

An Experiment in Lectionaries

This article is going to be about something that you may – or may not – have ever thought about, and may not even care about – but it does affect you! It is about Lectionaries. Now don't stop reading because you are thinking, *what is a lectionary?*

A lectionary is a list of lections, of course! And a lection is a reading. So, a lectionary is a list of readings. In our case, the lectionary refers to the list of scripture readings that we read in worship on Sunday mornings.

Our congregation uses the lectionary that our denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, has chosen to use in all its publications, referred to as the Revised Common Lectionary. It was developed by a group of denominations and went into use in 1994. It is the successor to a number of other lectionaries developed during the preceding decades.

This lectionary includes the following each week: a reading from the Old Testament, a Psalm, a reading from a New Testament letter, and a reading from a Gospel. It is a three year lectionary, each year structured around one of three gospels, Matthew, Mark, or Luke. The Old Testament readings are generally chosen to correspond with the Gospel, as is the Psalm. The New Testament reading may or may not correspond – sometimes we are simply reading a particular letter through over several weeks.

The Revised Common Lectionary has some strengths, but it also has some weaknesses. Often, it is difficult to find a thread that connects all the passages, so I end up preaching only on one text – usually the Gospel. The Old Testament passages are often pushed into supporting the Gospel, and are not allowed to speak for themselves. The Gospel readings leap around, and don't tell the story in order. In general, many have come to think that the lectionary does not help people learn the Bible.

All of this background info leads up to this: about five years ago, faculty members at Luther Seminary in St. Paul Minnesota, at the request of a group of pastors, came up with an alternative lectionary, referred to as the Narrative Lectionary. It's goal is to help people learn the stories of the Old and New Testament. It reduces the number of assigned texts for each week to two. It is a four year lectionary, giving one year to each of the four Gospels, focusing on the Gospel between Christmas and Easter.

In consultation with the worship committee, we are going to give the Narrative Lectionary a try. Beginning in late December, we are going to be focusing on the Gospel of John. We will be hearing readings from John, in order, all the way until Easter.

I am personally very excited about this, for a couple of reasons. One, I love the Gospel of John! Two, it will be energizing for me to preach on many texts I have never preached on before! But more than that, I think it will be very exciting for our members to get a firm grasp on a book of the Bible. Instead of hearing about John the Baptist in Advent, Jesus' baptism in Epiphany, and Jesus' Temptation in Lent, you will hear those three stories, which follow one another in the text and are meant to go together, on successive Sundays.

As we near the end of this experiment, we will decide whether to continue trying the Narrative Lectionary or return to the Revised Common Lectionary. Over the past years, the number of Lutheran congregations using the Narrative Lectionary has increased from 30 the first year to an estimated 1000, and many who are using it report that they love it!

I am looking forward to this experiment, and will be sharing suggestions for how you can fully participate in this exploration of John's Gospel!

Peace, Pastor Shannon