

PLANNING YOUR PREACHING: A LOOK AT THE LECTIONARY

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One thing about Sunday is that it just keeps coming. No matter how good last Sunday's sermon was, you are faced again with the prospect of working up yet another. Last summer's planning helps a little. At least we have a few ideas or directions we can go. But even then, we find ourselves frantically searching for passages to support those ideas; and then, illustrations to support the ideas that may or may not come from the passages. And so it goes. Week in, week out, the same story.

Then a friend, a colleague, or a friend of a colleague mentions something called the lectionary. We wonder if, perhaps, this will be the answer to all our homiletical problems. We wonder what it is and how to use it. The purpose of this article is to talk about both: first, what the lectionary is, how it is put together, some strengths and weaknesses; and second, a possible approach to using it.

I

The Nature of the Lectionary

What exactly is the lectionary? Two answers emerge--one theological, the other practical. Theologically, the lectionary is a gift of the church by the church to help the church proclaim the gospel. If we do not see it first in this way, we begin at the wrong starting point. The lectionary belongs to a long ecclesiastical tradition that has been tested, revised, and proven over many centuries. At the same time, it is part of the church's ongoing life. Why has the church given itself such a present? The church throughout its history has seen the need for an orderly presentation of the gospel. The lectionary is an answer to that need. The practical answer to our question is that the lectionary comprises a selection of readings from Scripture--one Old Testament, one New Testament, one Epistle--for every Sunday across a three year period.

Speaking of the lectionary presumes that there is only one. This is simply not true, although there has been more uniformity in the last ten years. Prior to Vatican II, there were fifty-nine different lectionary systems in use among the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, and Reformed Churches. Most have yielded to the Ordo Lectionum Missae, a new three year lectionary constructed by the Roman Catholic Church and completed in 1969. Most new lectionaries in different denominations follow the pattern of this one with some minor variations.(1). The Presbyterian version can be found in the Worshipbook, pp. 167-175; the United Methodist version is located in Word and Table, pp. 50-57. The advantage of the latter is the addition of selections from the Psalter for each Sunday.

If followed faithfully, the lectionary offers congregations reading and preaching from most of the New Testament and much of the Old Testament in a three year period. "It provides, in short, a systematic inventory of the corporate memories of the people of God."(2) This emphasis on an organized dissemination of the gospel struck home to one United Methodist minister who was attending a conference where I had been lecturing on the lectionary. He told me that he had

worked at the Pentagon for several years before becoming a minister; and said that if his department in organizational development had been given the task of spreading the gospel throughout the world in the best possible way, they could not have come up with anything better than the lectionary! I was not sure whether I was for it or not after hearing that endorsement. But the fact remains, the lectionary is designed to bring the gospel to the people.

There are four controlling elements that influence the way the lectionary is put together: the gospels, the church year, various theological themes, and finally, the human or political element. First of all, the gospels are one key to understanding the lectionary. Each year--A, B, or C--is guided by one of the four gospels. The synoptics--Matthew, Mark, and Luke--each have a year; but all three are supplemented by John. So the preacher is not hopping from passage to passage but is able to develop continuity in his/her preaching. In addition, the gospels are often the passages chosen first; the others follow suit.

If the gospels determine the choice of the Old Testament and Epistle lessons, the church year determines the gospel selections. For many people, Christmas and Easter comprise the church year. In the early church, it was only Easter--Pascha. But the church has learned over the centuries that it gets its identity by celebrating the seasons of the liturgical year. It is important to remember that the church year is not a fabrication created by some church bureaucracy. It has grown out of the life-blood experience of the people of God trying to remember and comprehend the life of Christ as they have moved through the seasons of their own lives. As the church is aware of the seasons in our individual lives--birth, marriage, parenthood, death--it is also aware of the seasons in its life with God, the history of God's redemptive work for humankind. Israel was always sensitive to this memory of God's saving acts in the world. No wonder they celebrated (and still do) the Passover every year. Here, they remembered God's saving acts in the world, not only in the past, but in the present and the future. By choosing gospel passages that mirror the church year, our scripture reading and preaching stir the memories of the people of God. But we must always do so remembering that the church year only points to Christ. We preach not ourselves, nor the church year, but Christ crucified and risen.

Also dictated somewhat by the church year are various theological themes that undergird the lectionary. Most lectionaries are primarily christological; but they are also trinitarian, some more explicitly than others. For example, in the Presbyterian lectionary published in 1964, we find a distinctively trinitarian lectionary. The season of God the Son extends from the first Sunday in Advent to the Sunday after Ascension. The season of God the Holy Spirit extends from Pentecost Sunday to the 19th Sunday after Pentecost. Then follows the seven Sunday season of God the Father. Here, specific theological themes of the Trinity govern the selection of passages.

The fourth element that governs the way a lectionary is put together is the human element. This element is often overlooked--the fact that people got together, met, argued, looked up passages, and fought over which ones to include and which ones to pass over. In all joint affairs of this sort, there are bound to be political battles that can at times outweigh theological criteria. Just as in confessions of faith, the human element is real. I say this not to degrade the lectionaries we have, but to present a fact of life. They are not infallible; they are not to be treated as a sacred unit.

II

Advantages and Disadvantages

Now that we have examined what the lectionary is, the obvious question is who needs it anyway? The answer to this question will come in part through our cursory perusal of advantages and disadvantages. Some see the lectionary as the panacea to all our homiletical and liturgical problems. But the lectionary is not perfect. Before considering the imperfections, let us first look at some of the advantages.

First, the lectionary as presently proposed is one of the most ecumenical events in the history of the church. Presbyterians may not agree with others on the way salvation occurs, on approaches to worship, to preaching and the sacraments; but if we all use the lectionary faithfully, our congregations will hear the same lessons read and preached every Sunday morning. Imagine that! As the lectionary gains more support across the country, you can go from church to church and know that there is some continuity in our worship. It is rather amazing when you think about it--the whole church moving together, Sunday after Sunday, through the gospel in a unified, systematic way.

Second, the lectionary prevents too much subjectivity in the selection of scripture for preaching. The preacher cannot ride hobby-horses every week. He or she cannot preach pet peeves or the latest movie or book. Neither can a minister constantly undertake to preach straight through a book of the Bible. When I began preaching, I noticed that I was stuck in Matthew to the exclusion of other books. At that point, I decided my congregation needed to hear more of the Bible.

This brings us to the third advantage. The lectionary offers the preacher a systematic approach to Scripture--not hop-skotchng around like some fool with a run-away pogo stick. This was my problem. Once I got dislodged from Matthew, I was in Habakkuk one week and Revelation the next. There was no system to my hopping. Now, some preachers hop very well through the Bible. But most good selection of scripture takes hard work and careful planning. Not all of us can do it well every Sunday.

The fourth advantage to the lectionary is that it helps us deal with passages that have no leaping power. We all know about leaping power. There are some passages where the sermon practically leaps from the page, and we can hardly get it down fast enough. In fact, many of us operate in this way in our selection of scripture for the Sunday morning sermon. We root around, ferreting through Scripture until we find a sermon that leaps from the page.

When we use a lectionary, this blessed event seldom occurs; and that is actually an advantage. Why? Because we as preachers grow the most when we preach on passages that seem dead as a doornail at first sight. As a result of our wrestling and growing, we often preach our best sermons from these passages. The reason is simple. We bring almost nothing to them. We cannot imagine how they could ever be preached. I run into these all the time and wonder how the sermon will ever make it into the pulpit. But that is the exciting thing about the lectionary. You as a preacher, in your exegesis and your sermon preparation, are on as much a road to discovery as your congregation is on Sunday morning. In this way, the preacher grows biblically and theologically right along with the congregation. In the same way, this sustained practice of Bible study, with a sincere openness to what may come, contributes in large measure to the improvement of the devotional life of the minister. And that affects preaching as much as anything else.

Another advantage to the lectionary is that it helps us as preachers take the

Bible more seriously and encourages our congregations to take it more seriously. In an age of biblical illiteracy, this should not be overlooked. One of the objects of good biblical preaching is to help people see their own stories in the light of the story--the biblical story of God dealing with creation, of salvation through Jesus Christ. By preaching the Bible more and from more varying parts, we can also use biblical characters and stories as illustrations to reinforce our points. Sooner or later, congregations will catch on when we mention in a phrase "Jonah, who took a slow boat to Ninevah;" or "Paul, who set out as a hatchet man for the Phariasees, but came back a fool for Christ."

Finally, because there is consistency in the lectionaries across denominational lines, preachers can get together to study passages and share sermon ideas. This is already being done all over the United States. I know pastors who assemble for breakfast every Thursday morning. Some switch around meeting at different churches. We can learn a lot from each other; and the fellowship is hard to beat. All made possible because of a common lectionary.

If I were a good salesman, I would stop here. But I am not trying to sell you on the lectionary. Obviously, it is far from perfect. A look at some of the problems will make that even clearer.

First, the use of the lectionary does not allow for pastoral input. Doesn't the preacher know what passage needs to be preached to his congregation? How many pastoral calls has the lectionary made? How many broken lives has it pieced back together? The preacher may not follow the church year, but at least he or she knows where the people are. Preaching from the lectionary could cramp one's style and inhibit the real pastoral work one is trying to do. This is a point well taken. But as a corrective, I only cite testimony of those who believe that their pastoral work from the pulpit has actually been enriched by being forced to make certain passages "come alive" in the context of their people's hurts and longings.

The second disadvantage is not unrelated. Slavish use of the lectionary inhibits the treatment of important social or theological issues that congregations wrestle with from time to time. This is not a major problem. Any preacher in his or her right mind would not try to tackle a major social problem or theological issue from the pulpit every Sunday. For one thing, to be done responsibly, the homework alone would be astronomical. For another, sooner or later, you would run out of topics. Besides, there is no rule that says once you begin the lectionary you are bound to use it every week.

The third problem has to do with the omission of some books of the Bible. In the Worshipbook lectionary, these books are completely missing: Judges, Ruth, Ezra, Esther, Obadiah, Nahum, Haggai, and the Psalms. Now you may want to preach from good ole' Haggai sometime, or Ruth, or maybe Judges. If you follow the lectionary in three years, you would miss them completely. Can you guess which Old Testament book is used the most? Isaiah--with more than three times more appearances than the next closest book--Deuteronomy. That's fifty-seven as compared to fourteen. Of course, there is a reason for all this. Most of the books missing or seldom used are from the writings, not the Pentateuch or the prophets. The modern lectionary gets its signals here from the Jewish lectionary which rarely employed the writings. We still have the problem of books completely left out. All I can say is that when you want to preach from one of them, do it. Don't feel bound by the lectionary.

Two more problems. One is that on occasion the pericopes or passages appear to be divided in odd ways. Some seem too long, some too short. If so, you as

interpreter of the Word have the right to shorten or lengthen them responsibly so that they make more sense. The other problem has to do with the fact that there seem (on some Sundays) to be no connection at all among the three readings. This does happen. In this case, you have to make a choice.

The first step, after having prayed for God's guidance, is to see whether there is any connection among the passages. If there is, as in the ninth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A (II Sam. 7:18-22; Romans 8:26-27; Mt. 13:24-43--a "future" orientation), then go with it and see where it takes you. If the connection is unclear, as in the sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B (Lamentations 3:22-23; II Cor. 8:1-9, 13-15; Mark 5:21-43), then pick one passage and stick with it. Avoid making the Marcionite move by preaching only from the New Testament. But also avoid making the synagogue move by preaching only from the Old Testament and leaving it at that as if you were a rabbi and not a Christian preacher.

III

From Lectionary to Sermon

Once you have decided on a passage, let it work on your imagination. See what makes it tick. How does it break down structurally? Where are the shifts in thought? What kind of ideas does the form of the passage give you? What possible illustrative material? Write whatever comes to your mind as quickly as you can. This should be a very fertile time in your sermon preparation. You are already making some moves to the contemporary. For example, in Gen. 45:3-11, 21-28, I see immediately the prodigal son story in reverse. I see Jacob bounding out of the geriatrics home when he gets the news about Joseph. I see homecomings and family reunions, like Jacob and Esau, Moses and Pharoah, Jesus at Nazareth. I think of how much more the Bible does with families than TV did with the Waltons. These thoughts may or may not make their way into the sermon. But at least they allow me to understand the context and tone of the passage at more than an intellectual level.

Then, homework with the biblical language (maybe studying only a few words or a sentence) and in the commentaries is in order. The purpose of this exercise is two-fold: (1) to make sure our creative thinking is on target and (2) to see whether there is more in the passage that can release imagination on levels we have not yet seen. From here, the structure of the sermon begins to emerge, and the writing follows, sometimes painfully, sometimes naturally.

The exciting thing about working with the lectionary is the road to discovering what is unique about a certain passage or set of passages. It is a new experience every week. Preaching from the lectionary, then, involves taking your congregation with you on that road to discovery. You grow, and the congregation grows with you.

(1) For more detailed discussion of the history of lectionaries and other matters concerning the new lectionary, see Interpretation, vol. XXXI, April, 1977.

(2) James F. White, A Lectionary (Princeton: Consultation on Church Union, 1974), p. 7.