

Deuteronomy 6:1-9

¹Now 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 and occupy, ²so 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. ³Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, 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.

⁴Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. ⁵You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷Recite 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. ⁸Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheynu, Adonai echad. V'ahavta eyt
Adonai Elohecha b'chol l'avcha uv-chol naf- sh'cha uv-chol m'odecha.

Most of us do not get many opportunities to wander into a Jewish synagogue when the faithful there are in prayer. One synagogue you are welcome to go and observe and pray is at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. We all have seen pictures of the Western Wall. A very tall wall of huge stones which make up a portion of the foundation of what the Jewish people call the Temple Mount, and which Muslim people call the Noble Sanctuary where the Dome of the Rock has been standing for over one thousand three hundred years. Those huge stones were placed there over two thousand years ago as part of the foundation for the Temple Mount which Herod the Great had built in the years immediately prior to Jesus’ birth. As it is as close as Jewish people are allowed to get to the site of the historic Temple, it is considered the most sacred place in Judaism. So, as one enters into the space in front of the wall, it is considered that one is entering into a sanctuary. The space in front of the wall is divided into a men’s section and a women’s section. Women are to wear scarves on their heads as they

enter the space. Men are to also wear a head covering – a hat or a yarmulke or a prayer shawl. The head is to be covered. On the men's side, there are always a number of men who stand at the wall praying. They will have the prayer shawl over their heads. And on their foreheads are little black boxes which are held in place with black leather straps. If they are right handed, they also have a little black box strapped to their left forearms with the little black box facing inward toward their hearts. If they are left handed, they wear it on their right arms. We often know of these little boxes as phylacteries, but most commonly they are referred to as tefillin. The tradition of the tefillin comes from the literal following of the scripture we read a few moments ago from Deuteronomy: "Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead." Inside those little black leather boxes are the words which follow that instruction in Deuteronomy – it is known as the Shema. "Hear, 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." Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheynu, Adonai echad. V'ahavta eyt Adonai Elohecha b'chol l'avcha uv-chol naf-sh'cha uv-chol m'odecha.

This morning we celebrate a number of people in our congregation who are at a transitional time in their lives. High school graduates. A couple of students receiving their Bachelor's degrees. One receiving his doctorate. All very significant times of transitions, but it seems that being graduated from high school may be the most dramatic of the transitions. Not only is it a completion of an academic program, it also means that many of the friends with whom one has traveled for years will be going separate ways. For many, it also means making significant steps of independence from ones families. We celebrate, recognize, and honor those of you who have come to

those times of significant academic milestones in your lives. But we all face transitions at many times in our lives. Last evening Leisa was at her desk doing some work. As she was sorting some papers, she ran across a project she was in the middle of working on when her father became ill and died at our home two months ago. It triggered an avalanche of memories and the sadness and the missing of her father surrounded her. Before bed, I heard her in our bedroom playing her guitar, soothing her soul. Significant transitions come to all of us at many times in our lives.

Question is, when we move into other phases of our lives, what is it that we carry with us and what is it that we leave behind? Those of the Jewish faith who try to follow the laws of the Bible as literally as they can, will wear the tefillin in the middle of their foreheads and on their forearms. Others who approach the same passages just as seriously but perhaps a bit less literally, will seek to be faithful in keeping the Shema in their minds and in their hearts. "Hear, 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."

In the New Testament, we hear the word "repent." Literally translated from the Greek, it means to "turn around." Times of transition are very much like times in which we repent. We turn around. We turn a corner. We enter onto a new path. We make a change. Often is the case that at those times of transition, we leave some things behind and we pick up some new things to carry with us on the journey of life and faith. What are those things?

Eight years ago, I received a letter in the mail from a man I did not know. It was a long letter. As I read it I was very moved by what he said. In the letter he told me that

when he was a child he attended Sunday School here. The superintendent of the Sunday School was John DeVries who died nearly twenty years ago – I never met John, but his wife Jessie is sitting right over there sitting in her wheelchair. As this man became an older youth, John took him under his wing and gave him a special job to do during Sunday School – he was to go around and collect the offering from all the Sunday School classes – which he did, faithfully. But then came a time when he was in need of money, and he found himself tempted by the money in the Sunday School offering. He could not resist the temptation, and over about six months took little bits of money from the offering and slipped it into his pocket. He got the spending money he was hoping for. But he got something else as well. He got guilt. He felt badly about what he had done. And as he grew to be a man and as he went through life, there was one thing which weighed very heavily on him year after year – he had stolen money from the church – it was not very much money at all, but he had stolen money. What also weighed heavily on him was that he had betrayed the trust of a very special man – of John DeVries. He carried that weight for year after year after year. Finally, he wrote us a letter – to the pastor and the elders of the church. He told his story, and he asked to be forgiven. I read it to the church elders and we all had a good cry. We wrote to him and told him that he certainly was forgiven. And, I think more importantly, Jessie DeVries wrote him a letter and included it with our letter. The letter we received back from him was filled with joy. It was like a heavy weight had been lifted off of his shoulders, it was like he had a new life – he was very thankful for the forgiveness. Then he offered to do something for our church. In the Seattle area, he was a sign maker. He offered to make a sign for our church, which he did, and seven years ago, as Ron

and Jennifer Dalby were driving through Seattle with a big trailer, they met the man, picked up the sign, and brought it here. Frank Lombardo put the sign up in front of the church. That is that huge sign that says United Protestant Church on it. And then on a little metal plate, it says that the sign is dedicated to John DeVries, Husband, Father, Teacher, Friend. Then under the sign is a smaller sign which says "welcome." On the back of that smaller sign is the word "forgiven."

What is it that we are going to carry with us from our pasts and into our futures? In the movie called "The Mission" – based on a true story from several centuries ago – one of the main characters reached a point in his life when he needed desperately to turn his life around – he had been hunting the native peoples in South America to sell in the slave trade. It was time to start new. He made a penance walk – to pull a large net full of military armor up the river, up the cliffs – way up the cliffs that led to the community of peoples whom he had harmed. When he arrived at the top of the cliff, and as he was struggling to pull himself onto the level place – a number of the native peoples surrounded him. One of the native men made a dash at him with a knife – but instead of killing him, he cut the rope which was dragging the very heavy armor. And all of the armor went cascading down into the river. He was accepted. He was freed. The ropes had been cut – he could begin his new life – knowing he had received forgiveness.

For those of us facing transitions in our lives, we begin the next steps of our lives. Some things are left behind. Some things we will carry into our futures. It is time to leave behind the things that should and need to be left behind. As we move into our futures, let us take that which is most important – take the presence of God. Take the

love of God. Take the peace of God. Take the forgiveness of God. Follow the will of God. And always, always remember: 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. Amen.