

The Sound of Silence

Then Moses and the levitical priests spoke to all Israel, saying: Keep silence and hear, O Israel! This very day you have become the people of the Lord your God. Deuteronomy 27:9 NRSV

As the 27th chapter of Deuteronomy begins, Moses has assembled Israel on the plains of Moab for a second announcement of their covenant with Yahweh. He outlines the blessings (or curses) the people should expect based upon their faithfulness (or unfaithfulness) to the covenant.

The command to, “Keep silence and hear,” reveals an important distinction. These are two separate actions. The people are first to stop their own voices and thoughts (the “keeping silence” part), so that they may be able to ingest the instruction of God (the “hearing” part).

I suspect most librarians have frequent familiarity with people: seeking guidance, remaining silent while it is offered, and then promptly ignoring it. While we might wish to restrict this irrational response to the domain of problem patrons, Deuteronomy reminds us, humans are all problem patrons.

I wonder if this human tendency helps explain Moses’ following remark that, “This very day you have become the people of the LORD your God.” Was Israel not already God’s people? Were they not His from the moment He:

gave the promise to Abraham?
renewed it with Jacob?
delivered Israel out of Egyptian bondage?
revealed His Torah on Mount Sinai?

Of course, Israel was God’s people (in some significant senses) prior to this speech in Deuteronomy 27. I suspect that what Moses is saying is, “Since you are His people...act like it; acting like it begins with actually listening to what He tells you to do!”

Years after this speech, the prophets of Israel would rail against the nation’s tendency to seek salvation by crying out to idols “who have ears...but do not hear” (i.e., who can do nothing except sit there mute). Jesus, Himself, would note the numbers of people in His day who had ears...but did not hear. May He not have to offer the lament over us. Let us not only keep silence before the LORD...but hear Him as well.

A Prayer:

*Father in Heaven,
I ask You to quiet the noise of my life and soul.
Quiet it, not merely for the silence’s sake;
but that I might truly hear Your voice above the storm.
And when I have heard it,
grant me the faith to heed it.
Amen.*



—Justin Lillard

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