

“The Big Listen: Shema” (fn.:DEUT. 6 1-.2019.DOC)
Scripture: Deuteronomy 6:1-8 (Romans 10:5-17)
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Deuteronomy 6:1-8: *Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the LORD your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy,² so that you and your children and your children’s children may fear the LORD your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long.³ Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.*

⁴ Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.⁶ Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.⁷ Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.⁸ Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead,⁹ and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

In the long history of Judaism, stretching through what we call the “Old Testament,” then the New Testament, and the centuries leading up to the present, Deuteronomy 6:4-5 has been central: “Hear, O Israel: 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.” Indeed, these words are often known by the Hebrew word, “Shema,” which is simply the first word in the commandment—the imperative, “Hear!” Jesus himself characterized the “Shema” as the “greatest commandment.”

Faithful Jewish homes have a mezuzah that contains these words of the Shema—a box on the doorway to their home (a literal application of Deuteronomy’s injunction to “write them on the doorposts of your house”). On the front of the bulletin is a photograph of Rabbi Yechiel Teitelbaum, who was forced to put on his ceremonial robes before being shipped off to another ghetto in Poland. The Nazis, who forced this charade upon him, were mocking his faith. Looking closely at the rabbi’s forehead, you can see the literal application of this Deuteronomy text which says fix these words of Shema “as an emblem on your forehead.” The teffelin is the box attached to his forehead and it would contain the words of the “Shema.” What is so cruelly sad about this picture is that the Nazis intended this picture as mockery; while Rabbi Teitelbaum, heading toward his death and that of his loved ones, wore the teffelin as an expression of the deepest faith in the face of such a horror. He will continue to “hear” in the midst of this injustice.

For Jesus and for Judaism, the greatest commandment begins with “Shema.” Hear...listen...pay attention...take notice. Of all our senses, hearing is lifted up...as it is throughout our Bible. Incidentally, there is a considerable debate about how many senses we have—going back to Greek philosophy, five is the usual number (sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell). However, there are likely more. For example, some might say that touch includes the sense of temperature but what about the sense of motion? You feel motion even when you do not see, hear, or touch. And what about the sense of balance—not exactly touch or sight?

However, as we will follow in the next several months, hearing has a primary function in our faith understanding and our faith story. For example, in regard to pastors, churches do not “hire” a pastor but rather “call” a pastor. Calling is a hearing metaphor. And the pastors themselves are asked about their “calling”—God’s call to ministry. And while there are some references to the Old

Testament faith leaders as “seers”—those who have a particular vision—the vast majority of references is that they are “prophets.” The word “prophet” means to “speak for” (not fortune telling or making predictions). A prophet is a spokesperson, one who gives the “Word of the Lord.” And consider as well the story of creation—remember how God creates—God does not invent the world or produce the world or craft the world. How does creation take place? God speaks! God says, “Let there be light” and there was light. And what corresponds to speech—listening! Creation is a matter of listening to God’s voice! And, I could go on to such Biblical passages as the beginning of the Gospel of John, where the Word of God becomes flesh and “moved into the neighborhood.” (Eugene Peterson’s translation of the more literal translation: “dwelt among us”). The centrality of hearing—Jesus is God’s Word! So throughout the Biblical story, the question keeps coming back to this: Have you heard?

So, in that convoluted text from the Apostle Paul about the relationship between the faith of the Old Testament and the New Testament, Paul declares: “So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.” Faith comes from what is heard. And this greatest commandment for Judaism and for Jesus begins with “Hear!”

But there is a dilemma: If we are not listening, then faith is NOT an option. If we have no hearing at all, then faith is NOT an option. I struggle with this tension—sometimes I am persuaded that people choose not to hear; other times I am persuaded that people just cannot hear. Which is it: “We will not hear?” or “We cannot hear?”

Take musical pitch—if I begin to sing and you sing with me and we sing the same notes, that’s called “melody.” If you sing different notes than I do, but it sounds good, that’s call “harmony.” If you sing different notes than I do and it sounds bad, that’s called...that’s called “jazz!” Seriously, we have varied abilities in musical pitch...and even with training, there are limitations. What you and I hear differs.

And yet this greatest commandment calls us to do the same thing: “Hear!” How do we develop the capacity to hear? That’s our faith journey in about as short of expression as I know. We are all in this process of hearing. Faith comes by hearing, says the Apostle Paul.

And the question is more than hearing sound...comprehension and appreciation come into this faith hearing. My son, for example, plays me something that he calls “music,” but the “old foagie” that I am, I don’t hear it as “music.” I hear sound (I did not say “noise!”). I hear sound...but I don’t hear music! But as I watch how he loves the sound, and I get pulled into an appreciation. So, my hearing still can be trained!

The greatest commandment begins with “Hear!” and what are we to hear? Ah, we have a wonderfully ambiguous choice here. Ambiguous as in “ambi”—two choices! Translation option one: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. Translation option two (just as valid): The Lord our God is one. Both options fit the Hebrew grammar of the commandment. The first option—The LORD is our God, the LORD alone—fits the meaning of the first commandment in the Ten Commandments: Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Here is the absolute exclusion: no other gods, the Lord alone...which begs some questions: “Are there other gods? And “Are the other gods real?” Indeed, option can be turned on its head—“My God is better than your god...your god is just a fake.” Option one is about loyalty to God alone—certainly the emphasis of the first commandment in the Ten Commandments.

The second option—The Lord our God is one—has a different perspective. That the Lord is “one” is radical monotheism. There are no other gods...all thought of any power or person remotely like God is excluded. “Radical” is not a word to use lightly. “Radical” means that all things come from God. “Radical” defines how we value ourselves and all around us. For some, the only value is what is good for self...but most people rise somewhat above that to ask what is good for my tribe—my family, my neighborhood, my school, my nation. “Make America Great Again” is an appeal to a value larger than self. Indeed, all patriotism seeks a value beyond the individual. But radical monotheism means that value is not just about you...or your family...or your team...or those who work the way you work. Radical monotheism—that Lord is one and there is no other—sends us down a radical path.

Here’s how a leading theologian of the 20th century, H. Richard Niebuhr, addressed the implications of “radical monotheism:”

It [radical monotheism] is the assurance that because I am, I am valued, and because you are, you are beloved, and because whatever is has being, therefore it is worthy of love. It is the confidence that whatever is, is good, because it exists as one thing among the many which all have their origin and their being in the One...¹

The very fact of being makes a person or thing valued. Our tendency (or should I say our sin) is that we reserve love for those close at hand, those who share a particular relationship, those who have a beneficial connection to us. We live in world of who is “in” and who is “out.” Radical monotheism will not let us define anyone or anything as being on the outside. Perhaps that is why Jesus moved from the Shema—the Lord is one—to the love of neighbor. Jesus connected the Shema AND the love of neighbor. Because for Jesus, we cannot say this one is neighbor and this one is not. As Niebuhr said it so succinctly: whatever is...is good.

There is a Chinese fable that addresses this perspective. A farmer bought a prize stallion. One day his stallion runs away. And a neighbor comes over and says, to commiserate, “I’m so sorry about your horse.” And the farmer says, “Who knows what’s good or bad?” The neighbor is confused because this is clearly terrible loss. The horse had been the farmer’s most valuable property.

But the stallion comes back the next day, with 12 wild horses following! The farmer now has corral full of strong, valuable horses. The neighbor comes back over to celebrate, “Congratulations on your great fortune!” And the farmer replies again: “Who knows what’s good or bad?”

And the next day the farmer’s son is taming one of the wild horses, and he’s thrown and breaks his leg. The neighbor comes back over, “I’m so sorry about your son.” The farmer repeats: “Who knows what’s good or bad?” Sure enough, the next day the army comes through their village and forcibly drafts all the able-bodied young men to go and fight in a battle, from which most do not come home alive. The farmer’s son is spared because of his broken leg.²

¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (1943), page 32.

² Multiple references can found to this fable on the Internet. This text is dependent on David Allan’s telling from a TEDx talk. See <https://medium.com/@davidgallan/who-knows-what-s-good-or-bad-my-tedx-talk-transcript-8404344779ce> as of 9/3/19.

And this story goes on and on like this...Good...Bad. Who knows? Radical monotheism says the Lord...the Lord is one. And all things work together for good...for those who love God. All things works together for good, said the Apostle Paul (Romans 8:28). And, among all the expressions of love, listening and paying attention are certainly high on the list. All things work together for good for those who love God...who hear God.

Shema...listen! Yes, the Lord is God alone...and, if you can hear it, the Lord is one...and there is no other. All things work together for good for those who love God. So, choose this day to love...with all your heart, mind, and strength...with all your capacity to hear.