

LISTEN, AND DO IT WELL Deuteronomy 6:4-19; JOHN 10:22-30

Having lost most of his hearing a number of years before, an elderly man finally goes to the doctor to be fitted with hearing aids that promise to allow him almost 100% hearing. A month later, he returns to the doctor for a check up on the results. The doctor tells him that his hearing is perfect and asks if his family is pleased. The man says, "Oh, I haven't told them about the hearing aids yet. I just sit around and listen to them talk. I've changed my will three times!" It's an old one, but a good one, at least for today.

Our text teaches the attitude: "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening," rather than "Listen, Lord, your servant is speaking." It is up to us to listen well to God. It's not like we are ever going to hear some big "Gong" and then through the smoke a voice will be heard directing us. We have to listen not just with our ears but with our heart, soul and might. Of course it's not easy to hear someone tell us something we may not really want to hear, but we still need to heed the message, which reminds me of a deacon and a pastor from the local church who are standing by the side of the road, pounding a sign into the ground that reads: "The End Is Near! Turn Yourself Around Now—Before It's Too Late!" As a car speeds past them, the driver yells, "Leave us alone, you religious nuts!" From the curve they hear screeching tires and a big splash. The pastor turns to the deacon and asks, "Do you think the sign should just say, 'Bridge Out'?" Today we are bombarded by disembodied voices and background noises. Radios blare at us in our cars, stereo systems squawk at us in our homes, ipods speak through subatomic ear plugs, elevators sing to us at work and computer generated "voices" nag us about the empty gas tank or door that is ajar, and GPS;s in our cars shout out "recalculating route." While we routinely live with all this noise, we still remain highly susceptible to messages shouted by these various voices. The commercial ads on radio and television pay. They pay the station's bills as we pay for the products they advertise. Why isn't God's voice more discernible than all those other shouted sounds? Who says it isn't? Perhaps we just aren't tuning in, which is just what the preacher meant when he said, "This morning I'm going to speak on the relationship between fact and faith. It is a fact that you are sitting here in the sanctuary. It is also a fact that I am standing here speaking. But it is faith that makes me believe that you might be listening to what I have to say." God has it much more difficult than I do. Somehow, the Lord has to work through these words in order to be heard by you—and by me, I should add. As Scripture says, "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ." Rom. 10:17

What we want to know this morning is that listening is a real challenge.

A recent survey by Cynthia Langham at the University of Detroit found that parents and children spend only 14.5 minutes per day talking to each other. She says that many people who doubt her research are shocked when they time their conversations with their own children. Tragically, that 14.5 minute statistic is misleading since most conversation is squandered on chitchat such as, "What's for supper?" and "Have you finished your homework?" Sometimes the best gift we can give to the people we love is to listen to them – really listen. Teenage runaways, during interviews in a San Francisco study, were asked: "Is there anything you needed most and couldn't get?" Their response, invariably preceded by sadness and tears, was basically unanimous: "What I needed most was someone to listen to me...someone who cared enough to listen to me." It should occur to us that God gave us two ears but only one mouth. Isn't that some kind of hint that we are

to listen more than talk?

The Shema or Great Commandment, as it has also come to be known, is the word of Moses' instruction to the people after the Ten Commandments and after the people asked him to stand before God and before them and to teach them. The Shema is this first teaching and it begins with the command to hear or listen. It was like the Apostles Creed of the Old testament. It went this way, Shema, Yishrael, Yaveh Eloheinu, Yaveh. Ichod. (Literally—hear Israel, the Lord is God, the Lord is One) The placement of this teaching is interesting as it falls between the Ten Commandments or the Decalogue and the other instructions in the hundreds of statutes and ordinances Moses would soon lay out. This is why Jesus can later say that all the law and the prophets hang on this commandment and the one following this one about love. Mt. 22:40. Listening to God is the first and most important act of a faithful Christian.

We are here today to listen to God. Why should we listen to him? **Three reasons. First of all because God sees things we don't see, which means the Lord is looking out for us.** If you could know what was going to happen five minutes before it happened, or one day, or how about a month or a year, wouldn't that be something? God has that ability, not to mention a much greater span of time. If we are blind to the future, then holding onto someone's hand who isn't blind is the wisest thing to do.

A rice farmer saved an entire village from destruction. From his hilltop farm he felt the earthquake and saw the distant ocean swiftly withdraw from the old shoreline, like some recoiling animal crouching back for a leap. He knew that the leap would be a tidal wave. In the valley below, he saw his neighbors working low fields that would soon be flooded. How could they hear him? They had to run quickly to his hilltop or they would all die. His rice barns were dry as tinder. So with a torch he set fire to his barns and soon the fire gong started ringing. His neighbors saw the smoke and rushed to help him. Then from their safe perch they saw the tidal wave wash over the fields they had just left. In a flash they knew not only who had saved them but what their salvation had cost their benefactor. They later erected a monument to his memory.

How good of a listener are you? Here's a test: Since you think about four times faster than a person usually talks, do you use the time to think about other things while keeping track of the conversation? Do you listen primarily for facts rather than ideas or feelings? Do you avoid listening to things you feel will be too difficult to understand? When listening are you distracted by outside sights and sounds? Obviously you are supposed to say no to each one of these. The story is told of Franklin Roosevelt, who often endured long receiving lines at the White House. He complained that no one really paid any attention to what was said. One day, during a reception, he decided to try an experiment. To each person who came by and shook his hand, he murmured, "I murdered my grandmother this morning." The guests responded with phrases like, "Marvelous! Keep up the good work. We are proud of you. God bless you, sir." It was not until the end of the line, while greeting the ambassador from Bolivia, that his words were actually heard. Nonplused, the ambassador leaned over and whispered, "I'm sure she had it coming."

**The second reason we need to hear God and be faithful to the word is because the Lord cares about us more than we care about ourselves.** The truth is that many people are rather selfish. In our selfishness we doubt that could God possibly care more for ourselves than we do. Considering this might be the truth, let us ask ourselves a couple of questions: Do we always do what is in our best interest? Do we always eat right, get the proper amount of sleep, and exercise? Do we spend every minute wisely? Do we always read books and listen to tapes and watch TV programs that will advance ourselves spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually? Do we always do the things we need to do to maintain healthy and spiritually vibrant relationships? We need to listen to God because he cares more about us than we care about ourselves, and certainly cares about us more than most others do, like one of the two psychiatrists who met at their 20th college reunion. One is vibrant, while the other looks withered and worried. "What's your secret?" the older-looking psychiatrist asks. "Listening to other people's problems every day, all day long, for years on end, has made an old man out of me." The younger-looking man replies, "So, you actually listen?"

God knows us. God made us. God loves us. God speaks to us, for our good. To whom should we listen if not to this one? The second command of the Shema is to love the Lord with all your heart, soul, and strength. A lot of Jewish and Christian thought see these three not as separate parts of one person, but as three areas of our lives, where heart equals our undivided loyalty; soul means a commitment even to the point of death; and might encompasses our substance, wealth, property given in the service of God. To hear someone, to hear God takes an act of faith that what is being said is true. To listen to God takes belief, and to believe first requires trust. Trust the Lord your God. Give God your heart, so that the Lord can give you his life. Don't be afraid to lean upon God. Don't be afraid to hand yourself over to the one who loves you more. Don't be afraid to believe God's word above all other words. But the truth is, when it comes to real trust, words aren't always necessary or available.

Famed radio and television newscaster Edward R. Murrow was rarely at a loss for words. After visiting a liberated German concentration camp in the aftermath of World War II, however, he could only say this to his listeners: "I pray you believe what I have said about [this camp]. I have reported what I saw and heard, but only part of it. For most of it I have no words ...." In bringing testimony about the horrors of the camps to Americans who could scarcely believe such things were possible, Murrow could only appeal to his towering journalistic reputation. "Trust me," he was saying, "when I tell you how bad it is." When Jesus asks his disciples, on the other hand, to share good news—as they declare what they really believe about him—they are equally at a loss for words. Finally, Peter blurts out his famous confession: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." There are no words that can convince others of this good news. Only testimony, something like, "Trust me, when I tell you how good a Savior we have." And then it's up to that person to listen and hear that God has spoken to you and still speaks to you, sometimes in words, sometimes in pictures, sometimes in prayers, sometimes in joyful times, sometimes in sad times.

Those who listen to and love the Lord are those who live the life, with or without words. There once was a little boy who wanted to meet God. He knew it was a long trip to where God lived, so he packed his suitcase with Twinkies and a six-pack of root beer, and he started out.

After three blocks he met an old woman sitting on a park bench. The boy sat down next to her and opened his suitcase. He noticed that she looked hungry, so he offered her a Twinkie. She gratefully accepted it and smiled at him. Her smile was so pretty that the boy wanted to see it again, so he offered her a root beer. Once again, she smiled at him. The boy was delighted. They sat there all afternoon eating and smiling, yet they never said a word. As it grew later, the boy realized how tired he was and he got up to leave. Before he had gone more than a few steps, he turned around, ran back to the old woman and gave her a hug. She gave him her biggest smile ever. When the boy opened the door to his home a short time later, his mother was surprised by the look of joy on his face. She asked him, "What did you do today that made you so happy?" He replied, "I had lunch with God." But before his mother could respond, he added, "You know what? She's got the most beautiful smile I've ever seen." Meanwhile the old woman, also radiant with joy, returned to her home. Her neighbor was surprised by the look of peace on her face, and she asked, "What did you do today that made you so happy?" She replied, "I ate Twinkies in the park with God. You know," she added, "He's much younger than I expected."

Go ahead. Listen well and live well.