

## INTRODUCTION

**M**aybe you're thinking about becoming a lector. Or you've been a lector for a while and wonder if you could delve deeper into your service in this ministry. Perhaps recently you listened, spellbound, as a particularly able reader made a familiar passage sound fresh and open for the first time. Or you heard someone race through the readings like they had a plane to catch, and thought: "I could do better than that!"

Most of us have a nagging fear of public performance. Reading aloud puts us back in the second grade, being called on to stand in the front of the room and read for the class. Just being visible to so many people feels conspicuous. Why put ourselves through that anxiety?

Demystifying the role helps to lessen the fear. Lectoring isn't an honor bestowed on the worthy, but a service offered to the community. Like any other role undertaken in the Sunday assembly—from soprano in the choir to active participant in the last pew—lectors give their gift for the sake of the gathering. Although it may feel like it's "all about you" when you're up there at the microphone, consider that

what you're doing is a service as vital and natural as the one performed by the person who vacuumed the church carpets on Saturday. This particular service assists the community at prayer to hear the word of God a little more clearly. But you don't have to be special to do it.

This book offers both spiritual and practical considerations about the service of the lector. New lectors will find helpful pointers, and long-time readers will find ways to reflect on their service they may not have considered. The material is arranged in short chapters followed by questions for personal reflection or group discussion and a prayer.

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# THE POWER OF WORDS

Most of us started reading as children, which makes the miracle of literacy seem commonplace. The magic of symbols on a page, revealing the thoughts of a civilization, escapes us. Magazines clutter coffee tables, as junk mail spills over counters. Books are found in every room. “Words, words, words,” Hamlet once sighed. They’re on cereal boxes, billboards, tee shirts, bumper stickers, and on our computers, tablets, and phones. Words are so omnipresent, we’re nearly indifferent to them.

We forget that, for most of history, the ability to read was limited to the privileged few. Those who could read and write had access to the collective knowledge of the ages. Everyone else relied on scribes and scholars to tell them what the law said, what the ancient wisdom advised, and what the stories of their ancestors described. Early lecturers, we could say, were powerful and valuable people in their communities.

Today, the public reader doesn’t normally possess a unique gift within the community. Almost anyone in the assembly can do what he or she does. In fact, we could dis-

pense with lectors, pass out the pertinent passages to the assembly, and ask those gathered to read it for themselves. Why not do it this way? Would it make a difference if we read the readings at home before we came to Mass, or sat silently and read them to ourselves during the Liturgy of the Word?

The difference between the written word and the spoken one becomes apparent as soon as we float the idea of dismissing the lectors. Both written and spoken words communicate, but each vehicle makes use of words differently. Written words stand alone and speak for themselves. They can seem invincible because they remain on the page whether you like them or not. This is why writing is such a powerful art, and why writers suffer oppression in lands where ideas are controlled. "The pen is mightier than the sword," the saying goes. Written words are hard to stop. You may imprison or even execute the writer, but the words go on and on.

### **The spoken word has a face**

Stronger than an army, longer-lived than Methuselah, the written word is an impenetrable force. It carries history and shapes the future with its wisdom and warning. The written word also holds the measure of our dreams and bears them down through generations.

Compare that power with the spoken word! Speaking is a finite endeavor, inhabiting a pinpoint of time. While written words can mask a writer in anonymity, a speaker steps out along with the words. The spoken word, like the person delivering it, is vulnerable. This word is now part message, part testimony. Marshall McLuhan said, "The medium is

the message.” The medium for a spoken word is the speaker.

A written word requires an idea coupled with language. A spoken word demands energy and charisma to put that idea across. It involves not only words, but the performance of words. We might say it is a word made flesh. And in the Christian tradition, we don’t take incarnate words lightly. Because Jesus is God’s-word-made-flesh for us, we know that a word is fully revealed when it takes on flesh. We can touch God better now that the divine word has a human face.

In a way, the mystery of incarnation is recreated twice in every liturgy: once in the consecration, but also in the proclamation of Scripture. In the proclamation, God’s word takes on flesh through the minister of the word: our lector.

Talk about holding a treasure in earthen vessels! The lector, even while struggling over the pronunciation of ancient Hebrew places and peoples, presents the human face of the divine word. As one lector put it, “I try to empty myself so I can be open to whatever God wants to communicate through me.” And in doing so, the whole assembly is invited to capture that word, to become a divine-word-made-flesh spoken into the world.

### **Giving voice to the word**

According to the record of Scripture, the word of God has long relied on human messengers. God chooses a person to give expression to the divine word. These messengers were called *nabi*, a Hebrew word meaning “mouthpiece of God.” We call them the prophets, from the Greek term *pro-phetes*: one who speaks on behalf of the gods.

We normally think of a prophet as someone who can predict the future. But biblical prophets were more invested

in interpreting the past and speaking directly to the present. They weren't concerned with fortune-telling, but with pointing out where things were headed if the nation remained on its present course.

The prophets didn't act on their own initiative or present their own agenda. They saw themselves as a delivery service. First, they listened. Then, they spoke.

And even prophets had performance issues. Moses protested to God that a speech impediment made him a poor messenger. Isaiah claimed he was unworthy for the job. Jeremiah said he was too young for such a responsibility. Amos made it clear he was just a shepherd.

Jonah has them all beat when it comes to trying to elude the task. Receiving the call to prophesy to the people of the north, Jonah gets into a boat and heads *south*, to escape the invitation. Clearly, God doesn't accept our imagined inadequacies and excuses. Unless you fancy a ride in a fish's belly, best to say yes the first time.

A lector I know admits: "I get shy. I get scared. Sometimes I hear my voice cracking. Then I remind myself: it's okay, it's not about me. It's about the word. I know I'm prepared because I've read the readings many, many times. Sometimes I've cried with them. And I know that the people hear what God needs for them to hear. Like the man who came up to me a few weeks ago and said, 'I really enjoy when you read, because when you do, I don't feel like sleeping.'" For a lector, that's success.

## **FOR YOUR REFLECTION**

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- ◆ *Name something you've read that moved or persuaded you at a deep level. Which stories from the Bible have a similar effect on you?*
- ◆ *The spoken word is part content, part personal testimony. What makes a testimony credible? What factors detract from a speaker's credibility?*
- ◆ *Think of a time you had to speak publicly about something important to you. How does the process of saying something in public change the speaker?*
- ◆ *Who are our modern prophets? How do we choose whom to listen to, among the many voices clamoring for our attention?*

## **WAYS TO RESPOND**

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- ◆ *Look around your home and make note of words you've chosen to live with. They may be on tee shirts, in frames, or attached to the fridge. What impact do these words have on you and others? What do they reveal about your values?*
- ◆ *Consider adding a Scripture passage to the words you regularly live with. It may be something that strikes you at Mass this week, or a quote you've long loved. Make it your computer wallpaper or fix it to a mirror at home.*

## **FOR YOUR PRAYER**

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*Gracious God, your love is revealed in your Word made flesh, Jesus Christ. Bless those whom you call to proclaim this word in the assembly. May we joyfully celebrate your presence among us this Sunday in our sacred story. Amen.*