added: “There is no other commandment greater than these.” The exchange that takes place in Mark’s narrative happens in the final week of Jesus’ life, not long before he is arrested and tried, not long before that final meal which we will commemorate this morning...remembering, hopefully not only what he said and did that night, but what he tried to teach us about what is important to know about God, God’s nature and God’s kingdom and how to bring it near and become a

citizen. The scribe who came up to challenge Jesus, repeats the two commandments Jesus has lifted from their record of God's revelations: "You are right, Teacher, you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,'—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.'" Jesus' response to this was to declare that to him that he was not far from the kingdom of God. So if we hear these words with more than our ears, if we process them with our minds and hearts, what do we come to understand about God and God's will for us? In Jesus' own words, what brings God's reign near is for God's people to love God, not by declaring this with our own set of words but by the declarations made by the ways we live and act in this world—by total loyalty and obedience to the teachings we have been given throughout the history of the covenant relationship about how we are to live in caring communities according which can be summed up by caring and treating others as we wish to be treated ourselves. We have a large text with many illustrations of God's faithfulness to us; of our failings along the way to "hear" the message revealed in a meaningful way; and in the gospel text from Mark this morning we have Jesus' own eloquent summation of all we need to know. May we truly hear what God has gone so far to reveal to us of God's love for us. May we respond faithfully. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.