

Free Text Series or Lectionary Preaching?

The lectionary can't cover everything—but it can cover what matters

By Caleb Bassett

My previous article argued that the underlying logic of the topical series preaching paradigm popular in American Christian culture and somewhat influential in Lutheran homiletical thinking carries with it some unexamined weaknesses that are worth the attention of Lutheran preachers. I cautioned that the underlying logic of the paradigm can push the homiletical task toward making Jesus instrumental instead of essential, that is, a topic-first approach has inherent qualities that could either make it more laborious to accomplish gospel predominance or that might move Christ from the center of the sermon's purpose and position the gospel as a footnote to what people otherwise sense is the primary goal: religious therapy, cultural commentary, intellectual inquiry, or spiritual motivation. I suggested, then, that a shared Lutheran lectionary, with its clear and consistent focus on the words and works of Jesus, makes gospel relevance and gospel predominance more natural—even easy—to accomplish.

Some readers suggested that the paradigmatic issues I described and conversations about them among preachers do not exist to the extent that I described them and therefore most if not all of my argument is spurious. I want to make clear that I do not consider this subject to be in the category of a *roiling* synodical controversy. I called it a *simmering* debate on purpose. I have observed it gently bubbling in circuits, conferences, and in the online spaces where pastors gather to talk shop. But by writing as if every reader was fully acquainted with the contours of the conversation, I opened my point to unwanted misunderstanding. The background I elided is this: contemporary Lutheran preachers have before them a significant choice between two fairly distinctive preaching paradigms. One is lectionary-driven, the other is topic-driven. The latter is quite influential, but I am arguing that

such influence is not all that warranted and that the former is the better overall choice for Lutheran preachers in our time and place.

A more serious concern from some readers is that I have accused colleagues of ministerial malpractice. Therefore it is good to repeat what I said in the previous installment. I am not saying that someone who preaches topically fails to preach law and gospel, nor am I saying that topical preachers are automatically guilty of positioning Jesus as instrumental instead of essential. I set up the framework of analysis to be one of paradigms in general, not preachers in particular. I signaled this in several ways, especially in gesturing toward the famous dictum that a medium can communicate in a way that overrides or undermines the message or, to put it another way, sometimes style can overpower substance. I'm not talking about the presence or absence of law/gospel sentences but rather the characteristics of preaching paradigms.

Style can overpower substance.

My specific claim was that the paradigm of topical preaching runs an unnecessary risk of interacting with the characteristics of ambient culture in a way that pastoral perspectives might overlook. Preachers tend to think in categories like Christian freedom and efficacy of the Word, but people catechized by the ambient culture's domineering emphasis on self-ownership and self-construction are prone to engage with sermonizing in radically different terms. We think we have said one thing, but in reality they hear another. The result can be a subtle shift from an objective message of good news to a message perceived as self-improvement.

Such an outcome is surely not intentional, but that does not make it imaginary.

I am suggesting that Lutheran preachers think carefully about this phenomenon and adjust their approach accordingly because they are free to do so. Christian freedom is essential to my thinking on this. The fact that we don't have a prescribed preaching paradigm is why discussing the merits and demerits of the available options is legitimate and worthwhile. That this is an adiaphoron is precisely why it deserves attention.

In this installment I give attention to the sentiment that the lectionary paradigm is too limited and that the topical paradigm is worth pursuing because it gives the preacher opportunity to cover things not covered in the lectionary. In this formulation it's not that the lectionary paradigm is irrelevant, it's that the lectionary paradigm is insufficient.

But first, we need to talk about books.

Books are an excellent contribution to preaching

I love to encounter thoughtful, engaging writing on theological subjects—and not just new writing either; reading old books is just as refreshing. C.S. Lewis once praised the salutary effects of the “clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds.”¹

Reading broadly in popular literature is important for cultivating a well-rounded homiletical mind and for developing illustrations and examples. Reading widely in popular Christian commentary is a useful way to develop fresh idiom and expression. Reading deeply in professional literature is important for gaining new angles on familiar texts.

But you know this already. This is commonplace homiletical advice. Preachers know the benefit that comes from reading an expert author exposit a biblical theme. We all have favorite writers who



A framework for preaching that is creative, relevant, enduring, and engaging.

resonate with us. Excellent writing can teach new skills, encourage fresh enthusiasm, offer timely support, increase emotional intelligence, and deepen knowledge. These are good things.

Books are an inadequate agenda for preaching

Sometimes, though, enthusiasm from reading a good book becomes a powerful desire to communicate the same content to the congregation. Thus the sermon-series-on-a-recent-book is born.

I identify with the preacher who wants to act as a kind of *London Review of Books* for the people he serves. The book review (not the book *report*) is a simple and flexible genre that offers writers and readers alike the opportunity to creatively interact with all sorts of ideas. If a preacher thinks of himself as a purveyor of engaging ideas (a *communicator* in contemporary parlance), then he will probably be the kind of preacher who enjoys digesting, synthesizing, and systematizing other people's work. This is a tremendously useful skill and is valuable in ministry.

But I suggest that the Sunday service is not an ideal time for a book review. Such a practice relies too much on the personality and temperament of the pastor. The homiletical task offers generous opportunity for the preacher to speak naturally from his personality and to develop sermons in a way that suits his temperament, which is why it strikes me as unnecessary for the preacher to also claim control over the agenda of preaching.

Is the pastor's bibliography an adequate pattern for congregational proclamation? I'm skeptical, but even if I'm wrong, the question remains: On what grounds does the preacher conclude that his reading list should set the every-Sunday agenda for what the people of God hear?

Answers might sound like this, “This book covers things not covered in the lectionary,” or its corollary, “This book covers things not covered *with enough detail* in the lectionary.” In this sense the topical preacher provides a vital service by selecting texts that plug critical gaps left open by the lectionary.

Sufficiency as acceptance of reality

Here I sense common ground between lectionary and topical preachers. A persistent challenge in ministry is to connect parishioners to diligent study and application of the Bible. We all agree that it is good for believers to be transformed by the renewing of their minds. I also understand why the Sunday sermon becomes the front line in the battle to get more people engaged with more biblical topics and their application. Preaching remains the most prominent public voice of the congregation. If a pastor is concerned that people need, say, an in-depth review of how to

forgive one another, then the sermon seems like just about the only avenue available.

But here a dose of finitude might be helpful. It seems both self-evident and inevitable that no preaching paradigm could be so extensive that it covers every important subject in careful detail. There are parts of the Bible that the lectionary does not appoint for reading and preaching just as, I am sure, a random sampling of three years of topical series preaching would reveal whole swaths of the Bible and entire categories of teaching that received little to no attention in Sunday sermons.

This is not a problem, though. The point of an organized presentation of Scripture is that certain texts are better suited for certain purposes than others. No one complains that six funeral sermons last year missed out on opportunities to cover Paul's missionary journeys.

"People won't get this material otherwise," when offered as a reason to set aside the lectionary, is a rationale that bolsters my point. If preaching really is the primary way most people connect with Christian teaching, then it is all the more important that the agenda for all that preaching be aligned as closely as possible with the main purpose of Lutheran preaching.

The Lutheran concept of sufficiency has long included the sense that something is sufficient *for a given purpose*. The purpose of Lutheran preaching is to announce the gospel of Jesus Christ for the salvation of mankind. If there is to be an agenda for the public voice among God's people, then the person at the center must be Christ and him crucified. The lectionary paradigm excels at this and consistently nudges preachers in this direction. Yes, there will be a lot of otherwise good things that don't get as much coverage, but some things really are more important to say than what the preacher might otherwise want to say. This is not a problem; it's the whole point.

Brainstorming as a bad sign

I realize that not all topical series preaching is seeking to plug gaps. I agree that the metaphor has a certain haphazard, *ad hoc* feel to it. I know that many topical preachers take the task of long-range planning very seriously. I do not doubt that these men believe that what their congregation needs is not offered by seasonal texts from Epiphany or Advent and therefore they need to think thoroughly about what to offer instead. I admire the level of effort that goes into such work, but allow me to suggest that preachers keep one part of that process (the planning) and ditch the other (the inventing).

Consider the cognitive model of topical series planning. It necessarily begins with what amounts to a blank page. Of course, the page is not literally blank; there is, at the very least, a list of every Sunday. Next to these dates are blanks that must be filled. Several may be marked already with themes or events like Soccer Camp, National Back to Church Day, Christmas, and Easter. The task is then to fill in all the blanks with a year's worth of themes, weekly



topics, and biblical texts to support them. And so the brainstorming begins.

The topical preachers I know are usually open-minded men, certainly more amenable to creative innovation than some of their more conservative colleagues, which is why I see a certain irony in the fact that the planning model that undergirds topical preaching is, generally speaking, less likely to produce creative and innovative results. Looking at the year ahead as an empty calendar to be filled with new ideas might just be one of the worst ways to work. Brainstorming can be a bad sign.²

The black hole of the blank page

The typical planning process of the topical series takes the preacher back in time to the unsettling college experience of staring at a blank page that must eventually become a finished paper. The common composition advice in such a situation is to brainstorm. "Come up with as many ideas as you can. See what sticks." But this advice only makes sense *because* the writer has nothing to work with. Brainstorming is the first step not because of the virtue of the process but because of the poverty of the situation. When you have nothing, then, yes, *anything* is better. But that's a low standard to work with, couldn't we agree?

A blank slate can be a black hole..

Could it be that the blank slate brainstorm is not ideal for delivering the kind of creative results and engaging communication that preachers want to deliver? Brainstorming prioritizes ideas that come easily. But easy does not equal relevant. Easy is simply a matter of our mind remembering what is most recent, has the most emotion attached to it, or what is most lively, novel, or practical.

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Brainstorming is also susceptible to the human tendency to like our own ideas the best. People prefer to hold onto their own ideas whether they are optimal for the task at hand or not. Brainstorming can actually reduce relevance for others.

One might think that adding more people to a brainstorming session will help, but the opposite is usually the case. It instead reduces the quality of the ideas and meaningfully narrows the scope of thinking.

This is not to say that it is impossible to generate creative ideas, but it is to say that brainstorming isn't as useful a tool as preachers might think it is. A blank slate can be a black hole. If a year of preaching began with a blank page brainstorm, then the odds are increased that the end result was not as creative and engaging as it could have been. There must be a better way.

Books to the rescue

The experience of blank page brainstorming may explain why some lectionary preachers react differently to the reading of books than topical series preachers do. Because the topical preacher has decided against following an overarching preaching agenda, he regularly faces the task of inventing one. It should be no surprise, then, that what a book offers will seem especially valuable: a systematic, carefully organized, and meticulously edited sequence of logic or narrative created by someone besides the preacher. The good book gives the topical series preacher what the lectionary would otherwise provide: a framework for preaching that is creative, relevant, enduring, and engaging.

The lectionary preacher, on the other hand, has a preaching agenda defined by the regular pattern of reviewing the words and works of Jesus Christ in an organized and narrative structure designed to repeat and reinforce itself over time. When the lectionary preacher reads a good book, he more naturally thinks of its benefits in terms of how elements from the book will fit into his preaching now and into the future. He thinks, "This insight will be really useful for my sermon on Lent 1," or "This chapter will contribute to my approach in Epiphany."

It is through the connection of new material and existing structures that creative thinking and original effort are most likely to occur, especially if the structure is consistent over a long period of time. The preacher who sets aside invention in favor of integrating his

thinking and reading to a lectionary framework over many years might discover that huge gains in creativity and engagement accrue at compound interest.

A different path is before you

The topical series preachers I know are men with tremendous skills at digesting, synthesizing, and systematizing the work of others, which is why I mean it sincerely when I suggest that they might become even better preachers if they migrated to the shared heritage, common good, and creative strength of our lectionary. The communication of important ideas is a skill that becomes all the more potent when connected to a long-term, external framework.

There are also a range of opportunities to engage people with the benefits of good writing apart from a book-driven sermon series. Reading groups, blogs, podcasts, classes, and newsletters are all better suited for the work of interacting with and applying ideas to strengthen and equip the saints for lives of faithful obedience, especially when the *telos* of such settings is more aligned with treating topics didactically and applying them within community accountability. Lean into such genres instead of trying to fit similar efforts into sermonizing.

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Topical preachers are right to remind colleagues of the many important matters that God's people need to understand and apply, but to set aside the concept of sufficiency is to eschew a critical element of Lutheran preaching. It is good for preaching to be proclamation and it is good when the agenda of preaching is the news to be proclaimed: the person of Jesus Christ and the great works by which he has redeemed us. And when the overarching agenda is not a bibliography of theological miscellany but a framework designed to support the primary purpose of Lutheran preaching, the creative communicator will offer what the denizens of contemporary culture are desperate to hear: a total narrative in which to situate themselves. If believers have the story of Christ for them, then what they have will be more than sufficient.

¹ On the Reading of Old Books," *God in the Dock: Essays on God and Ethics*, Ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Harper, 1970), 201-202. Also HarperCollins, 2014.

² For more detail consult the research presented in section 13.1 of "How to Take Smart Notes," 2nd ed., by Söhnke Ahrens, pp. 130ff.