



Limitations of the Lectionary

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I. TWO ANECDOTES

1. "When Bathsheba the wife of Uri'ah heard that Uri'ah her husband was dead, she made lamentation for her husband." As the lay reader at our church began to read the Old Testament text for the 4th Sunday after Pentecost, Cycle C (2 Sam 11:26-12:10, 13-15), he had the full attention of the congregation, including me. One could hear the proverbial pin drop as the passage went on to recount how the prophet Nathan exposed the excesses of a king consumed with passion for the wife of Uri'ah by telling the tale of the vicious ruler and the poor man's lamb. It was early June, 1989. Halfway around the world, vicious Chinese rulers were making Nathan's allegory immediately relevant as they murdered Chinese citizens in their capital's central square. But the Old Testament was not done yet. I could see people lean forward in their pews as the passage ended with David's repentance and the prophecy of the death of the child from his adulterous union with Bathsheba. These people knew about the joys and strains of marriage and children. They had experienced the trials of adultery and divorce. "What is the Bible saying to us?" "What does this mean?" These questions were on everybody's lips.

Alas, these questions did not find a response. Indeed, the attempt to respond was made extremely difficult by the other readings assigned for the day. We had a selection from the second chapter of Galatians. This great epistle, to which Luther said he was married, was in the process of being read in sequence—an important event in the three-year lectionary cycle. I believe I can say with some confidence that compared to the drama of 2 Samuel, it made no impression whatsoever. In the context of the service, it simply represented a clumsy change of subject. Finally, the Gospel, Luke 7:36-50, presented us with a new issue. It told of a woman in anguish

over unnamed sins who throws herself on the mercy of Jesus. After hearing 2 Samuel, many of us had a sense of being convicted by the law. Now, after the reading from Luke, we were encouraged to identify with an extravagant act of repentance and Jesus' forgiveness. In the inevitable analogy of the Old Testament and gospel texts, sanctioned by the lectionary, the transgressions of David the office holder and Bathsheba the wife were given a generalized comparison to the personal sorrow of a woman burdened by mysterious sins that we were left to imagine. This had the effect of focusing the Old Testament reading on David's act of repentance and downplaying the primary attention that the text gives to the social consequences of sinful actions. I was not surprised when, after the service, one person even offered a Marcionite reading of divine behavior based on a comparison of the texts: "The God of the Old Testament kills

babies,” he said; “Jesus forgives those who weep.”

The lectionary had done its disruptive work yet another week. It had confused us as a congregation by placing disparate passages of the Bible in juxtaposition. It gave two of these passages a simplified point of comparison and left the third hanging. The lectionary put the pastor in a dilemma. It presented an awkward combination of themes and issues that demand separate and careful treatment. The sermon we heard concentrated, as usual, on the Gospel. The Old Testament, as usual, was left in the dust.

2. About a week later I ran into a colleague just as he was getting ready to preach in chapel. “What’s your text?” I asked. He told me he was teaching a summer school course on Mark and that he decided to let the students pick the passage. They found one quickly: Mark 4:11-12: “And he said to them, ‘To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables; so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn again, and be forgiven.’” This choice of a preaching text made sense to me. It is the hard passages of the Bible that grab our attention. They are the ones about which we want to learn. If I had been a student in my colleague’s class, I would have voted for Mark 4:11-12. It brings to mind the great Augustinian themes of election and predestination.

My colleague’s next comment, delivered in an ironic tone, was especially interesting. “Naturally,” he said, “Mark 4:11-12 does not appear in the lectionary.” I understood what he meant. It is not that the current three-year lectionary so expurgates the Bible that all difficult passages are removed. Clearly this is not the case. But one does notice that the gospels, which are read according to the principle of *lectio continua*, are not read in their entirety. This makes one curious as to what is left out and by what criteria. It is obvious that Mark 4:11-12, along with parallels (Matt 13:10-15; Luke 8:9-10) and related passages (John 12:39-41; Acts 28:26-27; see also Isa 6:9-12), have been self-consciously avoided in the current Lutheran lectionary. I say self-consciously because the Roman *Ordo*, upon which the new Lutheran lectionary is based, at least includes the text from Matthew.

It would seem that those who made the choices of texts for the Lutheran lectionary refused to deal with the thorny but crucial reason given in these passages for Jesus’ speaking in parables: that there are those who are fated by God to be confused. Is this biblical explanation too exclusive? Does it throw a monkey wrench into the bland theology of an affirming deity so prominent in mainline Lutheranism

today? My colleague was suspicious because he saw an objectionable pattern at work in the choice of texts. After long experience, he came to the conclusion that the lectionary is soft on a number of vital theological issues that have been the bone and sinew of the Christian tradition.

II. TAKING A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

For many pastors in the church, especially younger ones, it is unthinkable to call the lectionary into question. Indoctrinated by liturgical purists, they have spent hours pouring over the highly detailed and frequently bizarre regulations of the *Manual on the Liturgy*, learning the “hows” of proper worship leadership without considering the “whys.” The Manual teaches the reader not to consider the lectionary critically, but only to employ a lectionary “of appropriate

size and dignity. . .not a paperback or a lectionary leaflet.”¹

The present preoccupation with the liturgical calendar provides further encouragement for unquestioning use of the lectionary. It is now a common experience in the church to be treated to a barrage of sermons which use the weekly pericopes largely for the purpose of illustrating liturgical concepts such as Advent or Epiphany. The poor congregation thus finds itself subjected to an endless series of abstract meditations on the emotions of “anticipation” or “realization,” or whatever else is thought to be relevant to the liturgical season.

Various aids and resources serve to reinforce passive obedience to the lectionary. For a distressing number of the clergy, weekly Scripture reading and sermon preparation have been reduced to the curious practice of studying the three assigned texts for the week. The ever-present temptation is to treat these texts as pieces of a puzzle to be fit together by analogy, typology, allegory, or a progressive scheme of salvation-history. Although this often leads the exegete to employ techniques that, in the words of Roy Harrisville, are better “left to Origen or to the author of the *Fairie Queene*,”² such techniques are tried nonetheless, week after week, year after year.

Alliance to the lectionary is also stimulated by the current enthusiasm for the ecumenical movement, particularly that portion of it which emphasizes links to the Catholic tradition. The present lectionary is a product of Vatican II reform. The “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy,” promulgated in 1963, called for an increase in public reading of the Scriptures in Catholic parishes. The old system of gospel and epistle texts was cast aside. The new *Ordo*, which began to be used in Advent of 1969, presents a three-year cycle of texts revolving around the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The *Ordo* adds significant selections from the Gospel of John to each year of the cycle. In addition, it provides not only epistle readings, which are customary, but also readings from the Old Testament. The Old Testament texts are selected according to a traditional, but by modern standards, arbitrary principle of analogy to gospel texts. This principle of analogy is grounded in a general hermeneutic of promise and fulfillment.

¹Philip H. Pfatteicher and Carlos R. Messerli, *Manual on the Liturgy: Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979) 206.

²Roy A. Harrisville, “God’s Mercy—Tested, Promised, Done!” *Interpretation* 31 (1977) 166.

The Roman Catholic *Ordo* was taken over, with modifications, by Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Lutherans, and other Protestants in the early seventies. Ecumenical enthusiasts now point with pride to the similar pattern of texts in Sunday worship. According to prominent ecumenical authorities, this similarity has become a “sign” of the “visible unity” of contemporary Christendom. Since, in the view of many in the ecumenical movement, there is no greater goal than the visible unity of the church, the present lectionary has come to be considered a vital tool of inter-church relations.

With such a cloud of distinguished witnesses ready to defend the lectionary, it would seem foolish to raise questions about it. At the very least, however, I want to file a minority report. In the nearly two decades since the present lectionary has been with us, we have seen too many serious problems to be content with the present state of affairs. It would be unrealistic and perhaps schismatic to advocate abandoning the lectionary, but we can argue for a more critical usage.

III. A HUMAN TRADITION

The origin of the idea of lectionary readings is lost in the mists of history.³ In all likelihood the practice goes back to the synagogue. Whether or not the practice was adopted by early Christians directly from Jewish models is an obscure matter, much debated. By the fourth century, however, a basic lectionary system was in place. In the history of the west, Gregory the Great (504-604), the church in Gaul, and Alcuin of York (c. 735-804), advisor to Charlemagne, have been credited with contributing to the development of what we know today as the traditional Catholic pattern of gospel and epistle lessons. These were chosen according to a variety of factors such as seasonal church festivals, the memory of saints, specific historical events, even the rhythms of the agricultural year. The Reformation subjected this inherited lectionary to critical examination. Radical reformers rejected it. Zwingli preferred the practice of *lectio continua*. Calvin favored a single reading at services. Luther was especially disparaging of traditional epistle choices for being too moralistic.

In short, the history of the lectionary shows itself to be part of what the Augsburg Confession calls "human traditions." As a human tradition, the lectionary is legitimately open to criticism, adaption, and even rejection. Lutherans in particular should be willing to treat the lectionary with at least a modicum of suspicion. Luther warned the church about the danger of inflexible customs of worship that are turned "into dictatorial laws opposed to the freedom of faith."⁴ I wish to exercise such a modicum of suspicion, born of the freedom of faith, by making three critical observations about the limitations of the present lectionary.⁵

³On the following see John Reumann, "A History of Lectionaries: From the Synagogue at Nazareth to Post-Vatican II," *Interpretation* 31 (1977) 116-130.

⁴*Luther's Works*, 53.46.

⁵On what follows, I have found three articles particularly helpful: Gerard S. Sloyan, "The Lectionary as a Context for Interpretation," *Interpretation* 31 (1977) 131-138; Lloyd R. Bailey, "The Lectionary in Critical Perspective," *ibid.*, 139-153; Richard Nelson, "Reading Texts in Lectionary Pairs," *dialog* 21 (1982) 95-101.

IV. THE LIMITATIONS OF THE PRESENT LECTIONARY

1. *The lectionary does not responsibly represent the Old Testament.* This is not surprising. In the long tradition of Christian lectionaries, the Old Testament has rarely found a secure place. To be sure, the Roman *Ordo* and the Protestant lectionaries modeled after it are a significant advance over much of previous practice. But the twentieth century has experienced a theological revolution in Old Testament studies. To employ, as the present lectionary does, a generalized hermeneutic of promise and fulfillment based on the crude device of analogy is an inadequate response to current scholarship. It shows that the fundamental intention of the lectionary is to use the Old Testament largely as a source of anticipations of Christian salvation. This distorts the biblical material by sanctioning what Gerard Sloyan calls, "realized eschatology with a vengeance."⁶ If such a promise/fulfillment scheme were proposed by a contemporary Old Testament scholar, it would meet with hostile resistance. That this hermeneutical use of the Old Testament has been a traditional Christian practice is not enough of a reason to continue it. If it does not serve the authentic exposition of the Scriptures then it should be rejected by a critical theology seeking to anchor itself in a confessional stance of *sola scriptura*.

A further problem is caused by the choice of Old Testament readings. Richard Nelson

points out that “30% of all readings are from Isaiah and two-thirds of these are from chapters 40-66.”⁷ This is a shocking statistic. It is obvious that the riches of the Old Testament are being ignored. Given the fact that readings from Acts replace the Old Testament lesson during the Easter season, one realizes just how limited the encounter with the Old Testament is in the average congregation on Sunday mornings.

It is particularly troublesome that the great stories of the Old Testament, especially from Joshua to 2 Kings, are largely neglected. My anecdote about the effect of 2 Samuel is the exception that proves the rule. Undoubtedly part of the reason my congregation listened so attentively to the story of the dramatic confrontation between Nathan and David is that readings of this type appear so infrequently that they draw attention to themselves because of their sheer novelty.

Why should this be? It is in the great tales of the Old Testament that the triumph and tragedy of human life before God find their most noble expression. All of us grew up with these Old Testament stories. The pictures that illustrated them in our Sunday School books captured our imagination as children. They continue to capture the imagination of our children today. These Bible stories have been shared by generations of Jews and Christians as they have sought to order the mystery of experience. It is a shame, therefore, that on Sunday mornings the walls of Jericho never fall (Josh 6:20) and that David’s cry: “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom!” (2 Sam 18:33) is never heard.

2. *The use of three disparate texts causes insurmountable hermeneutical difficulties for the preacher and the congregation.* The temptation to relate the texts to each other, fostered by the lectionary’s effort to make the Old Testament and gospel readings analogous, is strong for the preacher and nearly overwhelming for the congregation. This discourages serious exegesis. To make matters worse, the constant use of

⁶Sloyan, “The Lectionary as a Context,” 135.

⁷Nelson, “Reading Texts,” 95.

three texts Sunday after Sunday has had the unintended effect of numbing the average congregation. Even under the best of circumstances, the Bible is confusing to most people in this secular age. Why confuse them more by dividing their attention among three texts that are most often unrelated? A worship service must have a focus. This is made nearly impossible when the Word of God is made to go in different directions.

3. *The lectionary produces too many sermons on gospel texts.* It is an obvious fact that the lectionary, and worship practice generally, give the gospel lesson pride of place as the culmination of the readings for the day. It is for the gospel alone that we stand; we begin and end the hearing of it with music of praise. This is an honored practice of the Christian tradition. But it is a practice that has led, in my opinion, to a surfeit of sermons grounded in gospel texts. In a famous article from the 1940s, H. Richard Niebuhr warned us against the danger of overemphasizing one person of the Trinity at the expense of the others and so placing the trinitarian doctrine as a whole in jeopardy.⁸ He saw this danger leading to truncated theologies grounded in “unitarianisms,” of the Father, the Son, or the Spirit. In our current lectionary practice, with its emphasis on the gospel lesson, there is the danger of a “unitarianism of the Son” in which Jesus’ preaching is equated with universal moral truths or ideals, and his feelings,

and even his personality, become subject to trivializing exploration. Such a theological approach can only lead to a red-letter mentality in the church that ends up advocating a desiccated form of pietism.

V. AN ALTERNATIVE

We all know the standard criticism of the preacher who wants to explore the Bible independently by choosing passages apart from the disciplined guidance of the church. The grave risk is that the preacher will make the Bible little more than an extension of the self. Exegesis will give way to eisegesis. This is a valid argument. It was hammered home to me again and again when I was a seminary student (in a school of the Reformed tradition). Calvin's preference for one text in a worship service was the rule. The selection of the Sunday text was the responsibility of the "teaching elder," that is, the pastor. In such a context, the constant worry of the homiletician was that he or she would abuse God's Word by practicing a subjective reductionism.

As students we did not have the established practice of the lectionary to provide a formal solution to the problem. We knew that we had to be on guard at all times. As one possible solution to the problem, we students were taught to practice an arduous, but ultimately rewarding pedagogical exercise called, "Fifty-Two Texts and Titles." Our responsibility was to read the whole of Scripture and find fifty-two preaching texts. We were told to reflect on them at least long enough to develop a working title for each text. We were then to make up a file for ten of these sermons and to begin the process of collecting research, ideas, scraps of information, illustrative material, and the like for each of the files. The purpose of the exercise was to inculcate the ideal of a preacher reading and thinking about the

⁸H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," *Theology Today* 3 (1946) 371-384.

whole of Scripture and directing the varied experiences of life to its exposition over an entire year, working on the average of ten weeks in advance.

This homiletical exercise was particularly rewarding. The responsibility of finding texts and titles forced me into an active relationship with the Scriptures on a daily basis. It encouraged me to try to exercise an authentic exegetical exploration of single passages instead of tempting me, as the present lectionary does, to practice analogy, typology, allegory, or a crude form of realized eschatology to deal with three disparate texts. Most importantly, it made me read the whole of the Bible *with the task of preaching constantly in mind*. I found myself surprised by God's Word as I encountered passages in the Bible that I had forgotten or that struck me in a new way. To use the terminology of educational psychology, my ability to think critically was expanded in direct proportion to the increase in my data base of biblical material.

VI. A MODEST PROPOSAL

Pastors might consider the possibility of trying the exercise, "Fifty-Two Texts and Titles" (adapted to their own needs). It could be employed, for example, only during the Lenten season or during the long season of Pentecost. Such a venture should be discussed thoroughly with the

worship committee or church council.

Pastors, see what you find when you read the Bible on your own. See what titles (that is, initial thoughts) you come up with when you encounter a text that seizes your imagination. Mindful of the danger of misusing Scripture for subjective purposes, look for texts that force you to confront theological difficulties. Allow these passages to stretch your mind and your faith. Monitor closely the effect on your congregation of having one text read and preached on during a worship service.

In short, try to free yourself from the “human tradition” of the lectionary, if only for a short period of time. You may be stimulated to return to the lectionary with new insights. In any event, you will end up knowing more about the Bible and yourself. An awareness of the limitations of the lectionary will lead you to realize new possibilities for the faithful proclamation of God’s Word.