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Christ's Love, Our Calling.

Free Text Series or Lectionary Preaching?

The lectionary: an enduring narrative

By Caleb Bassett

In the first two parts of this discussion of lectionary preaching vis-à-vis topical preaching, I argued that in many ways the topical paradigm has not grappled adequately with how contemporary culture has changed since the topical paradigm became popular in Evangelicalism. I also warned against several undesirable outcomes ranging from instrumentalizing Jesus to missing out on the creative strength of an established framework. I pointed to the ways in which the lectionary paradigm effectively keeps Christ as Savior at the center of the homiletical task while also providing the kind of framework that supports homiletical creativity and engagement by taking the burden of brainstorming off of the preacher.

Many of my colleagues who preach topically do, in fact, diligently seek to be thoughtful about what they plan and preach. The nature of my argument, though, is not about what preachers are able to do, but about the directions in which paradigms nudge preachers and their hearers. I see paradigms as a kind of intellectual and spiritual architecture whose designs invisibly—and often inexorably—move people toward certain ends. Such a phenomenon is not individual, but collective and cumulative.

Which leads to the third and final part of this series. Given the character of contemporary culture, it seems that lectionary preaching is perfectly poised to make a meaningful difference among God's people because the lectionary is, at its heart, not so much a curriculum of topics as it is a comprehensive gospel narrative.

The corruption of narrative as a concept

The term *narrative* has, unfortunately, reversed polarity from positive to negative. Today *narrative* means something like *dishonest spin*. Political and social opponents accuse one another

of perpetuating a narrative. "Your truth" competes with "my truth." Or as The Dude put it in *The Big Lebowski*, "That's just, like, your opinion, man."

But *narrative* once meant a *faithful account*. Narrative was used in legal contexts to describe the facts of the case. A narrative is what St. Luke was talking about in the opening sentence of his gospel. To tell the story was to offer testimony to truths that had real-world implications.

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The work of Lutheran preaching relies heavily on an understanding of *narrative* in the original sense, which is (thankfully) making an encouraging comeback these days. People are noticing what it's like to live without narrative and are wondering if perhaps we might want to renew our narrative structures of sense-making.

Shared narrative vs. individual identity

Every preacher surely agrees that something in our social setting has gone horribly wrong. We appear to live in a time marked by a general dissolution of meaning and coherence. People no longer inhabit stories or contribute to institutions, they express identities and construct meaning by giving voice to a *true self*.

In a world where the primary catechetical truth is not that "I should be *his* own" but rather that "I should be *my own*," the fundamental task in life becomes one of assembling the puzzle of

personal identity from whatever material, values, and interests are available. This task is radically individualized. Indeed, that is the whole point. It is an expression of pure autonomy, of self-law.

Much has been said about this phenomenon, perhaps nowhere so thoroughly as in Carl Trueman's recent work, "The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self." But that's a long book. Taylor Swift captured the spirit of what Charles Taylor called *expressive individualism* in only two lines: "I know my love should be celebrated / But you tolerate it."

This is not how it has always been and not how it must always be. People once sought to understand themselves not as isolated individuals but as part of a broader narrative. The shared story gave shape to the years and offered wisdom for different seasons of life. It helped them process sorrows and celebrate joys.

But such sense-making is far afield from our culture's deepest convictions. Indeed, the late modern notion of freedom is to see oneself as *a person who has no story*. Today's ideal protagonist is someone who yearns to discover who they really are, subsequently seeks to uncover an authentic self, and then throws off the expectations of family and society to chart their own path and construct their own meaning. The goal is to jettison existing narrative structures and to replace them with stories that are self-made.

Narrative as necessary counterculture

If this is an accurate description of the modern self and we agree that this not only makes society miserable but also contradicts broad tenets of biblical anthropology, then preachers must avoid acting as a chaplain to the culture of self-ownership. I have little doubt that many preachers have substantially addressed the phenomena described above, especially in recent years. But consider again the difference between what is said in the text of the sermon and what is communicated through the paradigm.

Topical sermons can, no doubt, make vigorous connections to the overall narrative of God's work in the world. But it seems impossible to describe the paradigm *itself* as a narrative paradigm. The topical paradigm seems closer to a curriculum than to a story, which is in some ways the heart of my point about the paradigm's interaction with contemporary culture: What is the story that seekers of true self are likely to discern from an idea-driven or concept-centric paradigm—especially ideas that are presented as useful for their practical benefits? One likely story will sound like this, "I am on a journey of self-discovery, self-actualization, and self-improvement, and God is my guide and ally in the process."

To underestimate how much expressive individualism is imported into church is to be needlessly naïve. Those preachers who can discern the culture's dominant influence on character formation even among Christians may wish to seek a preaching paradigm that aligns more closely with the countercultural nature of God's Word.

What if the church had its own set of days tailor-made to accomplish its overarching goals over time?

The power of a calendar

A powerful way to address expressive individualism is to integrate people into a shared calendar. Indeed, the ability to set the calendar matters. What society celebrates as holidays says a great deal about what they value. The recent addition of Juneteenth to the calendar of federal holidays in the United States is an example of this phenomenon. Activists and marketers are also well-aware of the value of marking time by their own values. Our summers are now marked by huge commercial commemorations: Pride Month and Prime Day. The calendar is contested territory for a wide variety of competing values and commercial interests.

The big loser in all this has been, of course, the ecclesiastical calendar. This is unfortunate but also unsurprising considering the dominant cultural values of our time. In the past a liturgical calendar marked time in terms of the Christian story of God's work in the world. But in an age when therapy and individuality are paramount cultural values, a church year calendar is seen as onerous. Why should a communal sense of what is important to all of us at all times impose on my sense of self-direction?

Now, I am not aware of anyone who has stopped observing Christmas and Easter, but for the most part the rest of the calendar appears to be fair game for revision. This is not to say that topical preachers do not sense the power of a calendar, it's just that the calendar that sets the agenda is often the civic calendar.

I understand the rationale. "Preach on subjects that everyone's attention is focused on that weekend anyway." I suggest, though, that this tactic is not as effective as one might assume. Take Valentine's Day, for example, and the perfectly understandable

desire to preach about love on the adjacent weekend. That love sermon, good as it may be, is not likely to outpace the massive marketing complex devoted to selling billions of dollars' worth of flowers, wine, and chocolate. To try to grab the microphone from the marketers and say that, actually, the holiday devoted to romance between lovers is a great time to consider the love of God may be an example of spitting in the wind. Chad Bird once noted that Christians already enjoy holidays far better suited for emphasizing the Christian idea of love. They are called Good Friday and Easter.[1] So here's a radical idea: Let people enjoy Independence Day or Memorial Day or Valentine's Day without necessarily trying to capitalize on the opportunity to preach a religious spin on it.

Here's an even more radical idea: What if the church had its own set of days tailor-made to accomplish its overarching goals over time, one that closely reflects the nature of its message and the story into which God is integrating us all? And what if this calendar were used in common among all the churches with the same set of ultimate ends? If Jeff Bezos can see the value of having his own holidays and spreading its influence as far as possible, then surely we can imagine that the ecclesiastical calendar might have some power to it, especially as it employs its narrative strength to engage people on a deeper level than the curricular presentation of ideas can.

Tapping into the mythical core

A narrative structure that repeats and reinforces itself taps into what the Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski called the *mythical core* of how human beings think and act.

The mythical core refers to matters of human experience that are not revealed by scientific examination or standard investigative inquiry. The mythical core connects to those aspects of human experience that are undoubtedly real but not strictly empirical. Kołakowski contrasted the mythical with the technological. The technological core is that which is subject to human manipulation and therefore involves reason, science, and most forms of thinking and philosophy.

Love is a good example of where mythical and technological diverge. Even the most strident evolutionary biologist knows that explaining love in terms of species survival (technological core) is lame. Something more satisfying—more *real*—is required. Presenting ideas doesn't cut it. We need a story.

I doubt I will encounter much pushback when I say that contemporary culture is almost entirely dominated by the quest to deploy human power to manipulate and control. This impulse has moved into church life in the form of what has been called *spiritual technology*, that is, technique-oriented tactics of leveraging spiritual practices to achieve measurable results. Name-and-claim prosperity gospel, glossolalia, and even decisional regeneration are all examples of pagan-style efforts to bring God under human control.

These are, of course, out-of-bounds for confessional Lutherans, but this does not mean that other forms of spiritual technology never appear. Subtle discernment is required here. Emphases on, say, right thinking or applications about how to manage one's finances or maintain one's physical health certainly gesture toward topics that arguably fall within the realm of Christian virtues, but the line between sanctification preaching and the uncritical introduction of spiritual technologies imported from cognitive behavioral therapy or modern-day Stoicism (to name two popular movements today) is a narrow one.

Here it may be helpful to repeat a point from a previous article, that there are some things that Lutheran congregations will address in their ministry, but not primarily through the main, public preaching voice of the congregation. Other avenues are better for such things, especially when so many people are missing out on the narrative component of reality that strikes them in deep, abiding ways. When all the people of God are together let preaching be primarily about the story that enfolds all of history and therefore all people present.

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The language of history and narrative is in many ways more truthful than the language of concepts. Only when a person fully enters the rhythms and contours of a narrative that sets the agenda week after week, season after season, year after year is the transmission of information able to produce transformation of character. Indeed, this issue has long been one of the legitimate criticisms of sermonizing that is too heavy on deductive points of doctrine. But the cure for sermons too heavy on deductive points of doctrine is not sermons too heavy on practical points of application. If anyone wants parishioners to encounter preaching

that is more transformational than informational, then he will not present a series of concepts but will instead inculcate a long-term narrative structure.

We do not turn to the Scripture merely to look up correct answers or to find helpful information (though such things are surely there), we turn to the Scripture because there we find the Way—and not according the technological core, as if Jesus is the way to some other good, but in the sense of the mythical core, that is, every aspect of who we are—from our body to our personality to our mind to our behavior—must participate fully in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He is the main protagonist of history. All of us are written into his story just as a branch is grafted into a vine.

Narrative as network good

Lutherans are familiar with the concept of antinomianism, that is, a person who rejects moral rules revealed in Scripture. A similar *somethingnomianism* has lately arrived: autonomianism, that is, the view that we are a law unto ourselves.

Autonomianism in ministry introduces a curious version of the old *cuius regio*, *eius religio* in which the principle is often expressed as something like, "This is what we like." To be sure, there is little justification for blanket uniformity among churches of a denominational brotherhood, especially across broad geographical distances, but there are surely ways to reflect unity apart from uniformity. A shared ecclesiastical calendar and preaching lectionary is one such way. The narrative of the lectionary is a *network good*.

Note the distinction between a *good* and a *network good*. A *good* is something that is advantageous to have, like money. Having one dollar allows you to do very little. Having one million dollars allows you to do very much. An iPhone, on the other hand, is a different kind of good, a network good. The advantage comes not from owning many iPhones but from many people owning iPhones. The good is a *network good*.

> *I would like more and more to think in terms of the "we" in our shared story.*

I see the narrative character of the lectionary and corresponding calendar in much the same way. If everyone charts their own path, then not only is the local effect of a consistent, long-term narrative structure lost, but so is the broader network amplification of the good. I would like more and more to think in terms of the "we" in our shared story, a "we" that includes not just the members of this or that congregation who heard this or that particular set of topical sermons, but also the other churches of

the denomination 15 miles across town or 1500 miles across the country. I would enjoy learning how some of the most gifted communicators in our church body walk their people through the texts and themes of Lent each year. I would be glad to know that a young professional newly introduced to the gospel narrative in one place could move to another and pick up where he left off. I see great appeal in raising children to find meaning in the narrative points of God's work in the world, especially in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And best of all, inhabiting the same narrative structure does not require rigid uniformity. Not everyone in a baseball lineup has a uniform batting stance, but they are united in the task of hitting the ball and for that reason they do all share a certain set of practices in common. In the same way, creative variety and local contextualization in preaching will actually be stronger when connected to a common core.

Free to tell the story

The vision I have sought to articulate in this series is one in which the core paradigm of preaching is narrative, cyclical, seasonal, and communal. Such a paradigm is built on a sturdy foundation of texts selected for the purpose of proclaiming the gospel in a way that is distinctively Lutheran in emphasis. It is also a framework that is more likely to produce creative and engaging results in contemporary culture, to say nothing of the massive potential for network good and refreshingly countercultural testimony.

> *The massive potential for network good and refreshingly countercultural testimony.*

For many years I have served in a setting where I could freely preach according to almost any paradigm I might want to try. But I have continually returned to the lectionary not because I am compelled to do so but because of the rationale I have explained in this series. I believe that a careful analysis of the way culture has changed since the rise of the seeker-sensitive or attractional model of Christian cultural engagement reveals a compelling case that, for the most part, the topical paradigm is a paradigm better suited for the past. I'm not enough of a historian to know if lectionary preaching was always so well-suited to a contemporary task at hand, but as I look around me and ahead of me, I am hard pressed to come up with a better overall way to preach to people living in late modern culture than through the shared heritage, common good, and creative strength that the lectionary paradigm offers.

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[1] Chad Bird, *Upside-Down Spirituality* (Baker Books, 2019), p. 137.

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