

Preach the Word

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Treasures Old and New

Challenges to Lectionary Preaching

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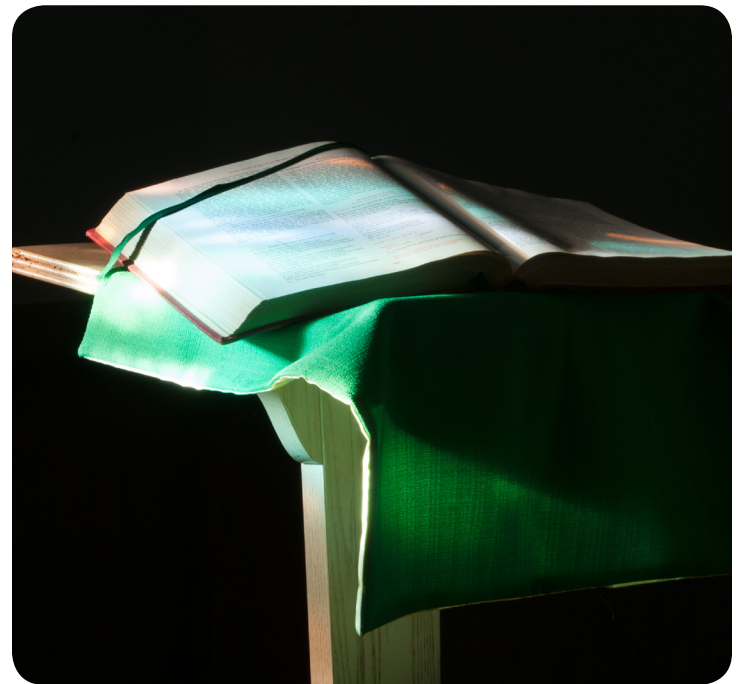
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Rich characters, rich locations, and great writing. That's what makes for a great book series. At least that's what author Anthony Horowitz claims is the reason for the continued popularity of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes series. (Horowitz has written a new book for the series nearly 100 years since the last installment was written by Doyle.) The idea behind his comments is that the author of a series creates stories within a story, bringing the reader along through the more immediate and long-term conflicts and resolutions of the storyline. With each new book, a little more of the greater story is told.

Not surprisingly, such approaches to writing are but a secular and faded reflection of the greatest book ever written. After all, biblical characters and locations are indescribably rich and the writing is, well, divine as the divine story is told. That is why early Christians, as they gathered for worship, imitated the synagogue tradition of reading selections from Scripture in public worship. As previously mentioned (PTW 21.1), early church father Justin Martyr, describes near the middle of the second century:

And on the day called Sunday there is a meeting in one place...and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits. When the reader [lector] has finished, the president [pastor] in a discourse urges and invites [us] to the imitation of these noble things.

Since then, the lectionary has been developed, revised, updated, and expanded. Each and every Sunday, selections from the



biblical "series" are shared with God's people that we may "so hear them, read, learn them, and take them to heart." This rich treasure is God's power for the "joy and edifying of Christ's holy people" as his story is told Sunday by Sunday within the story of his life through the progression of the Church Year.

Not all that glitters is gold

While the selected portions of the lectionary are the inspired Word of God, the choosing, pairing, and placing—the crafting—of the selected Word for a given service or Sunday is not inspired. Much of

the Church Year is influenced by the annual telling of the life of Christ. The readings for the festival half of the Church Year, in particular the gospel readings, almost select themselves. Many gospel readings have obvious connections to Old Testament selections. But selections for the non-festival half of the Church Year and the selections for the Second Reading throughout the year, have presented many challenges.

One of the more challenging aspects of lectionary preaching, based in the historic practice quoted above, is the presence of *lectio continua* selections in the ILCW-based lectionary of *Christian Worship*. Experienced preachers know the challenge of finding common threads between Jesus' Sermon on the Mount as recorded in Matthew chapter 5 and the opening chapters to Paul's first letter to the Corinthians during the season of Epiphany Year A. Of equal challenge is tying together the practical applications of God's relationship with his people in Ephesians chapters 4-6 with the Feeding of the Five Thousand and subsequent discourse on the Bread of Life in John chapter 6 (Sundays after Pentecost Year B).

Others have expressed the challenge of reading lectionary selections from the Scriptures which are difficult to understand or are unclear, especially without lengthy explanation. When such selections also serve as the sermon text, the preacher is able to take the time to explain, illustrate, and summarize the truths to be found in the selection. But if the reading is presented with little or no explanation, hearers are left questioning rather than assured and comforted.¹

At the same time, the absence of certain passages or selections makes it difficult to bring in certain aspects of the whole counsel of God. A lack of emphasis on Bible History prompted the creation of the Supplemental Lectionary. (See *Treasures from the Archive* below). Others have cited a lack of selections focusing on the family unit. Certainly, anyone could question why a certain selection was chosen over another selection for almost any given Sunday.

But perhaps most challenging of all is seeing the flow and progression of the lectionary from one Sunday into the next. As an example, consider the seasons of End Time and Advent. This author has often been asked by fellow preachers to differentiate between the two seasons in a meaningful way. Indeed, it is easy to take a broad approach to the two seasons and summarize all eight weeks with the words "Jesus Is Coming" only to find the wealth of the seasonal selections already spent by Christ the King Sunday. Many a pastor has intimated that the Sundays "all say the same thing!" Sadly, such a broad approach to these seasons usually finds its impetus in a busy schedule, a cursory text study, a predilection for the obvious, or all of the above.

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It would be easy, at this point, to simply encourage a more thorough search of the biblical storeroom for the sake of discovering the richness to be found in the lectionary selections.

(And that is good advice!) A former professor told us to let the Sundays of End Time and Advent speak for themselves without borrowing from the Sundays before or after. (Also good advice!) But consider taking a step back from the individual Sundays, the individual seasons, indeed from the individual years in the three-year cycle, and look at them as a whole.

The following example of progression builds on the resources found in the 2008 revision of *Planning Christian Worship*.² All selections from the lectionary for these two seasons point us to the coming again of our Lord Jesus. Yet each year we are reminded that we live in the End Times by God's grace as the end of the Church Year approaches. Then with the turn of the new Church Year, we are invited to receive God's grace with ready hearts.

End Time – Reformation: Lord, Keep Us Faithful to the Word!

Year A: In the face of persecution

Year B: With unwavering commitment

Year C: Standing in the truth

End Time 2 – Last Judgment: Lord, Keep Us Mindful of the Judgment!

Year A: Longing for redemption

Year B: Rejoicing in the resurrection

Year C: Confident in innocence

End Time 3 – Saints Triumphant: Lord, Keep Us Watchful for Our Triumph!

Year A: Through these latter days

Year B: In full knowledge and eager expectation

Year C: Confident in our relationship

End Time 4 – Christ the King: Lord, Keep Us Joyful in Our King!

Year A: At the fulfillment of God's Plan

Year B: Awaiting his triumphant return

Year C: Sure in the Promise

Advent 1: Keep Watch, for the Lord will come again

Year A: Unexpectedly

Year B: At an unknown time

Year C: Forewarned by signs

Advent 2: The Forerunner Prepares: Christ is coming

Year A: He is near—repent!

Year B: He is powerful—be baptized!

Year C: He is coming—prepare!

Advent 3: The Forerunner Explains: The Christ is here!

Year A: To his disciples

Year B: To the religious leaders

Year C: To the people

Advent 4: The Promised Virgin Birth of Christ

Year A: To Joseph

Year B: To Mary

Year C: The *Magnificat*

Seeing all eight weeks of the three-year cycle in a concise format helps the preacher to see the progression from one Sunday to the next and from one season to the next, setting in motion yet again the annual celebration of God's grace to us in Christ.

This, of course, is only one example. Other seasons and emphases may also challenge the preacher (and worship planners) to find a clear progression of thought. Professor Emeritus Dan Deutschlander, author of the revised *Planning Christian Worship Year B*, offers this explanation for the Sundays after Pentecost. It serves well for anyone struggling to find the progression of thought in the lectionary selections at other times in the Church Year:

Each season begins with a general theme that more or less unites the readings for that season. Then each succeeding Sunday tries to develop that theme. During the Pentecost season, one will generally find that there is a major break in the train of thought after about seven or eight weeks, and a new theme will emerge; the new theme will still be built on what preceded and anticipate what is yet to come. It should be expected that some themes and some Sundays will work out better than others; what follows is just one man's attempt to help unify the service in the context of the liturgical year and of the pericope series, as the inventors of pericope series intended. The themes presented are by no means the only ones possible; if the reader comes up with other and better ones, he should by all means use them.

Fixed value

It may, at first, seem counterproductive to this PTW series to mention the aforementioned challenges to lectionary preaching. They may cause a preacher to ignore, set aside, or devalue the lectionary itself. In recent feedback to the first issue of this volume of PTW, a brother in ministry stated that he doesn't "trust the lectionary." Others have stated that they feel almost handcuffed by their conscience to use the appointed readings.

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Certainly, this series is not intended to obligate the preacher to a slavish adherence to some other human's selections of God's Word for a given Sunday. Rather, this series is intended to encourage the preacher to fix a value on the selection and curation of biblical readings that has taken place over decades and centuries, the development of a series of biblical readings that proclaim what God has done for his people within the liturgical cycle of the life of Christ.

Planning Christian Worship can help the struggling:

If the preacher feels overwhelmed by the majesty of the text and all that it has to offer, if he is perplexed about where to begin, at sea over which of the number of points he wants

to try to make from God's Word, he may find what follows of some use. If the preacher worries that he is saying the same thing every Sunday, what follows may be helpful as he tries to make each Sunday God's unique visit with us that it should be. If the preacher is anxious that he not miss presenting a particular doctrine or that he not overwork another doctrine at the expense of the rest of the *corpus doctrinae*, then too what follows may serve a purpose; for every effort has been made, as aforesaid, to present all of the body doctrine in its proper sequence during the course of the year.

"If the preacher worries that he is saying the same thing every Sunday..."

Even then, a preacher may feel that the lectionary is not serving the specific needs of his congregation. But before moving away from the lectionary to serve the preacher's ideas, consider recrafting what has already been developed. Take the time to see how the Sunday themes progress rather than assuming they do not. Set aside the *lectio continua* readings for a season or a series of weeks and choose a reading for each Sunday which supports, enhances, or more closely fits the theme and Gospel of the day.³ Replace an unclear or challenging reading with a selection that more clearly conveys an identical or similar point. These are easy fixes to some of the aforementioned challenges and will greatly enrich the value of the lectionary selections for the preacher and his listeners.

Other approaches will require more crafting. For example, if an emphasis seems to be missing, select a fitting key passage. More often than not, that passage will be part of or in the same book as a *lectio continua* selection during one of the lectionary cycles. Then craft a series which includes the key passage and the desired emphasis within the *lectio continua*.⁴ In this way, specific emphases can be covered without stepping outside the lectionary.

Another approach to include a missing emphasis would be to select readings for a specific Sunday with a *Proper* frame of mind. In other words, be sure to craft the aspects of the Sunday in terms of the whole service, not just a single reading. Select a set of readings, a Prayer of the Day, and a Psalm of the Day that cohesively proclaim the emphasis. Carefully choose a Sunday that makes fitting connections to the season of the Church Year or to the Sundays before and after the special emphasis Sunday. Such efforts guard against a flavor-of-the-day approach chosen by the whimsy of the pastor while valuing the treasure of the Word found in the careful crafting of the lectionary.

There are many challenges to preaching the lectionary. It is but a tool used to pull treasured and crafted gold from the storehouse of the Holy Word. The lectionary may have its detractors, but in various forms has served God's people for nearly two thousand years. In some ways, the lectionary is like a painting of a biblical subject by Michelangelo or Rembrandt. I may not agree with the artist's perspective, theology, or representation, but his artistry

and craftsmanship engender a deeper appreciation for the subject matter. More than rich characters and rich locations, this is the treasure of the divine Word displayed and enjoyed through the emphases of the liturgical Church Year.

¹ Of a similar, if not an ironically and mildly humorous, note are the occasions when a Gospel Reading ends with stern law. An extreme example would be the Gospel Reading for Last Judgment Year C – Luke 19:11-27. Verse

27 concludes, "...and kill them in front of me." It is quickly followed with the acclamation, "This is the Gospel of our Lord."

² Available at: <https://worship.welsrc.net/download-worship/planning-christian-worship-revision/>. Two additional citations from PCW are from this same source.

³ Or if you regularly use the hymnal's lectionary, substitute just for a season the options in *Christian Worship Supplement*.

⁴ An example is available at <https://worship.welsrc.net/download-worship/preach-the-word-volume-21/>



Treasures from the Archive

With twenty years of archives to hand, there is a storeroom of treasure to behold in past issues. The following excerpt was published as a review of the 2008 Christian Worship Supplement lectionary.

We believe, teach, and confess that God's Word is central to everything we do, including our worship. That has led us to critically evaluate how well we are proclaiming God's Word in our worship. This led to most churches moving from the one year historic lectionary to the three year ILCW series. It led the committee that prepared *Christian Worship* to clarify and "clean up" the End Times portion of ILCW. With the publishing of a hymnal supplement, a critical evaluation of our proclamation of the Word was made once again. (For detailed information on the process used by the Rites Committee, see the May/June 2004 issue of *Preach the Word*.)

Their two main goals:

- Emphasize a single theme with all three lessons, including the second lesson. Many of the ILCW second lessons were chosen to give an overview of certain Epistles over a period of weeks.
- Replace some of the many lessons from the Old Testament prophets with familiar Bible stories. The prophet Isaiah is used over 50 times in the three year cycle. By comparison, there are less than 20 lessons from Genesis.

Some general observations about the new choices:

- Some of the changes are minor. Epiphany 2, Isaiah 49:1-6, has been changed to Isaiah 49:1-7; Pentecost 8, Isaiah 55:10-11 has been changed to Isaiah 55:10-13.

These generally provide a little more context or a little fuller reading to carry out the theme of the day.

- Other changes are more significant. Advent 1, Isaiah 2:1-5 has been changed to Ge 6:9-22, 7:11-23; Epiphany 4, Micah 6:1-8, has been changed to Daniel 3:13-27.
- Overall some very good work and good thought has been put into the supplemental lessons. They do a much better job of emphasizing a single theme for the Sunday. No matter which lesson is the basis for preaching, the emphasis for that Sunday will remain the same.

There are some concerns of which pastors should be aware:

- Most of the new lessons are longer, sometimes considerably, than those they replace. Congregations with multiple services need to consider this in planning the overall time of their worship hour.
- When preaching on these texts, many will be challenged because of the amount of study necessary. The time-taxed preacher may want to pick out the few most significant verses of the longer texts, exegize just those few verses, and use the rest as context.

I would encourage anyone to make use of these supplemental lessons. There may be a given Sunday when the *Christian Worship* lessons are preferable. I know that we will be using the supplemental lessons extensively to give our people a larger taste of the whole counsel of God. I am thrilled to see young children relate well to familiar stories. As a congregation with many people new to Scripture, I appreciate the added opportunity to make use of some of the familiar stories many of us learned in Sunday School.

Pastor David Clark - Volume 12, No. 1