

## Protagonist Corner

*A Word for the Fashion Conscious  
or  
The Limits of the Lectionary*

William H. Todd, Jr.  
First Presbyterian Church, Dalton, Georgia

Theology and the practice of ministry, like all human endeavors, can easily become slaves to fashion. One example of current *haute couture* in the church is the use of the lectionary in preaching, especially in denominations and traditions where Epiphany was scarcely whispered, let alone preached, two decades ago. The recent interest in liturgical renewal has helped to bring the lectionary into use among the so-called nonliturgical traditions. Teachers of homiletics, with the strong support of seminary communities, have schooled their students in preaching from the lectionary, primarily as a way of avoiding too frequent use of their favorite passages and as a means of giving congregations the opportunity to hear preaching from the whole of the scriptures.

There is much to be said for use of the lectionary as a source of preaching texts and themes. It assures a systematic survey of the gospels with an emphasis on the life and ministry of Jesus. This in turn highlights the movement of the church year in the minds of the members of the congregation. The lectionary also encourages the preacher to address some of the more difficult texts which might otherwise be avoided—although this is still possible. The use of passages from the Old Testament, gospel, and epistle demonstrate the unity of the scripture. And, of course, there is some protection for the congregation from the whims of the preacher. There is also some protection for the preacher from the tyranny of having to choose a text and sermon title in time to get the bulletin typed.

I wonder, however, if we have now reached a point where following the lectionary has not only become the fashion, but one slavishly followed as a mark of honor. There is nothing wrong with being fashionable. But there are limits to fashion, and there are also limitations in the exclusive use of the lectionary in the choice of texts and themes for preaching.

First, most preaching from the lectionary seems to come almost exclusively from the gospels. I cannot validate this assertion with the results of a survey of Sunday bulletins. However, I do know from the experience of a lectionary study group that I participate in, and from conversations on preaching with other ministers, that this seems to be the case. If you are a lectionary preacher, check yourself with a short survey of your own sermons for the last year. Do the gospel texts predominate?

Obviously, there are two reasons for this. The church year is built on the life and ministry of Jesus, and, therefore, it is natural to emphasize this by focusing on the gospel passages. At the same time, the current use of the

narrative in preaching—"my story," "your story," "their story,"—is much easier to pursue using the events and people of the gospels than are texts from Deuteronomy, Micah, or many of the epistles. Turning I Corinthians 1:18ff into a narrative is not easy for most of us.

A second limitation in the exclusive use of the lectionary is the effect it has on preaching from the Old Testament. The use of the lectionary makes systematic preaching from the Old Testament almost impossible. The great narratives of Genesis, for example, are scattered over the course of the three-year cycle with no sequence or connection, and, therefore, very little opportunity to see the themes of Genesis building on one another. The same thing is true of other Old Testament books as well. The lectionary is primarily a means of systematic preaching from the New Testament.

Further, use of the lectionary makes systematic preaching of the great themes and doctrines of the Christian faith more difficult. To address through a series, or in sequence, the great themes of creation, judgment, or redemption, or to deal with election, justification, and sanctification is almost impossible by use of the lectionary exclusively. It might be that theological and doctrinal preaching is dormant anyway. However, it cannot be encouraged as long as texts that would support a series on the great themes of the faith are scattered throughout the three-year cycle.

The use of the lectionary can also discourage a sense of freedom in choosing texts and subjects that might be called for by events in the congregation, the community, or the world. Oftentimes, a pastoral situation, a community crisis, or the state of the world itself require the preacher to address a problem, a need, or a situation that might have nothing to do with any of the three texts that the lectionary lists for that week. The danger is that the preacher will resort to a little isogenesis in order to stretch his text over the situation that concerns it.

Having pointed to some limitations in the exclusive use of the lectionary as a source of text for preaching, I am quick to say that I am not suggesting that it be abandoned altogether. The lectionary is a useful starting point for the consideration of passages or themes, whether for a particular Sunday or for a season of the year. But it should only be that—a starting point that leads the preacher to further consideration of the broad range of possible texts, passages, themes, or doctrines.

Preparation for preaching in Advent offers a brief example of what I am suggesting. The gospel passages for the first Sunday of Advent in all three years are roughly parallel and deal with the theme of watchfulness and the signs of parousia. The passages for the second Sunday in all three years are also roughly parallel and deal with the appearance of John the Baptist. These passages do offer substantial material for preaching and preparation for Advent. However, there are other themes that are not suggested by any of these passages from the gospels, or by the passages from Isaiah from which most of the Old Testament texts for the four Sundays of Advent are drawn.

The preacher might want to choose, for example, to preach in the first Sunday of Advent on the great theme of creation, emphasizing the power of God the creator, which can set the tone for further sermons on sin, judgment,

and our redemption by that same God. Too often we skip merrily into Advent as though it were a brightly lit K-Mart, forgetting that without our seeing and acknowledging the darkness of the night, the coming of the light loses its meaning.

Again, the theme of election, both the election of Israel, and God's subsequent claim upon us in Jesus Christ, is also an appropriate subject for Advent preaching, but one that does not really suggest itself in the lectionary texts for those Sundays.

If, therefore, the lectionary is used as a starting point for choosing texts or themes, then the freedom of the pulpit is preserved. But even more, a broader range of themes and subjects are available for the one who is preparing for the all-important task of preaching the word.