

Preaching in Ordinary Time

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“Ordinary” comes from the word “ordinal” and means “counted” or “numbered.” The numbering of Sundays in Ordinary Time is evident in the Revised Common Lectionary listing of lections. The Sundays between Epiphany and Ash Wednesday are numbered as the “Sundays after Epiphany”: first, second, third, etc. The Sundays after Pentecost continue that numerical sequence.¹ Note that in this counting, the emphasis falls on “Sunday.” That emphasis is a reminder that at the heart of Christian worship is the central observance of the Lord’s Day. The Sundays that fall outside of the Advent and Christmas (incarnational) and Lent and Easter (paschal) cycles are not understood as a liturgical season, in the same way that Easter and Christmas are seasons, but receive their liturgical importance from their regular, indeed numbered, celebration of the Lord’s Day. Sunday after Sunday, the focus is not on the reenactment of the particular stories of the incarnational and paschal mysteries, but on the many facets of the Christian story as known through Scripture and the worship and mission life of the church. The Sundays of Ordinary Time do for each week what the liturgical seasons of Advent/Christmas and Lent/Easter/Pentecost do for the year—they make the counting of time sacred. Even the succession of “ordinary” weeks in Ordinary Time is counted in relationship to worship.

The New Handbook of the Christian Year helpfully articulates the liturgical and theological significance of the Sundays of Ordinary Time: “The preeminence of the Lord’s Day indicates the presence of the risen Christ in all our experience. The resurrection punctuates our perception of time by its commemoration once every seven days, regardless of what else may be occurring in the church calendar or in our own lives.”² As crucial as the story narrated and enacted in the two central cycles is to Christian life and faith, the weekly celebration of the Lord’s Day remains the defining liturgical moment. This means that “ordinary time” is not liturgical “down time” for the church, but is a time when the church regularly reaffirms that God defines all time and all moments of Christian life.

Text Selection in Ordinary Time

In incarnational and paschal cycles, the readings are chosen according to the principle of selected reading (“*lectio selecta*”). The selection of lessons is governed by the time in the liturgical season: the Gospel lesson established the theme for the Sunday, and the other lessons are selected in relationship to the Gospel text. In Ordinary Time, a different principle of text selection is at work: in Ordinary Time, the lessons are chosen according to a pattern of semi-continuous reading. This principle of text selection, like *lectio selecta*, has its origins in an ancient liturgical practice, the continuous reading (“*lectio continuo*”) of the synagogue and early church. In ancient synagogue worship, the Torah was read continuously in worship as part of the lectionary cycle: on each consecutive Sabbath, a portion of the Torah was read, each week’s passage following in sequence from the passage that was read the week before. This pattern of continuous reading was carried from the synagogue into the early church.

One can find evidence of this pattern of continuous reading in the sermons of the early church. Most of the sermon collections that are extant from the third and fourth centuries are in the form of sequential readings of biblical books, and indeed, most of the early commentaries began as series of homilies on biblical books. The sermons of Origen and Chrysostom on the Gospel of John provide good examples of sequential, continuous reading. These sermons take their content and their form by following the biblical book, verse by verse, Sunday by Sunday. Chrysostom, for example, refers to reading Scripture “portion by portion” (Homily 9, John 1:9) and speaks explicitly of “the continual reading of the Holy Scriptures” (Homily 11, John 1:14).

The primary purpose of continuous reading of Scripture in worship and as a basis for preaching was largely catechetical—to instruct a worshipping community in the particulars of Scripture and to increase familiarity with Scripture.³ The scriptural story was the primary lens for worship in these services. A passage from one of Augustine’s sermons describes the place of selected and continuous reading in worship:

You remember, holy brethren, that the Gospel according to John, read in orderly course of lessons, is the subject on which we usually discourse: but because of the now intervening solemnity of the holy days, on which there must be certain lessons recited in the Church, which so come every year that they cannot be other than they are: the order which we had undertaken is of necessity for a little while intermitted, not wholly omitted. (Prologue to the *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*)

Recognizing the difference between the principle and practice of selected reading and of continuous (or semi-continuous) reading is pivotal for understanding Ordinary Time. In the incarnational and paschal cycles, the Christ story determines how the lectionary is constructed, as texts are selected to proclaim the stories of Advent, birth, and the paschal mystery. By contrast, in Ordinary Time, reading through the biblical books assigned provides the structure for the season. The three lectionary years (A, B, and C) are built around a semi-continuous reading of the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Year A; Mark, Year B; Luke, Year C).

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What difference does this pattern of text selection make to the preacher? For the majority of the Sundays of Ordinary Time, the preacher is presented with three semi-continuous readings—Old Testament, epistle, gospel—that are not interconnected. The three distinct semi-continuous cycles mean that for the majority of Sundays of Ordinary Time, the lessons do not go together and usually should not be preached together. The Old Testament, epistle, and gospel provide three different perspectives on the story and life of faith. This distinction between lectionary cycles and seasons is often ignored in lectionary aids, so that the preacher is left confused about whether or not to coordinate the lessons in Ordinary Time.

The semi-continuous reading pattern creates opportunities for congregational exposure to a wider range of biblical texts than is possible in the incarnational and paschal cycles. In Ordinary Time, the preacher can place before his or her worshipping congregation large sections of the stories of the Hebrew Bible, as well as continuous readings from the synoptic gospels in narrative/chronological order. The Sundays of

Ordinary Time also provide one of the few opportunities for a congregation to hear continuous readings from Pauline or other epistolary material (Year A, Romans, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians; Year B, 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, James, and Hebrews; Year C, Galatians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Timothy, 2 Thessalonians). The breadth and diversity of Scripture move to the center of homiletical interests.

In the Sundays of Ordinary Time, the biblical texts themselves provide the main context for preaching, not the liturgical year. If in Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter the liturgical calendar is the shaping context for lesson selection, in Ordinary Time something closer to a canonical context shapes lesson selection.⁴ There is no overarching story such as Advent or Lent with which the lessons are placed into conversation. Rather, in the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), Ordinary Time is the “season” in which the congregation can place its life in the flow of the biblical stories and experience the intersections of the biblical texts and world with the contemporary world.

Preaching Strategies for Ordinary Time

1. Independent Lessons. When all three sequences of lessons are studied, the rich array of texts at the preacher’s disposal becomes apparent. What the preacher actually has in Ordinary Time is three independent sequences of texts from which to build his or her preaching ministry. The independence of the lessons is the key to any preaching strategy for Ordinary Time.

It can require considerable discipline to resist the urge to find a theme that connects one or more of the lessons during ordinary time, especially for the lectionary preacher who is used to looking for and finding connections in the other seasons of the year. Because of the independence of the appointed lessons, Ordinary Time provides the opportunity to tell the story of faith in much broader and diverse perspectives than is the case at other times in the liturgical year. To look for the one thread that unites the lessons in Ordinary Time is to undercut this diversity, because one ends up manufacturing themes that distort all the lessons. Each of these stories has something to offer the worshipping community, but that offer will only be heard if each lesson is allowed to speak in its own voice and not forced into a conversation with the other lessons assigned for the day.

In essence, the RCL provides the preacher with three distinct cycles of texts. Since the preacher will not be able to preach all of the lessons provided in Ordinary Time in any single year, the RCL can be seen as providing the preacher with a nine-year cycle of texts.⁵ To think of the lessons as containing enough texts for a nine-year cycle helps to illustrate the richness of biblical resources that the RCL makes available to the preacher and through him or her, to the worshipping congregation.

2. Lessons in Sequence. A synonym for Ordinary Time is counted time. This means, as we noted earlier, that the major organizing principle for Ordinary Time is simply the regular succession of Sundays. Week after week passes in the community’s life, punctuated by the regular weekly celebration of the Lord’s Day. The passing of time—and the record of the passing of time (e.g., each week the church bulletin records where in the count of Ordinary Time the community stands)—is the character of this season. In this way, ordinary as “counted” is also synonymous with ordinary as “commonplace,” because there is nothing special about the passing of time. Rather, the weeks of Ordinary Time enable the community to count the regular movement of

its life with God and with one another in the world.

The semi-continuous reading practice of Ordinary Time communicates this regular passing of time—the lessons move in an orderly fashion through the biblical books appointed for this time of year. The preacher needs to select lessons for preaching in a way that communicates this regular, continuous movement of time. That means it does not make sense for the preacher to jump weekly from lesson to lesson—that is, preach a lesson from 1 Samuel one week, a lesson from 2 Corinthians the next, Mark the week after that. To follow such a pattern will not help a congregation increase their biblical fluency, because they will hear a series of unrelated sermons. Instead, the congregation is best served if the preacher follows the arc of the lessons to construct his or her sermons on a semi-continuous pattern. For Year B, for example, the preacher could begin the Sundays after Pentecost with a series of sermons on David, using the lessons from 1 and 2 Samuel; then turn to a series of sermons on Mark; then to a series of sermons on James; a series on Ruth, etc. If the preacher constructs sermons for Ordinary Time in this way, he or she will provide the congregation with enough readings in succession from a particular book that the congregation will begin to hear the theological particulars of that biblical witness.

3. Discovery of the Breadth and Diversity of the Biblical Material. To undertake to explore coherent lesson blocks in the sermon will also move the preacher away from preaching only texts with which he or she is already familiar, which in most instances translates into the fallback position of preaching the gospel lesson every week.⁶ To preach only lessons from the synoptic gospels communicates that the only part of the Bible that is necessary for Christian life and faith is stories about Jesus, even though the breadth and depth of the canon witnesses otherwise. While the preacher may not consciously intend to communicate this, such a narrowing of the biblical conversation is the effect of nurturing a congregation's faith and witness only with gospel lessons. The preacher's own spiritual nurture suffers as well, because he or she misses the opportunity to explore the breadth of the biblical witness and discover afresh the dynamism of the Christian faith.

At the heart of the Christian faith is the proclamation that for the Christian community, God is known decisively in Jesus Christ, but the early Christians were able to recognize God in Christ because of what they already knew and had experienced of God through the stories of God in the Hebrew Scriptures. The books of the Old Testament cover the sweep of history in the way that the New Testament, recording the faithful witness of just a few decades of religious life, cannot. The Old Testament enables the worshipping community to engage the stories of real communities who tried to live faithfully within the realities of domestic and political life. The Old Testament contains examples of people who both succeed and fail in their efforts to live in right relationship with God and with one another, and to proclaim the presence and good news of God in all those struggles is to come closer to the ways that contemporary peoples struggle to be at one with God's hopes for the world.

Perhaps most importantly, when the preacher neglects the Old Testament as a resource for preaching, he or she severely limits the ways in which God can be known and will be present for the worshipping community. Paul articulates this powerfully when he speaks of the continuum between the God of Abraham and the God who is revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The God in whom Abraham believed is the God "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist"

(Romans 4:17). Paul and other early Christians were able to speak powerfully about the revelation of God in Jesus because their Scriptures had already revealed to them the life-giving powers of God. In the creation stories, the stories of barren women giving birth, the exodus journey from slavery to freedom, the journey from exile to restoration—all of these stories testified to God's power of life over death. The resurrection belongs to this deep and rich story of God and God's will and hope for God's creation. A congregation's experience of God and of God's place in their lives and their world needs to be sustained and formed by the proclamation of the Old Testament.

A church's experience of the preached Word of God also is limited when the epistolary literature is not a regular part of preaching. Given the proportion of sermons that are preached on the gospel lessons, one would think that the gospels are the dominant literary form in the New Testament, but of course they are not. There are four canonical gospels compared to twenty-one epistles, and to omit the epistles from preaching is to limit the picture of Christian proclamation and witness. Not only do epistles testify to the ways and places in which Christianity spread in the first century, but perhaps more important for contemporary communities of faith, they provide glimpses into the particularities of how early Christian communities tried to define the new life and faith to which they were called. The epistles witness to very pragmatic struggles of these early communities—how do we order worship, how do we define community membership, what behaviors are detrimental to community life—as well as to the theological questions that animated and resolved these struggles. The epistles remind us that part of Christian faith is to ask about the stuff of religious life—e.g., what is reconciliation, what is hope, what is faith? Early Christians and their leaders thought and talked intensely and with great seriousness about the meaning of their faith. To include the epistles as a regular part of the preaching and worship life of a congregation creates new possibilities for similar conversations in contemporary communities.

To preach from the epistles also challenges a preacher to stretch his or her own preaching style. Preachers tend to gravitate toward the stories of the Bible as the mainstay of preaching, and to preach non-narrative texts like Paul (and the Old Testament prophets and wisdom literature) creates opportunities for the preacher to try new ways to proclaim the good news of God. Not all of life can be captured in stories, and the situational immediacy and theological directness of Paul can model new pastoral and homiletical directions.⁷

To Preach or Not to Preach: Leaving the Lectionary in Ordinary Time

Even though the three years of lessons for Ordinary Time cover a vast amount of Scripture, they do not do justice to the full range and diversity of biblical texts. The major narrative cycles of the Old Testament lessons in Year A (Pentateuch) and Year B (1 and 2 Samuel), for example, tend to focus on the “great men” of those cycles (Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David) and not on the fullness of the stories in which those men are embedded. In all three years of the lectionary, only one lesson from Leviticus appears (Lev 19:1-2, 9-18), and only a sampling of texts from Numbers and Deuteronomy. Joshua and Judges are almost invisible in the lectionary, and there are no texts from the Chronicler's version of the David story. The prophets are heavily weighted toward Isaiah and Jeremiah. For the New Testament, Acts is represented

only in the seven Sundays of Easter, and the only texts from Revelation are those that depict scenes of heavenly worship or celebrate the New Jerusalem. The heart of that important book is completely absent from the lectionary.

If the preacher takes seriously that Ordinary Time provides the opportunity to present his or her congregation with the breadth and depth of the biblical witness, then that very commitment can guide the preacher in varying some of the lessons prescribed by the RCL. Since the lectionary cycles repeat every three years, the regular lectionary preacher can use this repetition to insert even more texts into a congregation's repertoire. If a preacher preached a sermon series on David one year, when Year B comes around again he or she could either read and preach on 1 and 2 Samuel texts that are excluded from the lectionary, or read and preach on Chronicles or Ezra-Nehemiah. The guiding principle should be the same as that which structures Ordinary Time—not to jump from text to text but to provide enough of a particular body of literature that the congregation can begin to get a sense of its theological voice and perspective.

Since the lessons in Ordinary Time lend themselves so naturally to sermon series, the preacher does not need to leave the lectionary if he or she wants to preach a series. If, however, the preacher wants to preach a series that is more thematically than textually based, he or she can still be guided by the goals of Ordinary Time in selecting texts for such a series. That is, Ordinary Time marks the regular progression of weeks, punctuated by the celebration of the Lord's Day. A thematic sermon series that honors that regular progression of time and text could still honor the possibilities of Ordinary Time while working with a slightly different textual repertoire.

Certain underrepresented biblical books can carry great power in the contemporary situation, and so pastoral attention to the needs of a congregation can suggest ways to broaden a community's biblical repertoire. The wisdom texts, which struggle with the perennial questions of the meaning of life and death, can model for contemporary Christians a way to think and talk about life and faith that does not trade merely in extremes and absolutes and does not settle for easy answers. The prophets asked their communities to struggle with questions of wealth and power. Were many of the difficult texts that the lectionary omits, both in the Old Testament and the New Testament, restored to the worship life of contemporary communities, new ways to think about violence, judgment, and the shape of the future might become possible. The essential abandonment of Revelation by the lectionary, for example, has contributed to the sustained misunderstanding and misuse of this important book, because many churches simply do not see modeled how it could be a regular part of the life of faith.

The decision when to vary from the lessons that are provided in the RCL also depends on the experience and length of ministry of the individual preacher. For the beginning preacher, who is working through the three-year lectionary cycle for the first time, the lessons available in Ordinary Time in the RCL provide more than sufficient material and grounding for the development of a preaching ministry and homiletical voice. The more experienced preacher, who has preached several rounds of the three-year cycle, will begin to notice what theological voices and perspectives are not represented in the lectionary and may want to address those limitations through alternate text selection.⁸

Notes

1. Because the date of Easter can shift dramatically, depending on the coordination of the lunar calendar and the spring equinox, the distribution of Sundays in Ordinary Time varies from year to year. When Easter is late—and hence Ash Wednesday is late—there are more Sundays between Epiphany and Lent than there are in years when Ash Wednesday is early. That is why there is such variation in the numbering of Sundays in Ordinary Time. The spread of calendar days that are included in the RCL listings after Pentecost (e.g., Sunday between September 25 and October 1 inclusive) provides a way to count the Sundays that takes into account the variations in the dates of Lent and Easter. Some traditions refer to these numbered Sundays as “proprs.” This terminology is also reflected in the listings in the RCL.

2. *New Handbook of the Christian Year*, 33.

3. As, for example, in the following quote from Chrysostom, Homily 9, John 1:9: “The reason, O children greatly beloved, why we entertain you portion by portion with the thoughts taken from the Scriptures, and do not at once pour all forth to you, is, that the retaining what is successively set before you may be easy. For even in building, one who before the first stones are settled lays on others, constructs a rotten wall altogether, and easily thrown down while one who waits that the mortar may first get hard, and so adds what remains little by little, finishes the whole house firmly, and makes it strong, not one to last for a short time, or easily to fall to pieces. These builders we imitate, and in like manner build up your souls. For we fear lest, while the first foundation is but newly laid, the addition of the succeeding speculations may do harm to the former, through the insufficiency of the intellect to contain them all at once.

What now is it that has been read to us today?”

4. See Fritz West, *Scripture and Memory*, and “Scripture, Bible, and Lectionary: A Quest for Common Ground,” *Worship* 74 (2000): 290-307.

5. *New Handbook of the Christian Year*, 242.

6. See Wade P. Huie, Jr., “Lectionaries Offer Freedom,” *Reformed Liturgy and Music* 24 (1990): 183-186. Quoting from this article, Fritz West (“Scripture, Bible, and Lectionary,” 291) notes Huie’s analysis of a survey of eight years of one preacher’s sermons: no sermons on nineteen books of the Bible, only one sermon from eighteen other books, and less than twenty percent of the total sermons on Old Testament texts.

7. See, for example, Nancy Lammers Gross, *If You Cannot Preach Like Paul . . .* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmanns, 2002) and Brad R. Braxton, *Preaching Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004).

8. This essay is an abbreviated and revised form of the author’s chapter on preaching in ordinary time from Gail R. O’Day and Charles D. Hackett, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: A Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, forthcoming, fall 2007).