

# Any Word from the Lord?

**A Sermon by Barbara Lundblad,  
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It was Advent season, but to students at Lehman College it was two weeks after midterms, the end of the first week of December. Friday, to be exact. And on the first Friday of every month, students gather in a classroom of Carmen Hall at noon for the P.T.L. Club (no connection with the television club of that name, but a similar theology). As a new and very parttime campus minister sent by the Lutherans, I had been invited to speak to the club that December day. I arrived early to make sure I would find the right room. The Advent wreath, waiting to be lit, sat on the front desk. (Sr. Madeline provided the only sign of the liturgical season.) On the blackboard, the club agenda marked out the hour: "Prayer/Praise/Message? Testimonies/Song/." While people were gathering, a group of students and staff came to me and asked if we could pray together before the meeting started. "Of course," I answered, ready for all of us to join hands . . . ready for the spontaneous whispers of "alleluia" and "thank you, Jesus" that droned a chorus beneath words prayed out loud. But they did not reach for my hand — instead, they circled my chair and laid their hands on my head. Then they prayed that the Lord would speak through me that noon hour at Lehman College, and we all said, "Amen."

Their prayer was larger than my expectations. Did they really expect the Lord to speak through me that day? (Did I share that prayer?) No one lays hands on my head on Sunday morning at Our Saviour's Atonement Lutheran Church in upper Manhattan. But do those who are there, nevertheless, expect to hear a word from the Lord? I have taken no surveys (except of my own heart), but I'd guess that many of us who write sermons each week are a bit reluctant to make such claims for our preaching.

Dare we invite such a laying on of hands and such prayers to be prayed over us? (Are we not the ones who hesitated in

the midst of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personal Inventory test when we came to the question: "True or False: I believe that I am an agent of God on earth"?) Yes, I believe that we dare invite such prayers — indeed, we must. Such a prayer is for more than the preacher, for something not quite equal to rhetorical skill. At its center, the students' prayer bids a meeting between God and people. Their words plead that God will speak as God has spoken before — through the word of a human person in the midst of other persons. Such a prayer breathes the faith that the same Spirit which brought forth the words of Scripture will again bring forth a word from the Lord.

"Let two or three prophets speak," said St. Paul, "and let the others weigh what is said" (1 Corinthians 14:29). To weigh, to discern (*diakrino*) — this is a gift that is given to the community, not primarily to the preacher. Without using the actual word, the students' prayer was a prayer for discernment, for the word of the Lord to be spoken and heard on that day. Such discernment must not be understood as the trickle-down theory of the Spirit's work: from God to the Bible to the preacher and finally to those who listen. Community and preacher are together under this spiritual gift; thus it is this communal discernment which must enter our preaching.

The hands which touch the head of the preacher hold stories of the people, stories discerning God's speaking in their lives. Luke Johnson defines discernment as "the attentive, alert hearing of human speech about God in the attempt to hear God's speech — the patterns of God's word." Such attentiveness is central to the preacher's task. We must hear not only the written words of Scripture, but also the being-written words — the text — of our community, our congregation. For me, this means that I must discern God's word *with* a congregation on Bennett Avenue and 189th Street in New York City. The stories of these people are touching my head . . .

*Arthur was dying . . . we sat together in his living room as he told me he no longer wanted to be on dialysis. We sat for a long time in silence. "Would you like me to read something?" I asked. "Psalm 23," he answered quickly, then just as quickly changed his mind. "No," he said, "read Psalm 22. That's what I read when I wake up in the middle of the night . . . just the first few verses . . ." A cry of hopelessness, forsakenness. A fragment of his*

*human life meeting a torn fragment of the psalmist's life. People's stories recognize God's incomplete speaking, absence as well as presence. Sometimes, preaching must do that.*

*The Bibles in Woolworth's on 181st and St. Nicholas are under a stack of colored file folders in the school supply section. It looks as though they have been there a very long time. Of course, most people don't go to Woolworth's to buy Bibles. Most people in my block aren't out buying Bibles anywhere. It's not that New York City is filled with wicked heathens . . . it's simply that Bibles are not at the top of their reading pile. There are many options here. There is permission in Manhattan to stay in bed on Sunday morning and admit atheism over brunch. On any Sunday morning here, there are people at worship who spend the rest of their week with no one who would claim to be a believer — not in their immediate family nor among their closest friends. Of course I had always known that the world was not like the seminary, but I have never shared their experience. I don't know that I had ever really heard the Lucan Pentecost texts about division in families before their stories touched me. They discern the foolishness of the cross in a way I never have. Sometimes preaching must pass on a depth of doubt (or faith) that the preacher has never personally known.*

*Last Sunday there were 52 people at worship. In congregations I have served before, that would have been a disaster: here, it is a cause for celebration! I make no claims for small congregations being closer to the early church — small congregations can be as faithless (or faithful) as large ones. But there is an unmistakable particularity about preaching to 52 people. There are empty spaces which tend to make each face appear more clearly: the widow whose husband died in the spring . . . the young mother who doubts most of what I say and most of what Scripture says yet comes every Sunday with her children . . . the musician who just moved to New York hoping to make it here . . . the older musician who has taken up computer training . . . the German man whose wife and son were killed in the war while he was working to bring them here. (I am certain that such life-stories can be told in every congregation . . . perhaps it is simply easier to pay attention when there aren't so many.) Each of these stories discerns God's speaking in different ways — it takes more than one Sunday's attentiveness on the part of the preacher.*

Perhaps it would be wise for those who preach to take a year off from combing books for good illustrations . . . to spend time instead in being intentionally attentive to the stories of our community. What word is God speaking in these stories? We who are pastors are invited into the inner circles of peoples' lives: the agony of dying, the joy of childbirth, the weariness of unfulfilling jobs, the emptiness of love grown stale. We need to be attentive to the gifts of discernment granted our people. What happens when the text of scripture meets these human texts within the community of faith?

It just might be that the prayer is answered . . . and we might dare to expect a word from the Lord.