Class Notes #1

**Lectionary Preaching and the Christian Calendar**

Required readings: Lowry, Chs. 2 &3; Hickman, et al, Chs. 1-4.

Suggested Readings: Allen, et al.; Talley.

The History of the Lectionary

1. The Use of the Lectionary in the Early Church:

* The root of the word “lectionary” is the Latin *lectio* which means reading, lesson, or selection. It denotes “a picking out or selecting a reading.” Likewise, lectionaries are orderly sequences of selections from the scriptures according to a prescribed schedule for either Sunday worship or daily prayer.
* The lectionary has a long history in the Christian Church. Since ancient times, synagogues have had fixed scripture readings appointed for the Jewish feasts and readings for ordinary Sabbaths chosen on the principle of *lectio continua* - that is, continuous reading through the books of scripture. Such a practice may have been in use when Jesus was in the synagogue at Nazareth and “stood up to read the lesson and was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah” (Lk 4:16-17).
* Although the origins of the Christian use of lectionaries are not clear, there is some evidence of using the lectionaries in the early 2nd-century Christian churches (e.g., Justine Martyr’s *Apology* in AD 155).
* In Western Europe, various local lectionaries developed. Early in the ninth century, these were standardized into the traditional Sunday Lectionary, and that, until recent years, was used by Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and Lutherans.[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. The Lectionary in the Roman Catholic Church:

* Roman Catholics have used a lectionary, a sort of small booklet, rather than using the whole Bible in their mass and personal meditation. The Roman Catholic lectionary was composed based on *lectio selecta*, which means “selected reading.” *Lectio selecta* means choosing a biblical text according to its relationship to the time of year, festival theme, and so forth.
* The ecumenical movement of the Roman Catholic Church in the Second Vatican Council (1962-5) led the Church leaders to revise their lectionary. The Second Vatican Council’s “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy” declared its necessity as follows: “The treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that a richer share in God’s word may be provided for the faithful. In this way a more representative portion of Holy Scripture will be read to the people in the course of a prescribed number of years.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Finally in 1969 the Roman Catholic Church produced the *Ordo lectionum Missae* which is based on the Roman-ecumenical three-year lectionary system.

1. The Lectionary in the Protestant Church:

* Protestant Christians have been ignorant of the lectionary since the 16th-century Reformers rejected the medieval church liturgy, including its use of the lectionary. The reformers declared “*sola scriptura*.” For example, Calvin never used the lectionary in worship. Instead, he tried to preach the entire books of the Bible. During the weekday services, he preached from the Hebrew Bible beginning from Genesis Chapter 1 verse 1. During the Sunday morning services, he preached the gospels, beginning from Matthew Chapter 1 verse 1. His reading method is called *lectio continua*, which means “continuous reading” of a biblical book, verse by verse, straight through the book.
* Canonical criticism and other historical critical methods in Biblical Studies have encouraged Protestant churches to realize the reciprocal relationship between text and ecclesial context. The twentieth-century Protestant churches began to feel the necessity of liturgical reform and reconsider the place of the scriptures in public worship.
* At this juncture, the Roman Catholic Church’s revision of the lectionary challenged Protestant churches to make their own lectionaries. In the 1970s, the Presbyterian, Lutheran, Episcopal, UMC, DC, and UCC churches made their own worship books based on the original Roman lectionary system. Although these churches had their individual lectionaries, the ecumenical spirit inspired 13 Protestant churches in Canada and the U.S. to convene the “North American Consultation on Common Texts” in Washington, D.C. in 1978. Membership of the consultation included pastors and scholars from the Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Lutheran and UM churches. The committee finally developed and published the *Common Lectionary* in 1983. It is generally based on the Roman Catholic model of a three-year lectionary system, but it has its own modifications, especially in selecting the Old Testament pericopes.
* The Common Lectionary went through a testing period of three complete cycles, or nine years total. After several years of evaluation, the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) was published in 1992, and that is the book being used at most churches.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The Structure of the Revised Common Lectionary

The Lectionary was organized based on the following 5 principles:

1. Principle #1: The RCL accepts the cornerstone of the Roman lectionary, that is, the semi-continuous reading of the three synoptic gospels over a three-year period designated by A, B, and C. The three years are each distinguished by one of the synoptic gospels: Matthew in A, Mark in B, and Luke in C. John is distributed over the three years with a heavy emphasis during Lent and Easter. We are currently in Cycle A.

1. Principle #2: The RCL assumes the classic Western Church Calendar, consisting principally of the Sundays and seasons related to the Christmas Cycle of Advent-Christmas-Epiphany, and the Easter Cycle of Lent-Holy Week-Easter-Pentecost/Trinity.
2. Principle #3: Each week, four lessons are offered from an Old Testament, Psalm, Gospel, and Epistle, based on the particular theological themes of the season of the Christian year. The four passages each Sunday may serve not only as a sermon text but also as a resource for the liturgical content of the opening prayer, the prayers of confession, intercession, and petition, and the affirmation of faith. The psalm is intended to be a response by the people to the Old Testament lesson rather than a lesson in itself, but it can also be used as the text for a sermon, too.
3. Principle #4: In selecting the four lessons each week, two types of readings are used, the *lectio selecta* and the *lectio continua*. That is, the RCL selects biblical texts using the *lectio selecta* for particular Christological events in the calendar. The RCL also reads biblical books in continuous fashion, that is, using the *lectio continua* for the days of the ordinary cycle of the year (the Sundays “after Epiphany” and “after Pentecost”). During the period of *lectio continua*, it is possible for the preacher to move in and out of the lectionary, or in other words, to use it when he or she wishes.
4. Principle #5: The RCL approaches the OT readings in three ways:
5. The OT is not read during the Sundays of Easter for two reasons: First, in order not to force the unique event of the resurrection upon OT material (to avoid the allegorical interpretation), and second, in order to use the book of Acts, which provides the church with its most primitive witness to the resurrection.
6. OT lessons are typologically controlled by the Gospel, particularly during the festal seasons of Advent-Christmas Day-Epiphany, and Lent-Easter Day-Pentecost.
7. During the ordinary cycle of the year, the RCL offers semi-continuous reading of some significant OT narratives rather than using a thematic unity. That is, in the year A, the RCL reads the Patriarchal and Mosaic narratives in the Pentateuch, along with Matthew. In the year B, the RCL reads the Davidic narratives in the historical books, along with Mark. In the Year C, the RCL reads the Elijah-Elisha sequence from the historical books and selections from the entire prophetic canon, along with Luke. Toward the end of the post-Pentecost Sundays, the Wisdom literature is introduced. During the Sundays preceding Advent and the First and Second Sundays of Advent, the apocalyptic material is used because of its ancient reference to the Second Coming rather than to Christmas.

The Evolution of the Christian Calendar

The Christian calendar has been developed through give-and-take with the surrounding secular culture. In the process of inculturation, cultural elements of secular society were not directly copied by the church but rather were modified and transformed within the church through theological and biblical reinterpretation.

1. Easter

* Easter has its origin in Jewish *pascha*. Its origin is *pesach* in Aramaic. *Pascha* in Greek) has two origins, both “to suffer (*paschein*)” and “to passage (*transitus* - Christ’s passage into the kingdom). Jewish *pascha* has been the center of the Jewish year as commemorating deliverance from slavery (Exod. 12:6-8). It is the feast of national liberation with the feast of Unleavened bread in spring (14th -15th of Nisan in the Jewish calendar). The old Jewish commemoration of deliverance was now made completely new in Jesus Christ for early Christians. Slavery and redemption were recalled but in the new sense of release from sin and death through what Christ had done (I Cor. 5:7-8).
* In the first three centuries the early Christians commemorated together the entire work of redemption—the incarnation, passion, resurrection, and glorification of Jesus Christ at the *pascha* (The Apostle’s Tradition). However, the date was controversial. The Christians of Asia Minor observed it on the actual Jewish *pascha* (the fourteenth of Nisan(April)), while other congregations in the West observed it on the first Sunday following it. It was because the Bible provided two different dates of Jesus’ crucifixion. One is that, according to the Synoptic chronology, Jesus was crucified on the 15th of Nisan after eating the Passover meal with his disciples in the night before his crucifixion (Mk 14:14; Mt 26:18; Lk 22:8). The other is that, according to John’s chronology, Jesus’ crucifixion occurred on the 14 of Nisan (19:32, 36) at the time of the slaying of the lambs for the feast. John identifies Jesus as the Passover lamb. The Christians of Asia Minor seem to celebrate the *pascha* according to John’s chronology (I Cor. 5:7). In the second century, it was kept in the night from the 14th to the 15th of Nisan as the memorial of the death of Jesus (*Epistula Apostolorum*) and on the 16th of Nisan as the day of the resurrection. Early in the 4th century, the Council of Nicea (325 A.D.) finally agreed that Easter should always be observed on Sunday, not on the same day of the week as the Jewish Passover. This implies there was controversy between Christians and the synagogues.[[4]](#footnote-4)
* The Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.) established the date of Eater as the First Sunday after the full moon (the *paschal* Full Moon) following the March equinox.
* The origin of the English term Easter may be derived from an Anglo-Saxon spring goddess named *Eastre* (the goddess of fertility and spring time. Her earthly symbol was the rabbit.) and her festival.[[5]](#footnote-5)

1. Pentecost (The Fifty Days of Easter)

* The observance of Pentecost goes back with Easter to the 1st century. It constitutes the oldest season of the Church’s year, corresponding to the Jewish feast of Pentecost which is the holy feast of seven weeks from the Feast of Unleavened Bread to the Feast of Harvest. The word “*pentekoste* (Fiftieth)” was used in the Septuagint (LXX) twice to indicate the Feast of Weeks which celebrates the renewal of the covenant. In Jewish context, the Pentecost was the fiftieth day from the day of Passover to commemorate the giving of the Law at Sinai as well as the covenants with Noah and Abraham.
* For the early Christians, Pentecost was conceived as an unbroken period of rejoicing both the resurrection of Christ and the giving of the Holy Spirit to the community as preparing the way for the day of the Lord, the *parousia* (Acts 2:9-11; Joel 2:28-32).

1. Ascension

* It was not until the second half of the fourth century that the ascension of Christ was commemorated as an historical event on the fortieth day of the Paschal rejoicing.

1. Holy Week (“Great Week” in Jerusalem)

* Although Easter was originally a single-night celebration, its celebration expanded to a one-week festival called Holy Week by the end of the 4th century.

1. Palm Sunday

* Holy Week begins with Palm /Passion Sunday. In the fourth century Jerusalem, its distinctive feature was the palm procession from the Mount of Olives back into the city. This practice was imitated first in Spain in the fifth century and then in Gaul by the seventh. It was finally accepted in Rome itself in the 12th century.

1. Maundy Thursday

* Maundy Thursday is a combination of three elements: the commemoration of the Last Supper, the reconciliation of penitents, and various preparatory rites for the Holy Saturday baptisms, notably the consecration of the oils. It was the first weekday in Holy Week to have a Eucharist. It was observed in Jerusalem in the 4th century.

1. Good Friday

* Good Friday was widely kept as the commemoration of the cross in 4th-century Jerusalem (Cyril of Jerusalem; *Eugeria* 37.1-3). It was known in Rome in the 8th century.

1. Holy Saturday and Easter Eve

* The most primitive feature of Holy Saturday is the total fast that was kept on that day without any liturgy. Easter eve was important because the celebration of Easter began with a lengthy vigil. “Watch all night in prayers, supplications, the reading of the prophets, of the Gospel and of psalms in fear and trembling and continual supplication until three in the morning..” (*Didascalia*, 21). It was the case at Rome in the fifth century and at Antioch at the end of the 4th century.

\*Tenebrae (shadow, darkness) services for three days—Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday; gradual extinction of candles.

1. Lent:

* The Council of Nicea (325 A.D.) first referred to Lent as a period of forty days and made it immediately precede Easter. It was argued that the practice of Lent was of Western origin and was introduced to Egypt through Athanasius’ experience in the West. Lent was being observed in Rome in 340. It would entail 36 days of fasting which was an unbroken period of ascetic exercises. The season of fast would have focused upon the final preparation of candidates for baptism.[[6]](#footnote-6)
* In the Western tradition, Lent begins with Ash Wednesday and ends with Holy Saturday. In the Eastern tradition, however, Lent begins on the previous Monday and goes up to the Friday before Palm Sunday, excluding Holy Week.
* Whatever the dates of the liturgical Lent were, Lent was in both traditions the time for the final formation of those to be baptized at Easter. However, later in the second decade of the 5th century, Lent was developed as a time for the public exercises of repentance. This history of Lent shows what seems to be a shift of emphasis from preparation for baptism to a general public penitential observance as a result of the practice of infant baptism.
* Lent as a time for the public exercises of penitents is demonstrated by Ash Wednesday which is the opening day of Lent. When the sprinkling with ashes became a dimension of admission to public penance is not known. What does seem clear is that the ceremony had its origins in Western Europe, not in Rome.

1. Christmas

* The date of Christmas, December 25th, was probably originated in the festival of the Unconquered Sun at the winter solstice in the Western pagan culture. Considering that Christmas was known in the West at Rome by 330 A.D. or earlier,[[7]](#footnote-7) it seems that the emperor Constantine encouraged the church to develop its liturgy by adopting this pagan culture. Constantine, a devotee of the cult of the sun would allow a blending of solar and Christian pieties. Such a festival represents the Church’s accommodation to imperial religious sentiment. That association of Christ with the “sun of righteousness” of Malachi 4:2 was by no means only a function of the establishment of the nativity of Christ on the winter solstice.[[8]](#footnote-8) (Talley, 90).
* Origins of Christmas tree are various. The most credential one is that in Germany, in 722, St. Boniface cut down the pagan oak tree on which children were sacrificed. The fir tree grew up at the base of the oak and the evergreen became a symbol of Christ’s promise of eternal life.

1. Epiphany:

* While Christmas was observed in the western churches on December 25, the eastern churches celebrated the feast of the Epiphany on January 6, to commemorate the birth of Jesus Christ.
* The feast of the Epiphany (January 6) was a feast of eastern origin of the nativity of Jesus. It was the festival of the birth of the Lord in Jerusalem and the festival of the birth and baptism of Jesus in Egypt until the end of the 4th century. According to Norden, the date January 6 was an ancient solstice date in Egypt.
* Chrisostom attempted to associate the water-drawing celebration in Egypt on January 6 (the feast of the birth of Aion) with the sanctification of water itself by Christ’s baptism on Epiphany. His sermon on the baptism of Christ clearly shows that for Chrisostom Jesus was not revealed to the world at his nativity but at and following his baptism (The Gospel of Mark). For this reason, he continued to call that feast the Epiphany. Prior to the adoption of the festival of December 25, Epiphany celebrated both the nativity and the baptism of Jesus in the regions of Constantinople, Cappadocia, and Syria.
* Epiphanius attempted to associate that water celebration with the Cana miracle.
* The Western church introduced Christmas of December 25th to the East, and Constantinople adopted it at the end of the 4th century and Egypt in the middle of the 5th century. After the adoption of the feast of December 25, the birth and baptism of Christ was divided, leaving the Epiphany devoted to the baptism alone.[[9]](#footnote-9) The Western church also adopted the January 6 festival (12 days later Christmas) in order to celebrate the baptism of Christ in the Jordan and the “first sign” at Cana in Galilee.[[10]](#footnote-10)

1. Advent:

* Advent as the preparatory time for Christmas originated in the West in the course of the second half of the 4th century. It was known to Rome only toward the end of the 6th century.
* The central theme was the thanksgiving of the gift of Christ to us in past time and the anticipation of his Second Coming. Likewise, the word “maranatha” which represents the meaning of Advent can be interpreted in two ways:

marana tha = “Come, our Lord.”

maran atha = “Our Lord has come.”

* By the 5th century, a forty-day season of preparation for Christmas and Epiphany was being practiced in Gaul and later Rome adopted this Advent season that began the fourth Sunday prior to December 25. The feast of Christ the King is the final Sunday on the consummation of history and leads into the season of Advent.[[11]](#footnote-11) (Talley, 84).

Lectionary Preaching

It is the Bible that shapes the calendar and Christian worship, and not the calendar that shapes worship. In other words, the Church calendar is not the substance of worship but **a vehicle** through which the liturgist expounds the mysteries of the faith and the guiding principles of the Christian life from the scriptures and helps the church “a more ample, more varied, and more suitable reading from Sacred Scripture.”[[12]](#footnote-12) At this point, it is important to review theological themes for each liturgical season from the biblical perspective and deepen our theological and doctrinal understanding on them.

1. Advantages of Lectionary Preaching

* Lectionary preaching affirms the primacy of the canon of the Holy Scripture for preaching. By using the method of *lectio continua*, lectionary preaching recovers not only the synogogal and primitive ecclesial custom but also the Reformed tradition of reading the Bible continuously in worship. This method increases the possibility of reading and preaching the Bible to its fullness. A congregation is freed from the preacher’s selecting texts only suited to his or her subjective interests. Most preachers who take on the responsibility of working consistently with the lectionary soon become aware of how little of the canon they had been using when the selection of texts was entirely their own.
* Lectionary preaching recovers preaching as a liturgical event. When observing feasts, festivals, and seasons, the reading method of *lectio selecta* through the year makes preaching a moment of celebration. Preaching is a moment of praise or doxology as well as a moment of teaching. When preaching becomes doxology, it embraces many dynamics of memory, hope, and interpersonal relationships.
* Multiple lessons each week makes worship rich. These biblical texts provide insights into selecting liturgical elements such as hymns, anthems, prayers, as well as preparing a sermon.
* The lectionary provides a useful planning tool for preaching and worship. It is possible for the preacher to invite the parish community to enter into a regular discipline to study and prepare for Sunday’s liturgy of the Word. A regular lectionary study group can be convened where the pastor can work with the faithful in advance to prepare the sermon and plan the service for the Lord’s Day. Through the lectionary, the preacher knows what will be needed and when, in order to order any materials and to practice the sermon ahead of time.
* Lectionary preaching and worship is ecumenical. These days, the RCL has become accepted by many local churches, beyond denominational boundaries. By reading and preaching the same texts, these churches underlie the unity with other Christians and nurture communal ecclesiology.
* Lectionary preaching and worship is Christocentric (theocentric-Christological). It is a way of repeatedly discussing the redemptive work of Christ. His birth and teaching, crucifixion, resurrection, and Second Coming are retold in liturgical practice.

1. Disadvantages of Lectionary Preaching

* Focusing strictly on the lectionary can lead to not effectively responding to the world and to the situation of the local church. An impersonal system of text selection cannot respond to the daily struggles of life that are ongoing needs for pastoral sensitivity.
* The Christocentric approach in the lectionary makes the NT dominate the OT. In other words, the OT is subordinated in the lectionary to—at best—a supporting role to the chosen NT passages. Particularly during the two central cycles of the Lent-Easter-Pentecost and Advent-Christmas-Epiphany, the main function of the OT lessons is to serve the Christian view of promise and fulfillment. That is, the OT is seen as **promise** and the New as **fulfillment**. When the NT writers wrote their books, however, they presupposed that their readers knew the OT, so they had no intention of going over all that same ground again. Everything they reported of what God was doing in Christ and in the early Church was related to what God had done before. Therefore, NT writers never intended to claim that Jesus was the first and last one to know the whole truth, but, rather, everything that Jesus said and did pointed to God in the Hebrew Bible.[[13]](#footnote-13)
* The preacher’s laziness is enhanced. Selected biblical lessons in the lectionary may be in danger of reducing the preacher’s theological “wrestling” of choosing and carefully thinking about an appropriate text for the following Sunday’s sermon. Moreover, prevailing “ready-made” homiletical aids for the lectionary preaching may lead the preacher to turn to helpful aids prior to having internalized the texts and thereby producing sermons like “fast food” rather than nutritious spiritual food relevant to the particular congregational context.

1. Challenges of Lectionary Preaching

* Just as the Christian calendar is emphatically Christological, so the lectionary texts following the calendar events are Christological. When we consider, however, that the function of the OT is as equally important as that of the NT, the lectionary preacher is challenged to interpret the texts within the “Theocentric-Christological” dimension. That is, while the Christocentric view understands that Jesus Christ revealed God to the world, the Theocentric view understands that, in due season and in the fullness of time, God revealed Christ and worked through him to bring God’s story both to a climax and to the whole world. This Theocentric reading makes it clear that the gospel begins in Genesis, rather than the Synoptic Gospels in the NT. In this way, preachers need to develop their own theological perspective through which they understand Christology in a holistic and inclusive way, rather than in a one-sided and exclusive way.
* Preachers need to reexamine the lectionary passages in relation to issues of the day within people’s lives, the world, nation, state, city or town and open themselves to the possibility that at least one of the texts may speak precisely to the event at hand.

1. Hoyt L. Hickman, et al (eds.), *The New Handbook of the Christian Year*, 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Horace Allen, *On Common Groun*, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 7-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Herman Wegman, *Christian Worship in East and West: A Study Guide to Liturgical History*, 32-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Hickmann, et al., 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Thomas Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*, 168-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Wegman, 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Talley, 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 125-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. 103-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid, 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Vatican II, “*Sacrosanctum Concilium*” quoted in Horace Allen, *On Common Ground*, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Dieter Hessel, *Social Themes of the Christian Year*, 258-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)