Class Notes #1

**Lectionary Preaching and the Christian Calendar**

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

Suggested Readings: Allen, et al.; Talley.

What is the Lectionary?

* The root of the word “lectionary” is the Latin *lectio,* which means reading, lesson, or selection. It denotes “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 is illustrated in Luke 4, which says that when Jesus was in the synagogue at Nazareth, he “stood up to read the lesson and was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah” (LK 4:16-17).
* In Western Europe, various lectionaries were developed by local church leaders. Early in the ninth century, these were standardized into the traditional Sunday Lectionary, which has been used by Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and Lutherans until recent years.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The History of the Lectionary

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

* Although the origin of the Christian use of the lectionary is not clear, there is some evidence of lectionary use in the early 2nd-century Christian churches (e.g., Justin Martyr’s *Apology* in A.D. 155).

1. The Lectionary in the Roman Catholic Church:

* Roman Catholics used a lectionary, a sort of small booklet, rather than the whole Bible for their masses and personal meditation. The Roman Catholic lectionary was composed based on *lectio selecta* (“selected reading”). *Lectio selecta* means choosing a biblical text based on the church calendar.
* The ecumenical movement within the Roman Catholic Church in the Second Vatican Council (1962-5) led church leaders to revise their lectionary. The Second Vatican Council’s “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy” declared the necessity for this 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 Churches ignored the lectionary after the 16th-century reformers rejected the medieval church liturgy, including its use of the lectionary. The reformers declared “*sola scriptura*” (“by Scripture alone”). For example, John Calvin never used the lectionary in worship. Instead, he sought to preach from the entire Scriptures rather than from selected verses in the lectionary. During the weekday services, he preached from the Hebrew Bible beginning at Genesis Chapter 1, verse 1. During the Sunday morning services, he preached the Gospels, beginning at Matthew Chapter 1, verse 1. His reading method is called *lectio continua*, which means “continuous reading,” verse by verse, straight through the book.
* The Pietist Movement in the 17th century, the First and the Second Awakenings in the 18th and 19th centuries, and the charismatic Pentecostal movements in the 20th century all stressed the significance of the inward experience of the Holy Spirit and encouraged preachers to select their texts as the Spirit led, rather than preaching from pre-assigned passages in the lectionary.
* The Roman Catholic Church’s revision of the lectionary at Vatican II challenged Protestant churches to reconsider the place of the Scriptures in public worship and led them to produce 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 thirteen 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 basically followed the Roman Catholic model of the three-year lectionary system, but had its own modifications, especially in the selection of Hebrew Bible passages.
* 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 is currently used by most Protestant churches.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The Structure of the Revised Common Lectionary

The RCL is organized based on the following five 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. Each year emphasizes one of the synoptic Gospels: Matthew in A, Mark in B, and Luke in C. John is distributed over the three years and is given a heavy emphasis during Lent and Easter.

1. Principle #2: The RCL assumes the classic Western Church Calendar, consisting principally of the Sundays and seasons related to the two cycles: the Christmas Cycle of Advent-Christmas-Epiphany and the Easter Cycle of Lent-Easter-Pentecost.
2. Principle #3: Each week, four lessons are assigned from the Hebrew Bible, the Psalms, the Gospels, and the Epistles, based on the particular theological theme of the season of the Christian year. The four passages are supposed to be used not only for preaching but also for other liturgical components, such as the opening prayer, the prayer of confession, the charge and the benediction. Although the psalm is intended to be a response to the first reading from the Hebrew Bible, it can be used as a sermonic text, also.
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 for particular Christological events according to the Christian calendar (*lectio selecta*). The RCL also reads the Scriptures in a continuous fashion (*lectio continua)* for the days of the ordinary times of the year (Sundays “after Epiphany” and “after Pentecost”). During the period of *lectio continua*, the preacher can be flexible, moving in and out of the lectionary.
4. Principle #5: The RCL approaches the Hebrew Bible readings in three ways:
5. The Hebrew Bible is not read during the Sundays of Easter, in order to avoid allegorical interpretations. The Book of Acts is used, instead, which provides the church with its most primitive witness to the resurrection.
6. The lessons from the Hebrew Bible are typologically controlled by the Gospels, particularly during the Christmas and Easter cycles.
7. During the Ordinary Times of the year, the RCL offers semi-continuous reading of some significant narratives in the Hebrew Bible, rather than providing a thematic unity. More precisely, in Year A, the RCL reads the patriarchal and Mosaic narratives in the Pentateuch, along with Matthew. In Year B, the RCL reads the Davidic narratives in the historical books, along with Mark. In 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, Wisdom literature is introduced. During the Sundays preceding Advent and the First and Second Sundays of Advent, apocalyptic material is used because of its ancient references to the Second Coming of Christ.

The Evolution of the Christian Calendar

The Christian calendar has been developed through give-and-take with surrounding secular cultures. In the process of inculturation, elements of secular society were not directly copied by the church. They were, however, modified and transformed into elements of the liturgical life of the Christian church through theological and biblical reinterpretation. Each liturgical season is represented by its unique liturgical color, and Hyuk Seonwoo’s article critically evaluates the formation and use of the such colors.[[4]](#footnote-4)

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* is the center of the Jewish year as it commemorates deliverance from slavery (Exod. 12:6-8). It is the feast of national liberation with the feast of unleavened bread in the spring (14th -15th of Nisan in the Jewish calendar). The old Jewish commemoration of deliverance was made completely new in Jesus Christ for early Christians. Slavery and redemption were recalled with 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 Apostles’ Tradition*). However, the date was controversial. In Asia Minor, Easter was observed on the actual Jewish *pascha* (the fourteenth of Nisan (April)), while other congregations in the West observed it on the first Sunday following it. This was because the Bible provided two different dates for 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 the night before his crucifixion (Mk 14:14; Mt 26:18; Lk 22:8). According to John’s chronology, however, Jesus’ crucifixion occurred on the 14th of Nisan (19:32, 36) at the time of the slaying of the lambs for the feast. John identifies Jesus with the Passover lamb.
* The Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.) finally agreed that Easter should always be observed on Sunday, and not on the same day of the week as the Jewish Passover. This implies there was controversy between Christian churches and Jewish synagogues at that time.[[5]](#footnote-5) The date for Easter was established as the first Sunday after the full moon (the *paschal* Full Moon) following the March equinox.
* The origin of the English term Easter derives from the Anglo-Saxon spring goddess, *Eastre* (the goddess of fertility and of spring time). Her earthly symbol was the rabbit.[[6]](#footnote-6)

1. Pentecost (The Fifty Days of Easter):

* The observance of Pentecost goes back with Easter to the 1st century. It is the oldest event in the Christian calendar, 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 the Jewish context, 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.
* The early Christians observed Pentecost as an unbroken period of rejoicing about both the resurrection of Christ and the giving of the Holy Spirit to the community, in 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 observance was expanded to a one-week festival called Holy Week by the end of the 4th century.

Palm Sunday:

* Holy Week begins with Palm /Passion Sunday. In the 4th-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 5th century and in Gaul by the 7th. It was finally accepted in Rome in the 12th century.

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 baptism, notably the consecration of the oils. It was the first weekday in Holy Week to have the Eucharist. It was observed in Jerusalem in the 4th century.

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.

Holy Saturday and Easter Eve:

* The most primitive feature of Holy Saturday is the total fast 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). This was the case in Rome in the fifth century and in 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 Nicaea 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, and entailed thirty-six days of fasting in an unbroken period of ascetic exercises (40 days - 4 Sundays = 36 days). The season of fast focused on the final preparation of candidates for baptism.[[7]](#footnote-7)
* 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, in both traditions Lent was the time for final preparation of catechumens before their baptism at Easter. Later in the second decade of the 5th century, when infant baptism became a conventional practice, Lent became a time for general public penitential observance.
* Lent as a time for the public exercise of penitence is demonstrated on Ash Wednesday, which is the opening day of Lent. When Ash Wednesday was included in the Christian calendar is not known, yet, it is clear that the ceremony had its origin elsewhere in Western Europe, not in Rome.

1. Christmas:

* The date of Christmas (December 25) probably originated during the winter solstice, as part of the festival of the Unconquered Sun in Western pagan culture. Considering that Christmas was acknowledged in the West in Rome by 330 A.D. or earlier,[[8]](#footnote-8) it seems likely that the Roman Emperor Constantine encouraged the church to develop its liturgy by adopting this pagan culture. Constantine, a devotee of the cult of the sun before he became a Christian, might have allowed the blending of solar and Christian pieties. Such a festival represents the church’s accommodation with the imperial religious sentiment. The “sun of righteousness” in Malachi 4:2 is the only biblical association of Christ with the sun, however.[[9]](#footnote-9)
* Origins of the Christmas tree are various. The most documented 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 later evergreen became a symbol of Christ’s promise of eternal life.

1. Epiphany:

* While Christmas was observed on December 25 by the churches in the West, the churches in the East used 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 the nativity of Jesus of Easter origin. This remained the festival of the birth and baptism of Jesus in Egypt until the end of the 4th century. The date of January 6 was an ancient date for the solstice in Egypt.
* Chrysostom 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 through Christ’s baptism on Epiphany. His sermon on the baptism of Christ clearly shows that for Chrysostom Jesus was not revealed to the world at his nativity but following his baptism (according to the Gospel of Mark). For this reason, he continued to call that feast Epiphany. Prior to the adoption of the festival of December 25, Epiphany was observed to celebrate both the nativity and the baptism of Jesus in the regions of Constantinople, Cappadocia, and Syria.
* The Western church introduced Christmas 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 celebrations of the birth and baptism of Christ were divided into two separate events, with Epiphany devoted to baptism alone.[[10]](#footnote-10) The Western church also adopted Epiphany (twelve days later than Christmas) in order to celebrate the baptism of Christ in the Jordan and the “first sign” at Cana in Galilee.[[11]](#footnote-11) (Epiphanius of Salamis in Cyprus associated the water celebration with the Cana miracle recorded in John 2:1-12.)

1. Advent:

* As the preparatory time for Christmas, Advent originated somewhere in the West in the course of the second half of the 4th century. It was acknowledged by the Roman Catholic Church toward the end of the 6th century.
* The central theme was thanksgiving for the gift of Christ to us in the past and the anticipation of his Second Coming in the future. 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.”

* Advent was observed in Gaul by the 5th century, and Rome adopted it later. The feast of Christ the King is the final Sunday of the consummation of history and leads into the season of Advent, four Sundays before Christmas.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Lectionary Preaching

It is the Bible that shapes the Christian 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 preacher expounds the mysteries of the faith and the guiding principles of the Christian life from the Scriptures. The lectionary based on the Christian calendar helps the church practice “a more ample, more varied, and more suitable reading from Sacred Scripture.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Consequently, lectionary preaching leads the congregants to reflect on various theological themes from a biblical perspective in the prescribed schedule and deepens their understanding of the Christian faith.

1. Advantages of Lectionary Preaching:

* Lectionary preaching increases the possibility of reading and preaching the Bible in its fullness (70% of the Bible in three years). The congregation is freed from the preacher selecting texts suited only 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 Bible they were using when the selection of texts was entirely their own.
* Lectionary preaching recovers preaching as a liturgical event. When observing feasts, festivals, and seasons following the Christian calendar, the lectionary provides preachers with appropriate texts and makes preaching a moment of celebration.
* Multiple lessons each week enrich worship. The four biblical texts provide insights for the selection of liturgical elements, such as hymns, anthems, prayers, as well as for preaching.
* 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 preaching and liturgy together.
* Lectionary preaching and worship is ecumenical. These days, the RCL is accepted by many local churches, and goes beyond denominational boundaries. By reading and preaching the same texts, these churches underlie their unity with other Christians and nurture communal ecclesiology.
* Lectionary preaching and worship is Christocentric. It is a way of repeatedly discussing the redemptive work of Christ.

1. Disadvantages of Lectionary Preaching:

* Focusing strictly on the lectionary may lead to not an effective response to the world and the situation of the local church. An impersonal system of text selection cannot suffice for the daily struggles of life, which require pastoral sensibility.
* The Christocentric approach in the lectionary means that the New Testament dominates the Hebrew Bible. Particularly during the cycles of Christmas and Easter, the main function of the lessons from the Hebrew Bible is to serve the Christian view of promise and fulfillment.
* The preacher’s laziness may be facilitated. Selected biblical lessons in the lectionary and “ready-made” homiletical aids for lectionary preaching may prevent the preacher from wrestling sufficiently when preparing a sermon.

1. Challenges to Lectionary Preaching:

* Just as the Christian calendar is based on Christological events, so too are the lectionary texts Christological. Preachers need to develop their own theological perspectives that they might understand Christology in a holistic and inclusive way, rather than a one-sided and exclusive way. In other words, while the Christocentric view understands that only Jesus Christ reveals God to the world, the theocentric view understands that, in due season and in the fullness of time, God reveals Christ and works 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 in the synoptic Gospels of the New Testament.
* Preachers need to reexamine lectionary passages in relation to daily issues. They should open themselves to the possibility that at least one of the texts may speak directly to the matter 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 Ground*, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 7-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Hyuk Seonwoo, “Whose Christmas Is Coming?: Christmas Season and White Privilege,” unpublished. Available in Canvas. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Herman Wegman, *Christian Worship in East and West: A Study Guide to Liturgical History*, 32-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Hickmann, et al., 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Thomas Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*, 168-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Wegman, 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Talley, 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 125-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. 103-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid, 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Vatican II, “*Sacrosanctum Concilium*” quoted in Horace Allen, *On Common Ground*, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)