

Now Hear This

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Dear friends in Christ: those words I just spoke are very familiar to us. They are the words with which we begin worship on those Sundays that we celebrate the Divine Service. They are also the first words you hear during special services such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals. Many Christian people use those words to begin their prayers: “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”. Together we call those words the “Invocation”, which literally means *to call upon a higher power*. And that’s why we say them as we begin our worship or prayers because that’s what we’re engaged in doing when we say them: we’re calling upon God – not just any God; but specifically, our God who has revealed himself to us as Trinity of persons who go by that name. And please notice that I said that our God goes by *that name* rather than *those names*. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together are the one name of our one Triune God.

The words of the invocation come from a particular passage in the Scripture. It’s Matthew 28:19 in which Jesus directs his followers to go forth and make disciples of all nations by baptizing them “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”. All of us have been baptized in that name. And so when we repeat the Invocation we’re doing more than just using it to call upon a mysterious higher power who goes by that particular name. The Invocation says something about who we are in relation to him. By using it we are saying that we are calling upon the God we know, the God who made us his children in Baptism and who washed away our sins through the blood of the Son crucified for us. We’re saying that we are calling upon the God who loves us *that* much, who has filled us with his Holy Spirit, and who has given us the privilege of using his name with the firm promise that for Christ’s sake he will hear and answer us. So while the Invocation contains the name of our God and says something about him, it also says quite a bit about who we are when we use it.

Now, the reason I mention all of this is that today’s Old Testament lesson begins with what in Jewish circles is called the “Shema”. That’s the line that goes, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one.” It’s called the “Shema” because that’s how you say first word, “hear”, in Hebrew. In Old Testament times, the Shema functioned in Jewish worship services quite a bit like our Invocation. Even today, they are the first words you hear when Jews gather to worship – though you might not know it because typically they still say them in Hebrew. In any case, like the Invocation, the Shema specified and defined the God of Israel in distinction to the gods of the other nations.

That was necessary because, coming as they do from the book of Deuteronomy, we can see that the words of the Shema were given to Israel at a time near the end of the Exodus. That is to say, at a time when God’s people had recently been rescued from slavery in Egypt, a land where many gods were worshipped. They were just about to go into Canaan, a place where a whole bunch of *other* gods were worshipped. And so it’s against that prevailing mindset of the world, the idea that there were many gods, that we see in the Shema an emphasis that God is one. That’s important for a lot of reasons; but chief among them have to do with the questions of trust and loyalty. What I mean is this: if you were an Egyptian and believed in many gods and goddesses, a big part of your religion was knowing which god to go to for your particular concerns at any time. You might go to god A to appeal for a good harvest, god B to be healed of an illness, god C for fertility treatments when you wanted to start a family, and gods W, X, Y, Z for who knows what else. And of course, if things weren’t going well for you, you had to worry about which of the gods you might have offended and then go seek to appease them. So, religious life for the typical Egyptian (or Canaanite) was something of a juggling act. You had to devote some time and effort to each of the gods in order to try to keep them all happy and avoid offending any of them because if you let one of the balls drop, well, then there could be trouble. So your loyalty was divided among the many gods, and so was your attention when appealing to them to receive their help.

It’s against this kind of fragmented and compartmentalized religiosity that the Shema asserts, no, there is only one God. There is only *One* who provides for all your needs, and therefore only *One* who is worthy of your religious devotion. Through the Shema the Lord God calls his people, who are naturally seduced into

accepting the polytheistic thinking of the cultures that surround them, to see that in him they have the ultimate one stop theological shopping center. “You get it all here with me. I alone made you. I alone sustain you. So there’s no need or utility in looking to anyone else. Besides, mine is the only address here in the heavenly realms. I’ve lived here for a long time and I’ve never seen any of those other so-called gods that people pray to in my neighborhood – so don’t waste your time with them. Those prayers always get sent back to where they came from stamped ‘return to sender, addressee unknown’.”

And it’s important that we see that the Shema was given to God’s people in the context of the Exodus experience. That is to say, the Lord prevails upon his people to hear, understand, and cling to the fact that he alone is God *only after having proved it to them* in many spectacular ways. Remember they had been slaves in Egypt. They were a weak, oppressed, and downtrodden people in the midst of what was then the mightiest nation on earth. There was no way they could have escaped from Egypt on their own. There was no way they could have survived these past forty years in the desert. But the Lord God brought them out of bondage with miraculous signs and wonders. He laid waste to the glory of Egypt and made a mockery of their pantheon of powerless gods. He sustained his people in the desert all these years with food delivered daily from heaven and water bubbling up from miraculous springs. And he had just brought them to the edge of the Promised Land and invited them to go in and take it from the Canaanites who, though much stronger and more numerous, would be powerless to stop them. You see, the Lord didn’t just come along out of the blue and demand a monopoly their religious devotion; he first proved his pedigree, so to speak. He demonstrated his right to be jealous about who and what they worshipped. And understand that he wasn’t jealous for his sake; but for theirs. He loved his people and didn’t want them wandering off in pursuit of false gods who could not help them and who, through their vain quest, would ultimately bring them to misery.

So just like the invocation, when God’s people used the Shema to begin their worship, they were reminded not only of who the Lord is, but also of who they were in relation to him. They were reminded that they were worshipping the Lord who called them out of the living death and privation of slavery to freedom and prosperity in the land flowing with milk and honey. They were reminded that they were a redeemed people, a specially privileged people; that they had been chosen out of all the world’s nations to be the ones to whom the Lord would reveal himself and through whom he would bring salvation to the world. The words of the Shema called them to remember that they were the ones the Lord picked to shower his blessings upon, to be a light to the Gentiles, and above all else, that they were the ones he had chosen to be the recipients and custodians of his Holy Word.

And that’s why the very first word of the Shema is so important: *Hear. Listen. Pay attention.* The Lord God is about to speak. He has something to say to us. That’s how the Jews began their worship: with an announcement that the Lord God who redeemed them was about to tell them something. It sort of reminds me of those movies set aboard WWII naval ships. Everybody is busy doing their jobs when all of a sudden the loud speaker blares, “Now hear this! Now hear this!” And the whole crew stops and listens carefully, because what follows is likely to be some important message from the Captain. The Jews began their worship with a similar warning to tell everyone to listen carefully – because you’d better believe that if God has something to say, it’s going to be important.

But that’s another thing that made the God of Israel so much different than the gods of the other nations: he *spoke* to his people. Oh, the other gods had their stories, their mythologies; but if you went to their temples to worship them, you deposited your gifts and offerings, you recited your prayers and praises, and then you went home. You never heard anything from them. They didn’t say a word. Idols never do. But Jewish worship was always primarily about hearing what God had to say. That’s why he directed Moses and the prophets who followed after him to record his Word and proclaim it regularly to his people. And that’s why too we see that immediately after the words of the Shema, this call of God to listen to what he has to say, there follows several lines worth of instructions about how you are to take the things that God had said to you and talk about them; talk about them at home, at work, while traveling. Talk about them in the morning when you get up and, in the evening, when you go to bed. The Lord tells his people to bind his words to their foreheads, and the idea is that they are to see the world through the lens of what he has to say – that their very thoughts are to be informed by God’s view of things. Likewise, he tells them to bind his word to their hands; the idea there is that the work of their hands might also be directed by the Word of God. And possibly also here is the

notion that God's Word should be as familiar to them as the back of their hands. The Lord's clear intent was that his people be completely immersed in what he had to say.

And this applies to us as well. Yes, these days we begin our worship with the Invocation; but as the children of God the Shema belongs to us as well. It belongs to all God's redeemed people. And there's a lesson or two to learn from it because the Lord God still speaks today, and we are called to hear him.

First, we are called to hear what the Lord says because that's how he has chosen to reveal himself to us. It's by listening to what he says that we learn to know him. That's so important because it's only by listening to him that we can be sure we have the truth. You see, apart from what he says all we have to go on are our sinful imaginations. That's how the ancient Egyptians and Canaanites came up with their many gods and goddesses. In the absence of God's Word, they were forced to guess what God is like, and so, not surprisingly, the gods they created in their imaginations were very much like them. Though greater and more powerful than mere humans, their gods were limited and driven by the same petty motivations that drive people.

The same thing happens today when people try to know or relate to God apart from his Word. For example, sometimes I'll hear people say things like, "I like to think of God as being ..." or "I'm sure it would please God if were to ..."; when a sentence begins like that and ends with something other than the Lord has specifically said about himself or what he wants, then you can be sure that you're moving away from truth and entering the field of mythology. Likewise, when a sentence begins with "I can't believe in a God who would ..." and ends with something that the Scripture *does* assert that God has done, well, once again you can be sure that you're stepping off the edge of reality. The truth is that apart from his Word *we don't know God*. We can't even imagine him. That's why he directs us first to hear. "You listen. I'll tell you who I am. I'll tell you what I want." And by listening to him we discover truths we could not have imagined. Take the doctrine of Trinity for example, the truth that God is three persons in one divine essence, or the message of the Gospel, the teaching that for the sake of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection God forgives sin – that what he really wants from us is not our best efforts to be good; but rather trust in the perfection attained for us by Jesus—who could ever have come up with such things? No, it's only by hearing him that we arrive at the truth.

And hearing God speak does more than reveal who he is, it also changes us. It is the means by which the Lord works in the world to accomplish his will. That's demonstrated so clearly at the time of Creation when to make things happen God spoke, and it was so. Each time the creation heard the voice of the Lord, it was changed for the better. The power of God's Word did whatever he wanted done. It was when creation – and specifically our first parents – stopped listening to what God said that things got so messed up. The same is true today. God works on us when we hear him speak through his Word. He shapes and changes us when he speaks. Once in a while I hear complaints that our Lutheran worship services are not active enough. Someone will say, "All we do is sit there passively. We want to be doing more, playing some greater role in the conduct of the service". Well the Lord wants you to do something too: he wants you to listen. That's how he works on you. This emphasizes his grace, his activity: because our services are not about what you do, they're about the Lord and what he has done to save you from sin, and what he continues to do to keep you in the faith and sanctify you by the power of his Holy Spirit. Listen: you can render no greater service to the Lord than to listen to what he says. And you can listen actively. You can let what you hear sink in and become part of you, or you can fight and resist it. Likewise you can compartmentalize this little hour and fence it off from the rest of your life, or you can do as our text suggests and take what you've heard God say and think about it, talk about it, teach it to your children – and in so doing the Word of the Lord will continue to shape and change your life.

In fact, there's an interesting word used in today's text where, speaking of the words God has spoken, it says to "impress them on your children". What's translated there "impress" literally means "to sharpen". Now, some of you know I mess around in the kitchen once in a while; and when I do there's one thing I just can't stand, and that's a dull knife. Dull knives are inefficient and they're dangerous because you have to apply more force to cut something thus increasing the risk that you'll slip and cut yourself. Much better and safer is a finely sharpened blade that slices effortlessly. A sharp knife is a tool that's a pleasure to use. But that's what hearing and internalizing God's Word does to us. Without it we grow dull and dangerous over time; but when

we continue to hear it, it sharpens us to be efficient tools in the hand of our Creator – tools that are a pleasure for him to use; tools that can be used by him to show his love to the world.

May our One Triune God grant us ears to hear and the grace to listen that we may be such sharp tools for him. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!