



Hard of Listening

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Deuteronomy 6:4-9

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Mount Saint Helens was the most destructive volcano in the history of our country. The before and after pictures from 1980 tell the story. The eruption reduced its summit by 1300 feet. The blast rose 60,000 feet into the air, blew away the north side of the mountain and left a horseshoe-shaped crater. The sound was positively deafening. Its sonic boom could be heard 600 miles away.

The people living near the mountain and its hikers didn't hear the explosion. They were contained in what scientists call a "zone of silence." The thrust of the blast sent the sound upward into the atmosphere and away from the source of the blast.

Some of us are living in a zone of silence. Even though God is active and communicating, some of us aren't listening. That's why I've titled this sermon "Hard of Listening." Never mind the hard of hearing; some of us are hard of listening. While God is communicating, we're not listening.

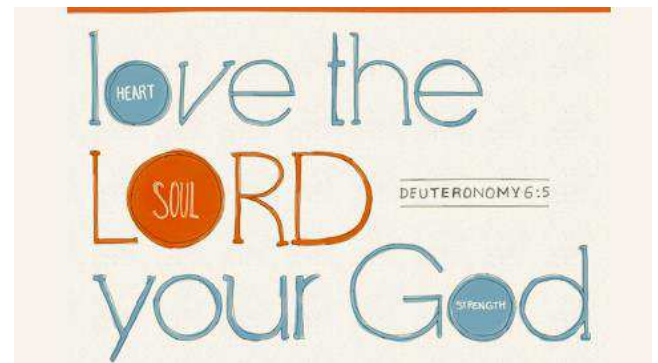
Some of us are "selective listeners." We listen to what we want to hear and tune out what we choose to ignore. I'm a selective listener. You can ask my family. I tend to hear what I want to hear and tune out the rest. I'm not bragging, you understand. Selective listening isn't one of my admirable traits.

The passage I read earlier from Deuteronomy is epic in Jewish circles. It's called the great Shema. Faithful Jews recite it as the first words in the morning and the last words at night. It's the closest thing to a Jewish creed. It's called Shema for the simple reason that the first word in the passage, *Shema*, is the Hebrew word for *hear*.

This Shema is also foundational for Christians. When Jesus was asked about the most important commandment, he answered in words from the Shema, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength” (Matthew 22:37).

Our passage begins, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4). The last Hebrew word in the sentence translated “one” can also be interpreted as “only.” It doesn’t change the meaning whether the translation is one or only. God is one and God is only. God is our one and only.

The second verse in this Shema is famous: “Love the Lord our God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:5). Loving



God doesn’t strike us as exceptional. But to people living in the ancient Near East, loving God would not have been the most singular emotion given to a deity. Fear would have been far more common.

The heart was the locus of the person’s will for the Hebrew. It’s where we derive our decision-making capacity. The second word in this trilogy, *soul*, refers to our essential self, our whole being. The third word, *strength*, derives from a Hebrew adverb meaning *very* or *exceedingly*. To love God exceedingly means to love God with everything we bring to the table.

There are two practical applications as to what to do with the words of this Shema. In verse 6, we’re told to lay these commands on our hearts. We make this command a matter of the will.

The second application in verse 7 is addressed specifically to parents. “Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and walk along the road, when you lie down and when you rise up.” There is nothing haphazard or casual about parents teaching children. Parents, make this instruction your highest priority.

The figure of speech utilized in verse 7 is what is called in English a *merism*, which puts two contrasting words together in such a way as to form a totality. If I search high and low for something, it means I look everywhere for it. Teaching children at home and on the road, before bed and when we rise in the morning means to teach children everywhere and all the time. Some of the best lessons aren’t learned in the classroom. They are taught in casual, everyday settings.



Phylactery



Mezuzah

Verses 8-9 form a fitting conclusion. “Tie these commands as symbols on our hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorposts of your

home and on your gates.” Moses doesn’t specify whether this directive is meant to be taken literally or figuratively. Orthodox Jews take it at face value. They wear leather bands, called phylacteries, on their wrists and foreheads that contain seminal passages like the Shema. They also place cylinders containing Scripture, called mezuzahs, on the doorposts of their homes. They functioned much like sticky notes back in the day. They place these commands on the wrist as representative of our actions. Strapping them on our foreheads reminds us to take these words into our minds. Mounting them on our doorposts serves as a visual cue to practice these commands at home.

I preached on this same Deuteronomy passage in 2014. I offered suggestions on how to speak about faith to children when we sit at home, travel, lie down and rise up. I spoke about teaching these Christian principles in terms of meal time, bed time, drive time and day time. I urged us to take advantage of teaching moments through the day to impart Christian values. You can access this sermon on our website.



I said in that sermon that God created the family to be the primary means by which faith is imparted to children. No one has more potential to influence a child's relationship to God for better or worse than parents. Our church plays an indispensable role in this transmission process, but there's no substitute for parents and family members who model what it means to live by faith.

Everyone is imparting values to the next generation. The question is what are we transmitting? Are we transmitting faith and trust in God or messages about self-absorption and anxiety? The Christian life is both taught *and* caught.

I said last month that we live in highly reactive times. I talked about how politicians on both sides of the aisle are pandering to these anxious times in which we live. If politicians can keep us all spun-up and fearful about our future, they can leverage anxiety for their political advantage.

I'm also noticing greater levels of anxiety among younger parents. Researchers have substantiated a direct correlation between parental anxiety and worry in children. Anxious parents transmit anxiety to their children. This anxiety becomes particularly acute when parents are overinvolved or overinvested in their children's lives.

People tell me youth are the future of our church. I disagree. Committed adults are the future of this church. If we want children to go in the way of the Lord, we had better go that way ourselves. Children pick up what we value by what we say and do.

My nephew joined us for worship last Sunday by LiveStream. Last Sunday alone, there were over 300 livestream connections. If the average connection is watched by two people, that translates into 600 people. Nothing can replicate being here in person for worship. But if you can't be here, joining us online is the next best thing.



My nephew arranged it so that my son and I were preaching on a split screen on his computer. So, there we were, side-by-side, on my nephew's laptop: Andrew in Massachusetts and I in Northern Va. He noticed that our mannerisms are strikingly similar. He was so fascinated by the likeness that he sent us this text after worship last Sunday.

I laughed in much the same way you did. I never said to Andrew—when you are making a point in your sermon, stretch out your arms and then bring them together. Nothing of the like was ever said between us. This poignant example in family life is replicated many times over! We transmit attitudes and actions whether or not we intend to do so. So, what values are we transmitting?

You may be listening to this sermon as a parent or family member and have decided it's time to step it up. What better time to do so, given that our church is engaged in a season of

renewal. Two weeks ago, we began with our individual selves—you and me—in our *Ready for Revival* booklet. This past week, our focus was family. In succeeding weeks, we will turn to church, city and world. We're offering a class for parents starting next Sunday morning on Sticky Faith. How can we promote faith that sticks with the next generation? On the first Sunday of May, we are offering a class for married couples. What better gift can you give your kids than a healthy marriage?

Today, we are confirming 40 young people into the membership of our church. Let me speak to our confirmands for a moment. Today marks a beginning. The baton is being passed to you. You are moving from an inherited faith to one you are invited to embrace for yourself. Don't go through the motions. Run with it. Live into it hard.

There is a passage in Proverbs 6 that mirrors the Shema from Deuteronomy. "My son," the Proverb begins. It's written in such a way that it includes sons and daughters alike in the salutation. "My sons and daughters, keep your father's instruction and don't forsake your

**My son and daughter,
Keep your father's command;
Do not forsake your mother's teaching.
Bind them always on your heart;
Fasten them around your neck.**

Prov. 6.20-21

**When you walk, they will lead you
When you sleep, they will watch over you
When you awake, they will talk to you.**

Prov. 6.22

mother's teaching." The father's commands and mother's teaching take us back to the summons to love God with all our heart, soul and strength. "Bind them always on your heart; fasten them on your neck." This passage calls to mind the phylacteries worn on the wrist and attached to the doorposts of Jewish homes.

Here's the part I want you to hear. "When you walk, they will lead you. When you sleep, they will watch over you. When you awake, they will talk to you." They will lead you and watch over you. They will even talk with you. Resolve to love God as your highest priority. Love God exceedingly, with everything you've got.

Hear, good people. Don't let these words go in one ear and out the other. Jesus said to would-be followers, "Whoever has ears, let them hear." Some of the people standing near Jesus must have been really hard of listening. Listening is a skill that must be honed if we are to follow Jesus. "Whoever has ears, let them hear!"

