

A Common Lectionary, a Shared Context: Planning Worship with All the Church

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Many have called the Bible a “good book.” And it is good. But it’s not a book. The Bible is, rather, a library—made up of sixty-some books, give or take a few, depending on your tradition. This collection, this library, contains multiple literary forms—poetry, song, narrative, history, and letters, to name a few—and was written over a dozen centuries by a host of authors living in a variety of communities and locations. This library in all its diversity invites us to explore and learn from hundreds of voices, thousands of perspectives—all sharing with us their experience of a good and awesome God. The biblical library is a place where ideas are planted and continue to come alive in the minds and hearts of visitors.

The content of the bound volume we call “The Bible” developed over centuries, in many cases deriving from the stories early Hebrew and Christian assemblies were telling each other, being collected into standard stories, being read together, and shared in worship.¹ The stories shared in communities and especially in corporate worship were passed down through generations, telling the whole story of salvation history, from Israel to Christ to our present day.

Over time, worshipping communities figured out which texts would be recognized as canonical. And others would have strong opinions about those choices, mostly famously, perhaps, Luther’s “canon within the canon” insisting on scripture’s focus on Christ. This seems ultimately to be Luther participating in this very tradition of figuring out which texts merit commendation across the community, which texts tell a story worth repeating over and over, which texts should be most central to who we are as humans in relationship with one another and with God, which texts help us share the good news with others or—just as importantly—don’t get in the way of the sharing.



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The process of assembling the various biblical collections we call “The Bible” has a counterpart in the practice of developing lectionaries, those lists of selected pericopes that help a reader move through some or all of scripture in a prescribed and, often, chronologically patterned way. A lectionary is in many ways another layer of curating our biblical library, creating a canon within a canon for those who want to read and pray scripture hourly or daily—usually as an individual or small religious community—or weekly, typically for communities gathering in worship.

Lectionaries are necessary for weekly gatherings because we end up with more scripture than we can possibly handle in any reasonable way for a community that gathers weekly, even if we read several pericopes every time we meet. And lectionaries provide coherence and digestibility to the biblical witness. Scripture has plenty of overlapping themes and even specific content. The thousands of verses of scripture in the Revised Common Lectionary cover only 16% of the 30,000-plus verses in the Bible.² But 16% of 30,000 is still a lot of scripture. Those developing a weekly lectionary for worship commend to the worshipping community which of these biblical texts seems good for corporate worship. When created by groups of people, lectionaries help ensure that the texts we hear in worship—and, particularly, the texts that are preached from pulpits—are faithful to the big arc of scripture rather than focused on individual theologies and agendas. The texts chosen to accompany each other on a given day are diverse, meant to supplement each other by agreement or argument, always pointing to what Gordon Lathrop calls the “rich Christian hope for unity in diversity because of Jesus Christ.”³

Enter the cantor, who, with the pastor and other congregational leaders, is called to plan worship. Most church musicians serve in a congregation that follows some sort of lectionary, whether a cyclical or narrative developed by an ecumenical committee or a leadership plan that goes from one themed sermon cycle to another. Cantors help select and often compose liturgical pieces, psalms, hymns, anthems, prayers, and other parts of worship. They offer further curation of which scripture we hear, sing, and pray, and which pericopes just don’t make the cut. The cantor, like the preacher, can introduce supplemental texts from outside the common lectionary—biblical texts as well as all sorts of others, like poetry, prose, paraphrases of biblical texts, and so on.

For both preacher and cantor, this task is centrally important to the pastoral care of the congregation, because it determines what the assembly will hear and take to heart and, in the case of musical selection, have in their ears and on their lips the rest of the week. The entire liturgy, and perhaps above all, anything we sing corporately—because when we sing together, we breathe together—takes on a corporeal and relational nature. When biblical proclamation is

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heard in the liturgy, the words become the Word, embodied in Jesus and embodying Jesus, who is with us where two or three are gathered. His promise of new life is shared most clearly in the proclamation of the word, and the proclamation carried out through the sacraments. Christ's presence throughout this scriptural library is realized in the liturgy, where the breath of God inhabits all that is spoken, sung, and heard.⁴

So, a common lectionary, first and foremost, ensures our worship planning remains within this historical dialogue of what texts are and are not most important to us, what stories are central to who we are as a Christian community, what pericopes best proclaim a Christ crucified for all the world. Here the very mission of God, the *missio Dei*, is propelled by the Holy Spirit into human communities most often and most reliably—that is, when we don't get in the way—by the scriptural and lectionary traditions as they do their work of keeping us creatures focused on Christ's promises to us and not on someone else's gospel.

Common lectionaries are to be commended for many other reasons as well. The formulaic structure of a lectionary can save time in worship planning, and the repetition of readings can help parishioners commit important scripture to memory. The shared context of readings and related liturgical components bind Christians across geographical and cultural borders. It can also provide points of collaboration for church leaders within and across ecclesial traditions.

Bringing the biblical witness week after week in formal structures, Christian liturgy is an ecumenical endeavor. In the years since the Second Vatican Council, Christian church bodies have worked together to create a collection of Scripture readings—for Sundays, for feast days, and even for every day of the week—for use in worship and for use in daily prayer in the home. The collection in this common lectionary ensures we are listening to the variety of voices in this library of "The Bible" and is therefore an indispensable tool in worship planning. The Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), compiled by the ecumenical Consultation on Common Texts, is a strong resource to provide diverse voices for Sunday liturgies and feast days, particularly. From my father-in-law's rural, multi-point Lutheran parish to my large, urban United Methodist congregation to my grandparents' suburban Presbyterian church, the RCL is a thread that binds us together even when our styles of music, language, orders of service, and liturgical structures differ. The comfort that comes from recognizing meaningful, proclamatory texts—from holding those texts in one's heart and mind—allows church members in the pew to see their shared journey with Christian siblings across the country and around the globe.⁵ With that scriptural-lectionary reminder of God's love for them, of their freedom in Christ, they are free to be little Christs to their neighbors, sharing those same words of hope and promise beyond the limits of their local worshiping community.

To some, a cycle of assigned readings—three years for the RCL—sounds limiting. But, like the liturgy itself, the framework of a lectionary can be understood as freeing rather than restricting. Because the lectionary provides a plan from which to work, church leaders are free to tend to other parts of their ministry. Sure, some occasions

require deviation from the plan, but, generally, it is worthwhile to follow the calendar. A lectionary worthy for Christian liturgy tells the story of Jesus' life and ministry from the varied accounts of the Gospel writers in connection with other parts of our ancestors' stories.⁶

Following a common lectionary encourages opportunities for ministerial collaboration, within denominations and ecumenically. Preachers and cantors will meet to discuss the upcoming texts and how they might be best proclaimed. Doing so ensures parishioners are hearing the whole arc of salvation history rather than the worship leaders' favorite themes. The temptation to "mine" the scriptures to support our individual agendas is avoided; creativity is not made an idol. The Good News we are called to proclaim is the same each time the community gathers for worship—proclaiming this story to our people in our time and place so that they are prepared for the week ahead. As the Second Vatican Council offered, "The treasures of the bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God's word."⁷ The lectionary was formed because church leaders agreed that evangelism and learning were connected to the liturgy. The texts they speak, sing, and hear in the liturgy are what they carry out into the world—what they hear in the worship life of the community affects the public life of the community.⁸

What many Christians know of scripture, the verses they've committed to memory and can recognize outside of church, was learned in the liturgy. All were from scripture—confession and forgiveness, prayers that quote Bible passages, hymns that sing the faith, pericopes and preaching. If the scriptures are the "cradle wherein Christ is laid," as Luther describes, then the liturgy is the nursery.⁹ By virtue of being in the pews during the Sunday morning liturgy as a child, I learned scripture. The lectionary connects the biblical narrative to the liturgical year and the life of the worshipping community so that we hear the story, the same story that other Christian siblings around the globe hear in their contexts and cultures.

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If the true test of liturgy is found in the life of the people, then the cantor's role is paramount to building the connections within the community's worship life and their public life. With covering less than seventeen percent of the content of the Bible, the goal of the RCL is not to teach scripture. Daily Bible reading and study groups can tend that learning. The RCL, rather, creates yet another canon within the canon. Each set of lections within and across the three-year cycle highlights Sunday as the festival day in the Christian community, the "eighth" day, when the community gathers to proclaim Christ's resurrection. Honoring the plan of the lectionary for the most part keeps the Sunday fest primary, avoiding the pitfall of other agendas.¹⁰ When it comes

to worship planning, the lectionary helps to shape all musical aspects of liturgy—congregational hymns, choral anthems and other “performance” music, liturgical music, and the psalms. Using the lectionary as a baseline for planning creates cohesion around not just the liturgy but all aspects of congregational life. The lections provide a helpful structure for selecting music that tells the broader story of salvation, rather than fitting a limited theme. A specific theme can still be lifted up in the sermon or in the prayers of the people but connecting the whole of the liturgy to the larger story in the Sundays before it and after it strengthens the worshiping community, sustaining members to bear witness to the gospel.

Several denominations have created worship planning tools based on the RCL cycle. There are databases with robust catalogues of hymnody, and, in some cases, “performance” music—preludes, postludes, hymn introductions, etc.—designed to be searchable based on thematic words and organized according to the Sunday/Feast Day pericopes. These tools save time for church leaders by providing an organized and narrowed structure for planning. Because some hymnody is shared across many traditions, we are reminded of the shared Christian journey. Paul Westermeyer, in his research, discovered that across fourteen English-language hymnals, there are about 750 tunes repeated at least five times.¹¹

The reliability of a lectionary cycle means that worship planners can be proactive, begin their work early, planning ahead for busy times of the church year. Choirs and bands need to rehearse for ensemble, altar guilds need to prepare the linens and elements, and teachers need to coordinate learning for faith formation. Of course, it is good to be ready to respond to emergencies and other current events, but long-range planning need not be rigid. The structure of the liturgy and the lectionary is the foundation on which relevant, vibrant worship is built. It builds upon the familiar and stable, while responding to the immediate needs of the people in context.

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The compilation of the RCL emerged from the lectionaries that came before it—from the sacred texts read in synagogues that Jesus himself read and explained, to early Christians who gathered in community to hear the story of salvation. Eventually, a codex of readings was made and shared between assemblies. The Bible was a communal book, intended for public proclamation; individuals did not own private copies.¹² Using the RCL today connects contemporary Christian assemblies to their Christian and Jewish ancestors—to the faithful across time and space, rejoicing with their rejoicing and lamenting with their lamentation. Connecting with history in this way and being attentive to how the pericopes work together on a given Sunday hold

church leaders accountable to the whole story. The worshiping assembly retains a broader biblical understanding of salvation history.

The common lectionaries strengthen the Christian community, forming ecumenical bonds among clergy, other church leaders, and lay people alike. Common lectionaries help people in the pews appreciate and understand the liturgical year and the rhythm and seasons of life in the worshiping community. The lectionaries move Christians beyond their local context and connect them to the global Christian community. Telling the story with these values in mind helps make sense of the overwhelmingly complex library of story, song, history, post, and poetry we call the Bible. In the repeated hearings of the whole story of salvation, we are invited deeper into the Word. The Word proclaimed in the liturgy takes root in us, renewing our minds for Christ, binding us to our neighbors, and sending us out into the world for ministry and witness to the gospel.

Endnotes

¹ *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy), Second Vatican Council, December 4, 1963, 24.

“Sacred scripture is of the greatest importance in the celebration of the liturgy. For it is from scripture that lessons are read and explained in the homily, and psalms are sung; the prayers, collects, and liturgical songs are scriptural in their inspiration and their force, and it is from the scriptures that actions and signs derive their meaning. Thus to achieve the restoration, progress, and adaptation of the sacred liturgy, it is essential to promote that warm and living love for scripture to which the venerable tradition of both eastern and western rites gives testimony.”

² Normand Bonneau, *The Sunday Lectionary: Ritual Word, Paschal Shape* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1998), 49.

³ Gordon W. Lathrop, *Saving Images: The Presence of the Bible in Christian Liturgy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 18.

⁴ Cally Hammond, “Today This Scripture Has Been Fulfilled in Your Hearing,” in *Lively Oracles of God: Perspectives on the Bible and Liturgy*, ed Gordon Jeanes and Bridget Nichols (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2022), 1.

“Luke 4:16-21...Luke 24:13-35...both show the man Jesus—before *and after* his resurrection—reading a recognised form of Scripture and then explaining it to his hearers. These two narratives capture in microcosm the approach used in modern reading and interpretation of Scripture in collective worship. They shift between the written word and the proclaimed w/Word; and in both cases their ultimate target is the living Word—through the breaking of bread through which Christ is made known.”

⁵ *The Reims Statement: Praying with One Voice*, English Language Liturgical Consultation, August 16, 2011, 1.

“We celebrate the sense of being at home in one another’s churches that comes with praying the same texts and hearing the same scriptures in the Sunday liturgy.”

⁶ Bonneau, *The Sunday Lectionary: Ritual Word, Paschal Shape*, 145. On guiding principles for the compilers of the Sunday Lectionary: “They sought (1) to include as much of the story of Jesus’ public ministry as possible, and (2) to underline the uniqueness of each gospel

writer's way of telling the story, all the while tailoring the results so as (3) to respect liturgy's need to tell the same fundamental story each year."

⁷ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 51.

⁸ Hans Boehringer, "The Common Lectionary," in *Word and World: Theology for Christian Ministry*, X, No 1 (Winter 1990): 27. "...Massey Shepherd, responding to a question about what makes for good liturgy, remarked that the true test of a parish liturgy was not whether it followed rubrical direction; the true test was to be found in the lives of those who celebrated that liturgy...that worship has to do with the diaconal ministry and witness of the church."

⁹ Martin Luther, *Word and Sacrament I* (Luther's Works, Vol. 35), E. Theodore Bachmann, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1960), 236.

¹⁰ Adolf Adam, *The Liturgical Year: Its History and Its Meaning after the Reform of the Liturgy* (Collegeville: Pueblo, 1981), 49. On the *General Norms for the Liturgical Year* released in 1969:

"These new regulations in defense of the Sunday liturgy are in danger of being frustrated once again by well-intentioned initiatives that tend to give many Sundays a special theme and purpose which are foreign to Sunday itself. We may add the widespread practice of celebrating on Sundays 'motif Masses' or theme Masses that are meant to 'raise people's consciousness' with regard to ecclesial or social problems and prepare them for appropriate 'actions.'"

¹¹ Paul Westermeyer, *Let the People Sing: Hymn Tunes in Perspective* (Chicago: GIA, 2005), 5.

¹² Gordon W. Lathrop, *Saving Images*, 6.

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