

Lectionary Patterns and Strategies

1. “The use of ELCA approved lectionaries serves the unity of the Church, the hearing of the breadth of the Scriptures, and the evangelical meaning of the church year. The Revised Common Lectionary and the lectionaries in Lutheran Book of Worship make three readings and a psalm available for every Sunday and festival.” @ *The Use of the Means of Grace*, 7a.
 - a. Unity of the Church B On a given Sunday, the same Scripture is heard in the Church across time and throughout the world.
 - b. Hearing the breadth of the Scriptures B Topical preaching (deciding on a topic and then finding a text to address it) tends to limit the number of texts used. Studies show that pastors and congregations who select their own Scripture for worship hear and preach on less Scripture over time.
 - i. Obviously, the danger of exclusion continues because everything is not included in the lectionary. Any selection betrays its presuppositions and theological perspectives.
 - ii. The more diverse the committee, the more difficult the task and the better the results.
 - c. Evangelical Meaning of the Church Year B The liturgical year and the assigned readings from Scripture enables the Church to reflect upon different dimensions of God’s gift of salvation in the course of the year.
2. When congregational worship planning teams select the scripture texts for the worship services during a given period of time in advance of the services, they are developing their own lectionary.
 - a. An individual or a worship team selecting texts for a specific faith community tends to select texts that support its concerns, agenda, biases, and perspectives.
 - b. The issue, then, may not be about the lectionary but about ecclesiology. What is a congregation’s relationship to the whole church?
3. The Revised Common Lectionary is the work of the Consultation on Common Texts, an ecumenical consultation of liturgical scholars and denominational representatives from the United States and Canada who produce liturgical texts for use in common by North American Christian Churches.
 - a. <http://www.commontexts.org/>

- b. Gail Ramshaw's *A Three-Year Banquet* (Augsburg Fortress, 2004) explains how the Revised Common Lectionary was developed and how the gospels, the first readings and the epistles are assigned.
 - c. Fritz West's *Scripture and Memory: The Ecumenical Hermeneutic of the Three-Year Lectionary* (Liturgical Press, 1997) is also very helpful.
4. Patterns of the Revised Common Lectionary
- a. Strengthen the place of the Bible in Christian worship
 - i. Has three year rather than one year cycle
 - ii. Includes Old Testament, Psalm, Epistle, and Gospel for each Sunday and festival
 - b. Christ-Centered: Christians read the Bible, the Old Testament as well as the New, through the memory of our salvation, that is, through a Christian lens.
 - i. Then [Jesus] said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem." (Luke 24:43-47 NRSV)
 - ii. The Church draws out of Scripture an assemblage of texts that speak of or to God's salvation in Jesus Christ.
 - (1) These texts together form a corpus whose unity is to be found in the memory of our salvation.
 - (a) John 3:16 is the "canon within the canon."
 - (b) John 8:44-45 does not appear in the lectionary.
 - (2) While Scripture is the ultimate pool from which texts are drawn, the Church has historically remembered a fairly limited number of texts.
 - (3) Lectionary interprets the canon. Whereas Bible provides the rule of faith (canon), lectionary provides the proclamation of faith within the framework of the liturgical year.

iii. The precise content of a particular corpus of selections depends upon how the criterion for selection, the salvation of God in Christ, is understood.

c. Scripture Understood as Story or Narrative and not as Ancient Document.

i. Canonical Understanding (Document)

(1) Understands the lections read in worship to be the reading from a printed book and preaching to be the conversion of that book into speech.

(2) Sees God=s activity as a single event that spans all salvation history from creation to consummation.

(3) This single event provides the structure for the Christian Bible.

(4) Scripture held in the written memory of the Bible.

(5) Lectionaries suspect because they provide only limited information, only some and not all the Bible. This selectivity seen as obscuring the entire biblical memory or witness.

ii. Calendrical (Narrative)

(1) Understands the lections read in worship to be the reconversion of writing back into the oral proclamation from whence it came.

(2) Focus on Christ.

(3) Shape of the liturgical year; organized by feasts celebrating events in the life of Christ and the Church.

(a) First half of the year concentrates on Christ=s coming, from anticipated messiah to ascended Lord. Second half is the story of the Church from its birth at Pentecost to Christ=s second coming

(b) Lectionary provides the calendrical context for the Sunday celebration.

(4) Scripture held in the communal memory of the Church.

iii. Churches sharing the same Scripture use different narrative forms. Different traditions have different favorite Bible stories.

d. Lectionary operates on two time frames

- i. Synchronic - Unique to a given Sunday or feast. Set by the appointed Gospel for the day and supported by the readings chosen from the Old Testament and Epistles.
- ii. Diachronic - Extends across Sundays and feasts. In season after Pentecost, Gospel and Epistle readings are selected to move in semi-continuous fashion.
- iii. Two lectionaries in one based on the assumption that different churches give different weight to communal and written memory in their interpretation of Scripture.
- iv. Identical in the first half of the year, both for the seasonal cycles and the Sundays after Epiphany.
- v. Diverge in the second half of the liturgical year, on the Sundays after Pentecost.

(1) Included in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*.

(2) Two sets of readings are provided for the Old Testament.

- (a) One set supports the proclamation of the paschal mystery presented in the Gospel reading.
- (b) Second set consists of carefully crafted Old Testament Narratives extending over the entire twenty-five Sundays
 - (i) Year A - Israel from flood to entrance into promised land
 - (ii) Year B - Rise of Israelite kingship with selections from Wisdom literature
 - (iii) Year C - Old Testament prophets

5. Criticisms of the RCL

- a. The RCL does not include enough passages in which women have major and positive roles. In fact, there is a virtual absence of the memory of women in the church's calendar and liturgical tradition. The memory that the church bears is a patriarchal memory, both in its formation and in its content. Locating women's memory in Christian lectionary, liturgy, and preaching will yield a profound re-experiencing of the entire Christian tradition.

- b. The RCL tends to avoid passages that evoke difficulties and unpleasant reactions.
- c. There is undeniably an anti-Semitism built into the gospel telling of the events of Jesus' last days, especially at the hands of John the Evangelist. It is not "the crowd" or some of the people" or "those who collaborated with the Roman occupation" who are the villains; it is "the Jews." This has meant, over time, that Holy Week has been the season most productive of hate crimes against Jews. Christian anti-Semitism is part of our tradition, surely a part of which we can only be ashamed, but one that risks perpetuation through the passing on of words (and ritual actions) that escape critique. To remember must include remembering the dark side as well, with an eye to its vigorous amelioration. The anamnesis that is to shape and form us must be truth-telling.
- d. The Old Testament is neglected during the Easter season.

6. Assumptions for Preaching the Lectionary

- a. Scripture is proclaimed and not written. We are talking about an event in which Scripture is read publicly and not a text.
 - i. The voice of Christ is heard in the scripture proclaimed. In addition to Christ, the Prophet and the Apostle also speak.
 - (1) Evidenced in the ritual that surrounds these readings.
 - (2) "The Word of the Lord" "Praise to you, Oh Christ"
 - ii. Prayers of illumination before and after the reading often focus on understanding the text or book and not the presence of Christ.
 - (1) Books are printed and provided in worship to be proclaimed. They are the written expression for an oral reality intended for public proclamation in the community. Their language is spoken not silent, aural not visual, their memory is communal not individual, their interpretation is shared not localized.
- b. Scripture held to be true.
 - i. Affirms lection's normative status in and for the Church.
 - ii. These are passages that have given the Church insight in the past and to which it returns again and again.

- iii. Don't lead the congregation into the woods if you don't know the way out.
- c. Lection exhibits a plurality of meanings
- d. Existential "otherness" demands interpretation
 - i. Affirms the place of sound exegesis because these texts were written in another time and place.
 - ii. While written texts possess permanence, autonomy, and authority, spoken texts exhibit presence, power, and voice. These texts convey meaning not only through content but also through the way they are read.

7. Context

- a. Readings are removed from their literary context in Scripture and placed in the context of the liturgical year and the other pericopes read in worship.
 - i. The greater context of readings is not the books in which they are found but the Sundays, feasts, seasons, and segments of the liturgical year on which they are read.
 - ii. Immediate context is the worship life of the Church where they are related to the other readings, the liturgy of the day, and the assembly at prayer.
 - iii. While preachers need to know the historical and literary context of a passage in order to remain faithful to the biblical witness, preachers also need to decide what and how much of the passage's historical and literary context the congregation needs to be told and why.
- b. Strategy for Seasonal Sermon Preparation
 - i. Ponder - Do your prayerful meditation and exegetical work
 - ii. Order - Choosing what to preach on

Sunday	Hebrew Bible	Epistle	Gospel
Advent 1	>	>	>
Advent 2	▼	▼	▼
Advent 3	▼	▼	▼

- (1) Take a panoramic view of the texts in a season to find those continuities and relationships that give the season its unique flavor or

character.

- (2) Turning to the readings themselves, start by examining the Gospel, but do this in light of the other readings assigned (particularly the Old Testament) to lift up a particular aspect of the Gospel reading.
- (3) Look at the liturgy to see if it provides a particular orientation for the sermon.

iii. Create:

- (1) Craft sermons that go with (or at least acknowledge) the grain of the lection's memories.
- (2) Allow both the authority and the way the sermon is crafted to flow from the features of the scripture proclaimed in context.
- (3) Strike a balance between the service for which the Church enlists the text and the freedom of the text to address the Church.

8. Guidelines for not using the Lectionary

- a. A respect for the memories that have shaped the Church's use of this text
- b. When departing from a lectionary, do so boldly. Claim the responsibility of the office of preacher for selecting the text.
- c. Decide
 - i. How many readings will be read in worship?
 - ii. What purpose these readings will serve
 - iii. How these readings will relate to one another and what that relationship will signify
 - iv. How will the occasion impact these readings?
 - v. How will the literary or theological unity of the Bible be upheld?
- d. Does the decision exhibit theological integrity, ecclesial accountability, and pastoral sensitivity?

