

Preach the Word

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Treasures Old and New *Lectionary...je ne sais quoi*

By Joel J. Gawrisch

It is most often heard as a punch line in movies, but the French phrase has its place. Take, for example, its use in in the title of this article. Literally, the phrase means "I don't know what." In usage, it is a way to label the inexplicable, especially when one is struggling to articulate an opinion. "The title of this article lacks a certain... *je ne sais quoi*."

Last month's title was "Lectionary Abundance." This month's title is the result of the author's struggle to find a suitable counter to "abundance." How does one realistically pair "lectionary" with words like paucity or dearth, especially considering the size, depth, artistry, and extravagance of the lectionary's biblical treasures.

And yet, recent feedback to this series revealed a lectionary challenge not covered in Vol. 21, No. 2. A fellow pastor (for the sake of the article we will call him Don) shared that he struggles on festivals when the lectionary offers the same, or mostly the same, texts through all three years of the lectionary cycle. Is this a lectionary...failure...shortcoming...deficiency? Often these festival texts are so specific to the life of Christ within the Church Year, so rich with imagery and meaning, so beatific in celebration of the day, that they are essential to the worship life of the congregation. Lectionary...weakness? Hardly. Thus, lectionary *je ne sais quoi*.

Frustrated Perfection-ish

As described earlier in this series, the lectionary, while not perfect in and of itself, is a systematic way to hold forth the perfect Word of God. It may be easy to criticize or question certain selections, or the lack thereof, amongst the lessons of a given lectionary cycle, but it is a fine line between criticizing the lectionary and criticizing the Word. Preaching on Luke 2 for Christmas Eve or John 1 for Christmas Day seems almost obligatory. Yet doing so year after year can leave some preachers feeling like they have said it all before. The Word is perfect, the lectionary has crafted it into a kind of perfection-ish, and yet the frustration remains, at least for some.

One of Don's specific examples causing him frustration is the three-year set of lessons for Palm Sunday:

CHRISTIAN WORSHIP LECTIONARY		SUPPLEMENTAL LECTIONARY
Year A		
Gospel	Matthew 21:1-11	
First Lesson	Zechariah 9:9,10	
Second Lesson	Philippians 2:5-11	
Psalm	24	
Year B		
Gospel	Mark 11:1-10	
First Lesson	Zechariah 9:9,10	
Second Lesson	Philippians 2:5-11	
Psalm	24	
Year C		
Gospel	Luke 19:28-40	
First Lesson	Zechariah 9:9,10	Isaiah 45:22-25
Second Lesson	Philippians 2:5-11	Hebrews 12:1-3
Psalm	24	

While the Gospel lessons change with each year of the cycle, they are accounts of the same event. The First and Second Lessons along with the psalm remain unchanged. Further, Zechariah 9:9,10 is quoted in Matthew's account, in essence making one lesson of the two. Year C of the Supplemental Lectionary offers the only alternates to the First and Second Lessons. Add it all up and, at face value, there are only five lessons on which to preach, including the psalm. If a pastor were to preach on each of the five selections, he would be "recycling" in year six of ministry.

By comparison, consider the Second Sunday after Pentecost. There are fifteen lessons from which to choose a sermon text, twenty if the preacher includes the psalm selections:

CHRISTIAN WORSHIP LECTIONARY		SUPPLEMENTAL LECTIONARY
Year A		
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 7:15-29	
<i>First Lesson</i>	Deuteronomy 11:18-21, 26-28	1 Kings 22:10-28
<i>Second Lesson</i>	Romans 3:21-25a, 27, 28	2 Peter 1:20-2:3
<i>Psalm</i>	78	
Year B		
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 2:23-28	
<i>First Lesson</i>	Deuteronomy 5:12-15	1 Samuel 21:1-6
<i>Second Lesson</i>	2 Corinthians 4:5-12	Colossians 2:13-17
<i>Psalm</i>	126	122
Year C		
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 7:1-10	
<i>First Lesson</i>	1 Kings 8:22,23, 41-43	Joshua 5:13-6:5, 20
<i>Second Lesson</i>	Galatians 1:1-10	James 1:2-12
<i>Psalm</i>	100	142

After 15-20 years of different texts, a return to the Gospel Lesson from Matthew in Year A would hardly seem like recycling.

Bored with it all

A certain shut-in enjoyed the visits of her pastors. She was fond of saying to them, "Tell me something good." By that, she meant, "Tell me about Jesus." Approaching the age of 100, she could see little more than light and shadow. She could no longer read, but she loved to listen. Her audio Bible and Christian hymn CD's were her constant companions. But she loved to hear "something good" from her pastors. She had heard about Jesus many times before and in many ways, but she loved to hear about him again and again.

If questioned, there is little doubt that any believer would disagree with her. All believers love to hear about Jesus. But Don shared that his frustration with the lectionary was made all the more pointed by the comments of a parishioner who questioned Don's ability, and the ability of pastors in general, to bring out *new* treasures from the Word. I'm sure the commenting parishioner would agree that he wanted to hear about Jesus, yet he complained "I've heard the same thing over and over again."

Comments like these come in many and various ways. This author recently heard the comment, "Dad, your sermon today was different. It was interesting." (The sermon included a brief Q&A, required a volunteer, and incorporated a multi-sensory visual aid.) Another pastor once heard, "After all of these years, I thought that I had heard it all on Palm Sunday, but you showed me something new." (The sermon connected Jesus' entry into

Jerusalem with his entry into our worship, homes, and hearts—something new to him, at least.) While both comments were intended as compliments, they were also indicators of the pre-service expectations of the individuals. They were surprised to see and hear something *new*. To be sure, they were both pleasantly surprised. But how many settle in to hear a sermon expecting a "same-ol', same-ol'" experience? Or to take it a step further, how many come with a bored-with-it-all attitude?

Pressure, Point

It is no wonder, then, that a preacher may feel both the pressure and the desire to bring out new treasure each time he preaches. A pastor doesn't want bored parishioners. A preacher likes compliments on "interesting" sermons. He feels a sense of responsibility to present the Word as best as he can. He strives to be a good steward of the gifts and opportunities he is given to preach the Word. But there is a reason he is encouraged to bring out treasures **both** old and new. There is blessing to be found in new treasures of fresh perspective and poignant application just as there is also blessing to be found in the "same-ol', same-ol'" preaching of Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Rather than give in to pressure, recognize the manifestation of the unholy trio at work in both the parishioner and the pastor. Parishioners bored with a text often mirror their pastor's boredom with the text. A shepherd chasing after something shiny and new for the sake of "shiny and new" can foster a similar desire in the flock and a consequential discontentment with simplicity. Point out the slippery slope of correlating the perceived "quality" of the message with its perceived "effectiveness." If we are not watchful, a desire for proclamation can be replaced with a craving for innovation. Gratitude at what God has done can become conditional on the novelty of the message. "Tell me something good" easily corrupts into "Tell me something better than last time."

God's people need to hear the simple unvarnished truth, be it the harsh condemnation of the law or the sweet assurance of the gospel. Take them to cross, and they will not be left wanting. Preach the Word that the good work begun in them may be carried on to completion. After all, "...if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle?" (1 Corinthians 14:8). Point God's people to Jesus, and they will follow in his steps.

In many ways, festival preaching is the easiest time to do this. It



is easy to point to Jesus in the manger, to Jesus revealed in glory, to Jesus riding triumphantly into Jerusalem. But in some ways, festival preaching can also be challenging. Repetitive lectionary selections seemingly narrow the possibilities. Schedules around festivals tend to be busier than at other times of the Church Year. Time spent studying a chosen text is abbreviated. Short cuts are taken. A quick glance into the storehouse results in presenting the easiest treasures to grab.

Sadly, such an approach can lead to frustration later on. It doesn't take too many cycles of the Church Year before "new" becomes "old," "interesting" becomes "repetitive," and the storehouse seems bare. Keeping in mind the encouragements above, there are additional ways to continue to bring forth treasures old and new from the lectionary, year after year. What follows are some practical ideas for preaching reinvigoration.

Facet-nating

If a preacher finds himself struggling to bring forth treasure, especially for festival preaching, take a closer look at the individual selections. Fewer selections and previous study can be a solid foundation on which to build. Ask yourself some searching questions: How exhaustive has your text study been in the past? Could you dig deeper? Have you examined every facet of every gem in every selected text? What differing perspectives could be explored? Could a change in preaching style be an interesting challenge? (Consider, for example, an inductive approach to the text, rather than a deductive, propositional approach.) Have you spent time working with the text to determine where it fits with the cycle of the Church Year, how it relates to the chapter and book in which it is found, what connections are to be discovered between the Old Testament and the New, between prophecy and fulfillment, between then and now and forever? What insights could be gained from the Prayer of the Day? And yes, it might be beneficial to see what others have written, crafted, even composed based on the same text.

A seminary junior once asked a retired seminary professor which commentary the professor felt best captured the psalms. His reply? "Do your own work." Sage advice, to be sure. And yet what blessings can come to the struggling preacher who, after careful study himself, finds additional treasure through the work and experience of others.

Nesper, n'est-ce pas?

Still struggling? Consider some alternate texts. Paul Nesper's *Biblical Texts*¹ includes more than a dozen lectionaries developed for use during the Church Year. Among them are the Soll, Thomasius, and Swedish lectionaries. Most are one-year cycles but still offer a number of options. For example, consider lectionary selections and alternates for Pentecost Sunday, the Coming of the Holy Spirit²:

CHRISTIAN WORSHIP/ SUPPLEMENT		ALTERNATES
Gospel		Gospel
John 16:5-11 (CW(S)-A)		Matthew 10:1-15 The twelve instructed and sent
John 14:25-27 (CW(S)-B)		John 6:60-71 The confession of Peter
John 15:26,27 (CW(S)-C)		John 7:37-39 Rivers of living water
		John 14:15-21 The promised Comforter
		John 15:1-7 I am the true vine
		John 16:7-14 The Spirit of truth
First Lesson		First Lesson
Joel 2:28,29 (CW(S)-A)		Exodus 19:16–20:20 The Ten Commandments
Ezekiel 37:1-14 (CW(S)-B)		Isaiah 32:14-18 Until the Spirit be poured out upon us
Genesis 11:1-9 (CW(S)-C)		Isaiah 44:1-6 Beside Me there is no God
		Isaiah 62:1-12 Raising aloft the banner of God
		Ezekiel 36:22-28 God's promise of a new Spirit
		Joel 3:1-5 The promise of restoration
Second Lesson		Second Lesson
Acts 2:1-21 (CW(S)-A,B,C)		Acts 2:32-41 Peter's preaching bears fruit
		Acts 2:38-41 Life in the apostolic church
		Acts 8:14-25 Peter and John at Samaria
		1 Corinthians 2:6-16 The hidden wisdom of God
		1 Corinthians 12:3-7 Concerning spiritual gifts
		2 Corinthians 1:18-24 The earnest of the Spirit in our hearts
		Ephesians 1:3-23 The church, the body of Christ
		Ephesians 1:9-14 The earnest of our inheritance
		Ephesians 2:19-22 Fellow citizens with the saints
		Hebrews 2:2-4 The witness of the Spirit
		Hebrews 8:8-11 The promise of a new covenant
Psalm		Psalm
51b	(CW(S)-A,B,C)	40

In addition to these selections, Nesper provides a number free texts, similar to E.H. Wendland's *Sermon Texts*.³ These selections not only provide additional choices for preaching, they can often provide additional perspective on the already appointed texts. All combined, this trove of selections offer a wealth of additional treasure to present on Pentecost Sunday or any other given festival.

Occasional Opportunity

Festival preaching is a special opportunity to preach the Word surrounded by the joy of the season as God's people celebrate with gratitude all that has been done for them in Christ. As the preacher chooses a text for special consideration on these and any other occasion, his job is not to unearth hidden truths lost to the ages, wow his listeners with clever takes, or try to prove his mettle through innovation. Rather, his job is to clearly sound the saving message of Jesus again and again to the immediate reassurance

and the eternal confidence of God's people. The appointed lessons of the lectionary are but curated suggestions from God's Word, carefully chosen to proclaim the Father's love for his people through his Son. Yet it continues to be a storehouse from which the preacher brings forth treasure old and new. Use it, renew in it, and preach it for what it is, the Word of God.



¹ *Biblical Texts* Paul W. Nesper, 1961 Augsburg Publishing House.

² *Ibid.*, p.369.

³ *Sermon Texts* E. H. Wendland, editor, 1984 Northwestern Publishing House.

Treasures from the Archive

With twenty years of archives to hand, there is a storehouse of treasure to behold in past issues. The following abbreviated article speaks to the importance of good text study to the exhausted preacher.

The more we study each Word as God gave it, the more we overflow with love for the Lover of our souls.

Περὶσσεύω—At least twenty-seven times in twenty-two passages of his thirteen epistles the Lord's Apostle Paul uses this favorite word. Paul puts περισσεύω in faith-born love contexts like the great resurrection chapter which concludes in triumph: "Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to (περισσευοιτες - literally "overflow with") the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58).

When the glass of our heart is filled to overflowing with the "the water of life," the message of Christ's substitutionary death and glorious resurrection overflows into our work for the Lord. This overflow keeps us from being discouraged by everything the devil throws at us. "For just as the sufferings of Christ περισσεύω into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort περισσεύω." (2 Corinthians 1:5). With this word the Holy Spirit pictures the super-abundance of God's blessings in Christ. Paul wrote to his dear Philippians: "...Your joy in Christ Jesus περισσεύω.... I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have περισσεύω" (Philippians 1:26;4:12).

What pastor has not at times felt like an old hand-operated water pump? Every person asking him for help seems to drain something out of him until he feels useless and dry. One pastor on a retreat was advised, "If your reservoir runs dry, you've got to go deeper."

In the drought of 1988, Minnesota farmers did something that seemed very strange to metro area residents. They took their heavy equipment into the dried up ponds and lakes around their farms and dredged out the bottom. "Why are you doing that?" neighbors asked. "There's no water. It's a drought." The farmers answered in typical fashion by shaking their heads and going back to work. And when the rain returned they had deeper water on their acreage for the next drought. Few suburbanites realized that their farming neighbors may have contributed enough to the water table to keep their precious lawn sprinklers swishing in the heat.

"Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit" (Jeremiah 17:5-8).

In seasons of spiritual drought, gospel preachers especially need to dig deeper wells, not into human sources, but into the one source of "living water," the Bible. We can περισσεύω more abundantly by drinking deeply of the gracious water of life waiting to be tapped in the Holy Spirit's original languages.

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