

## **GETTING THE SENSE:**

### On Reading Scripture Aloud to a Congregation

I am often asked to read the Scripture as part of the worship service. I love the Scriptures, and learn so much from being the conduit for its expression to a group gathered to worship. Sometimes the Scripture readings are all I need that day to concoct my own inner sermon, coming from the juxtaposition of the four passages designated.

People sometimes tell me that when I read they “get the sense of the words”. This phrase goes back to the story in Nehemiah of the return of the people of Israel from captivity in Babylon, where “all the people gathered together in the square before the Water Gate” to listen to a reading of the rediscovered Scriptures. In that case, the people stood “from early morning until midday, and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. . . So they read from the book from the law of God, with interpretation.” And then comes this telling line:

*“They gave the sense so that the people understood the reading.”*

That line is what interests me. How does one read in such a way that people get “the sense.”? This is the task of the reader.

To me, the first essential in preparing to read is to **see the passage as a whole**, see it in context, which implies familiarity with the Scriptures and being taught by God personally. Perhaps it takes a lifetime to absorb the larger context, so I am patient with the younger reader. There is no substitute for this preparation in discerning the sense of the Scripture, and it underlies the suggestions that follow.

However, there are two simple and basic practices that I think help a reader “give the sense”.

#### **Practice One: Project the voice.**

What helps me in this is to **breathe freely**. Stop before you start! Take a breath.

**Lift your head slightly** to be near the mike (and be sure it is turned on).

**Take a moment to feel the courage** to care that people pay attention to the reading. This will help you to use the volume level and enunciation necessary to be heard clearly.

Receive the **humility** that comes with standing there exposed like an “important person” —knowing you are only a conduit for God’s voice coming through you.

You have to **resist the temptation to fall into a cadence** of reading the words like a manual, with a tiresome rhythm of sameness, letting the ends of every sentence fall like a recitation in grade school. It means staying alive to every word.

### **Practice Two: Use pauses.**

More than anything else, pauses help listeners get the sense of the words. **Read a little more slowly** than usual, because of the size of the space and the audience.

Pauses help you **listen to the words**. The words begin to give you the sense, and that comes through you to those listening. You don’t have to “read expressively” like an actor, as that detracts. But you listen to the words as you speak them, and pausing helps this happen.

Paradoxically, pauses help you **regain equilibrium**, moving away from self-consciousness, embarrassment or unnecessary shyness.

You regain the grounding of your being, **producing the humility of being that conduit** for what God wants to say through the words you are reading aloud with courage.

When you finish, take a final breath, pause, and listen to what comes through in that final line: “The Word of the Lord.” It does not matter much *how* it is said; but leaving space in the timing may be helpful. I experience this phrase as a final prayer of gratitude to God, not as an authoritative word from me to the worshippers gathered.