***SHEMA***

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Texts: Deuteronomy 6:1-9 and Mark 12:28-34

There are seminal moments in life, times when your world is about to change, and someone –a parent, friend, teacher, or well-meaning know-it-all neighbor – feels the need to offer some advice before you head into the next chapter of your life. Retirements can be such moments, as can a move to a new job or new home, the arrival of a first child, or a graduation – hence the proliferation of speakers at commencements. Some of you may recall the movie *The Graduate*, in which Dustin Hoffman plays a young graduate who is taken aside by a family friend at his graduation party who feels the need to offer the clueless new graduate advice about his future in one iconic word: PLASTICS! In churches the ordination or installation of a pastor can be such a time; in the order of service there are specifically designated spots for such advice in charges to the pastor and the congregation. When I was installed here at Covenant I asked Phil Roberts, a former pastor of this church, to charge you all, and he said, “John, I will do whatever you want me to do, but they didn’t listen to me when I was here, so I am not sure they will listen to me now.” Such is the risk of offering advice: it may or may not be heeded!

The people of Israel who had wandered across the wilderness for forty years reached such a seminal moment as they stood in the desert on the verge of the River Jordan with the Promised Land just over the horizon. The goal of their long journey was in sight, a land flowing with milk and honey, and their level of excitement was sky high. But before they crossed the river into a new life in a new land, Moses paused to speak with them and offer some advice from the Lord. At the heart of all that Moses had to say to them was the confession of faith known to Jews as the SHEMA, the Hebrew word for HEAR:

*Shema Israel, Adonai elohenu Adonai ‘ehad.*

*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.*

Or perhaps better translated:

*Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord alone.*

Or perhaps meaning:

*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord.*

The Hebrew is a little ambiguous, you see. It could be any one of those messages that Israel is to hear, any one of those meanings that Israel is to grasp, hold, recite and treasure in their hearts. Perhaps most likely it is all of those meanings bound up together, a profound affirmation made in four brief treasured words:

*Adonai elohenu Adonai ‘ehad.*

The Hebrew word *Adonai*, the word that in your Bibles appears as LORD (in all capital letters), is really YHWH (Yahweh) in the text, but in Jewish tradition the sacred name of the LORD is never spoken. YHWH is that holy name given to Moses at the Burning Bush when Moses asks, “*Whom shall I say is sending me to Pharaoh?*” And the voice from the bush replies, “YHWH! Tell them, YHWH sent you.” It is a name unlike any other name – a word with a four-letter root in a language in which all other words have three-letter roots, a name that defies easy translation: *I am who I am. I am who I will be. I will be who I am. I will be who I will be.* Or perhaps best translated simply: *I AM*. Hear O Israel, *I AM* is our God, a particular God with a particular name that transcends the limits of human language and understanding – and that is a good thing. For, if we could fully grasp God with our puny little minds, then God would not be all that great. As it is, the best we can do to identify God is to say the divine name: I AM and thus affirm: GOD IS – and that is enough.

I AM is the God of Abraham and Sarah – the God of Jews, Christians and Muslims alike – God of all those Abrahamic traditions that trace their faith back to the tents of Abraham and to his God, the Creator of all things and all people. It is that same I AM whom we worship, that I AM whom we praise, that I AM to whom we pray each day, that I AM revealed to us in Jesus the Christ, Son of the living God. In Jesus we see revealed not a different God from that of the Hebrew Scriptures, but one and the same God. Sometimes it is hard to reconcile the descriptions of the LORD in the Old and New Testaments; it seems hard to imagine that it is one and the same God calling David to smite enemies and calling Jesus’ disciples to love their enemies. Yet we affirm that YHWH is God alone; there is no other! And the God to whom Jesus bears witness, the God who is incarnate in him, is that same I AM. In giving the Great Commandment to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, Jesus quotes the Hebrew Scriptures – for he and the LORD are one, and the LORD our God is God alone, one God. *Adonai elohenu Adonai ‘ehad*.

The source of the ambiguity and richness in that early confession of faith in the desert turns on the last word which is: ONE or ALONE or both ONE and ALONE. To say that YHWH is God alone is to say that there is no other God, no other divine being who can stand with God. It is a radical claim that dismisses all the claims of divine status for sun or moon, idols of stone or wood, or any pretender like pharaoh or Caesar. The LORD alone is God! But it is also the radical claim that judges our 21st century misplaced loves and idolatrous trust in wealth or science, any politician or nation. The LORD alone is still God, and no other person or thing or American idol is worthy of our devotion and praise. It is the LORD alone who does divine things – creating and saving and loving without end. We are the creations of divine hands, the beneficiaries of divine saving, the objects of divine love no matter how unlovable we may be. We love the LORD with all that we are – heart, soul, mind, and strength, because no other god is divine and worthy of our love.

Why then do we seem to love the LORD so little and love so many lesser things so much? People who say they love the LORD attend meetings of Rotary or Kiwanis or a bridge group or college football games more faithfully than they attend church – be it in person or virtually. People who say they love the LORD with all that they are and love their neighbors as themselves keep for themselves far more of their time, talents and resources than they share with God and the neighbors in need who they supposedly love. People who say they love the LORD pick and choose among the Lord’s commandments to be obeyed in order to create a comfortable faith:

Do not kill – okay.

Do not steal – okay (with small exceptions for stealing from the IRS).

Do not take the Lord’s name in vain – okay, except on the golf course.

Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy – Revise to: Remember

the Sabbath Day!

Honor your father and mother – okay as long as they don’t embarrass

me.

Do not covet your neighbor’s \_\_\_ - okay if we can narrow it to just the

donkey and ox from the list in Exodus

Love your neighbor – okay, provided I define *love* and *neighbor*.

Forgive those who sin against you – too hard!

Love your enemies – way too hard!

Turn the other cheek – unrealistic!

Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus – too painful!

Believe in God, believe also in Jesus – okay as long as not too much is

asked of me…

With the same lips that we proclaim the LORD alone is God, we modify God’s commandments to suit our own desires and thus make ourselves God. Or we claim we are saved by OUR confession of faith instead of by the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ. We are saved by what God does, not what we do; that is what grace is all about – that great revelation that we celebrate this Reformation Sunday. We are saved by the grace of God, and we are called by that same God to live faithfully, not in order to earn God’s love but in gratitude for it. If the LORD alone is your God, then it is the LORD’s commandments alone you are to obey, not your careful revision of them. Faithfulness is hard work sometimes, and while other gods may seem easier to follow or promise a more comfortable life, their promises come up empty and the hope they offer proves to be nothing but an illusion. The LORD alone is God, and to follow any other god is to betray and deny the uniqueness of the One who is the Great I AM.

That, according to the SHEMA, is what we are to teach our children and to keep uppermost in our minds in all times and in all places. Within certain branches of Judaism that commandment is taken literally, so they bind the words on their hand or forehead or write them on the doorposts of their home. But what God really wants is for us to write those commandments on our hearts and across our lives. Jesus reaffirms the importance of the SHEMA when he is asked which is the greatest commandment. He quotes it, but lifts up also the command to love your neighbor as yourself, which means, of course, loving yourself as well as your neighbor. Why? Because God has created you and your neighbor in God’s image, and if we are to love God with all that we are, then we are to love the image of God in our neighbor and in ourselves as well. That image may be badly tarnished, but it is nevertheless what we are to do, and if you want to argue with God about that command, feel free, just be prepared for God’s response which may be akin to the final word our friend Charlotte decreed to her daughter from time to time, “Because I am the mother, and I say so.”

“I am the LORD your God and I say so,” should be enough for us, enough for us to do as God asks, enough for us to love God with all that we are in gratitude for what God has done for us, enough for us to love our neighbors because that is what God asks of us, enough to teach those words to our children and grandchildren and neighbor’s children, as saints before us have done for us, teach them not only by what we say, but also by how we treat others and what we do and how we live day to day!

*Adonai elohenu Adonai ‘ehad*. Hear, O Israel – Hear, O Covenant – Hear, my children – the LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD with all that you are and love your neighbor as yourself. And that my friends, is enough! Amen