

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David Powers
Sunday, September 13, 2026

All right, friends. This morning as we celebrate kickoff, we also kick off a brand new sermon series—just four weeks for us. It is entitled Hebrew 101. You see it there on the front of your bulletin. We are going to spend four weeks studying a couple of ancient words from Holy Scripture. For those to whom Bible study is a new endeavor, our Old Testament was written in Hebrew. Okay? And what we call our Old Testament was written in Hebrew. Our New Testament was written in Greek. And so we'll study four Hebrew words over the next four weeks. Then we'll switch and we'll study four Greek words. We'll have Greek 101 as we move through the month of October. We think that these ancient words have something to speak to our Christian faith today. We think that we need to know these words and allow them to shape our discipleship of Christ in this time. So this morning we start with Shema. Shema. Okay.

It can be defined as either hear or listen. What you'll find with almost all of the words that we're going to study over the next four weeks and then eight weeks total are that there's different dimensions of meaning when you're talking about Hebrew and when we're talking about Greek. Okay? And so it's hard simply to nail down one thing that Shema means, but hear or listen is the best we can do. We're going to allow Deuteronomy, chapter 6 to ground us. But before we read God's word together, let us join our hearts in prayer together. So for the first time at 11 o'clock in about four months, let's get comfy and take a deep breath together. Let's take a deep breath in and breathe it out slowly.

Another deep breath in and breathe it out slowly

and breathe in God's mercies

and breathe out God's mercies to others.

Breathe in God's mercies

and breathe out God's mercies to others.

Gracious spirit, you are as close to us as our very next breath. And so we pray that you would dwell within us and around us in these moments. That you would by the power of your spirit quiet any voice within us but your own so that we might hear your word for us this day. And that in hearing we might be called to lead lives of response. So may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Deuteronomy, chapter 6, beginning in the first verse.

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. 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. Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you,

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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. Here, 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. Keep these words that I'm commanding you today in your heart. 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. Bind them as a sign on your hand. Fix them as an emblem on your forehead and write them on the doorpost of your house and on your gates.

Beloved, the grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever.
Amen.

So, daily affirmations weren't much a part of my life until I discovered a book called Heart Steps by Julia Cameron. I've held it from this pulpit before. Julia Cameron, for those who are unfamiliar, developed something called The Artist's Way. We actually had a study of it last programmatic year here at Idlewild. I began reading those daily affirmations of hers about seven years ago. I've worn the cover off of that book, and the cover has now become my marker of where I am. I just go through them. It takes about a hundred days to get through the book. Each morning after reading scripture, a psalm, not being holier than thou, it's just one psalm. Okay. After reading scripture, I listen and I read a daily affirmation written by Julia. These have begun to shape the way I move into my day. Ground me. Ground me once again in my faith and in my trust that God is present with me. and even on my best days working through me. Daily affirmations are not unfamiliar to us. We see them in all sorts of different places. I remember—y'all remember the movie The Help many years ago? We got to listen as Viola Davis playing her part in that movie spoke to a child, Mae Mobley, a daily affirmation, one that you might be familiar with. She would say, "You is kind, you is smart, you is important." Every day to a young woman feeling neglected by the people around her, a daily affirmation, a reminder of the qualities of her heart and her mind and her spirit.

A daily affirmation is a powerful thing. It's not simply cliché. I have a friend that I visited not long ago. On the mirror in one of their bathrooms, there's a post-it note in the bottom corner. It says, "You are loved. You are called." Every morning when they look in that mirror or anyone looks in that mirror, reflected back to them is their belovedness and the idea that God is using them in some way, calling them to some greater purpose. There is power in the daily reminder, the daily affirmation. Here in Deuteronomy 6, we encounter a word that serves as a central affirmation of the Jewish faith. Faith. It's referred to in shorthand as the Shema. The word itself means to hear or to listen. But for thousands of years, devout Jews have begun and ended their days by reciting a part of this passage that we just read, as well as two others from the Pentateuch. "Here, 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." Morning and night for thousands of years. The practice is meant to ground them. Ground them in the fundamental truth of the world

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and their place in it. They are children of the only God. They are those who are called to love their God with every bit of who they are. It's a daily practice to give them direction.

For thousands of years, repeated it has been, in the morning and in the evening. Just you taking on that practice would be powerful. But if we learn a little bit more about the context of the Shema, perhaps it might even impact us more. Verse one says, "Now this is the commandment, the statutes, and the ordinances that the Lord your God charged me." This is the voice of Moses—"charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into."

This affirmation is coming at a very specific time in the life of God's people. They are about to make their move into a land that the author of Deuteronomy describes as a land flowing with milk and honey. Before they make that move, Moses wants them to be grounded once again in the power and lordship of God. The idea that there is no power in the universe greater than the power of the one that they call Yahweh.

They are to carry this understanding with them as they move into this new land. They're supposed to put it on their hands. They are supposed to emblazon it upon their foreheads. Wrap it around their necks. (That was an interesting horn right there. Sounds like a cartoon or something. Um, yeah.) So, they are not to be distracted by anything. They are to be grounded back in forever and always to the truth of the lordship of their God and to trust and believe that they are not alone. This is really important. Daily affirmations, if they be truly daily, have the ability to strengthen us in any time. But I would posit to you most especially to strengthen us when we're moving from one place to another. And the truth is, beloved, that all of us are making our way from one place to another. And you might be making your way in your job, in your vocation, on one stretch of the journey, contemplating maybe a shift in the work. Or maybe you're a teacher and the school year has just begun, a month ago now, moving into a new season. Maybe you're a student and you've just made your way across the country to a new school, right? Or across our city. We are always making our way to a new place. That might be relationally. It might mean a place on our health journey, or even we might be moving to a new place in our faith.

Moses wants the people to be grounded once again in the power and the care of their God as they make their way into the new place. And I would posit to you, beloved, this morning that the call to Shema to hear or to listen is also a call to you this day. I know not the place to which you are going right now. The part of the journey that feels brand new. I don't know if you're journeying alone for the first time in a long time. I don't know if you're surrounded by new people for the first time in a long time. I don't know if it's vocational or health or faith. But what I do know is that the same call to the Israelites is the call for you today. Wherever it is you find yourself, whatever new place you're moving to, listen afresh to the call of Deuteronomy. "The Lord is our God, the Lord alone." There's no power drawing you into that place besides the power of the living God.

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If this passage or at least part of it sounds familiar to you, it's probably because you studied it, maybe even in Sunday school, or it's because you've heard its echoes in the Gospel according to Mark. The 12th chapter of Mark in the 28th verse says this.

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another. And seeing that Jesus answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is Hear, O Israel. Shema, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength."

And it's just like Jesus not to leave it there in verse 31.

The second is this. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these."

Verse 32. Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and beside him there is no other, and to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself. This is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." Jesus saw that the scribe answered wisely and he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

So the question this morning is where is the new place to which you are moving to which God is leading you in relationship, in work, in faith, in service to this church or to our community. Where is the new place where God is leading you in this time? My invitation to you is the invitation of Deuteronomy and that is to Shema to hear or to listen. Maybe this morning you need to be reminded to listen before you make the move into that place. Maybe your world has been a little too loud and you haven't been able to create the space and the quiet to truly listen for the voice of God. So maybe for you this morning it is simply to hear, to listen. Or maybe...maybe you have listened and you're making your way into that new place, but it doesn't feel like God is with you. The Israelites felt that way as well. This is towards the end of a very long journey where they have hemmed and hawed and complained and been worried at every turn as to whether God was actually with them on the journey. And if that is the case for you this day, I pray that the call to hear and listen might root you back down in the truth that there is no other power in the universe surrounding you but the Lord our God.

Or maybe, maybe you are moving into a new place, and you feel comfortable and confident that God is with you, and you are so attuned to God's voice in this season, and you need to hear the extension that Jesus gives to this teaching, not simply that of Deuteronomy but that of Leviticus. That's what he is echoing in the Gospel of Mark. "Love your neighbor as yourself" wasn't created by Jesus. It was echoed by him. And if that's the case for you, and you are looking for a way to love your neighbor as yourself, then I encourage you at the ministry fair to go and find the way that you are being called in this season to love your neighbor as you love yourself. It might be that you are called to be a smiling face down this long hallway for those who come

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upon this place for the very first time. You're supposed to greet, or I'm sure Barbara Jennings would appreciate a shout out. You're supposed to "ush" around here. All right. It might be that you are to give, as we've talked about several times over the summer, your time and your energy to Room in the Inn or More than a Meal. You're supposed to recommit to walking alongside young people on their journey. We need youth volunteers for our youth group. I don't know what it is, but what I do know is that there are way too many ways in which God can use you in this place for you to sit it out.

I would posit to you that you might not be Shema-ing well enough if you do not hear that call. So hear and listen this day wherever you find yourself on the journey. May the affirmation that comes to us in Deuteronomy affirm to you this day that the God that walked with the Israelites walks with you now. That the place to which you are being led is a place where God will be found. There might not be milk and honey there, but there will be provision for you. There will be goodness there. Let's respond to the invitation this day. Let us listen more clearly. Let us hear the voice of God together. And let us pray.

Gracious and loving God, we trust and we believe that you are with us on this journey. In the beginning of this new programmatic year, we know there's all sorts of possibilities for us, God. And what we pray is that you would speak so clearly to us about the place where you are calling us. That you would convict our hearts so that we might know that you have a purpose for us. God, surround those who are fearful as they make their way into this new place whether it be around health or faith or work or relationship. God, help them to know and believe that indeed you are their God and you are with them. Lord, we trust and we believe that as we listen, you guide. So may we be instruments of your grace and your healing in the world. We ask it in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.