

“An Eternal Story Happening Partly in Time”: Preaching Through Ordinary Time in 2005

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Scratch just below the surface, and most people who are even half alive will acknowledge there is really no such thing as “ordinary” time. Even the most routine tasks, the most common moments, bear within them the possibility for extraordinary interruption or inspiration. Properly understood, all time is charged with divine potential, and is lived within the eternal providence of God. Thus, for the children of God, there is perhaps no greater challenge than the faithful stewardship of time.

In Wendell Berry’s rich and evocative novel, *Jayber Crow*, Jayber is the narrator/protagonist, an ordinary man in most every way, except for his remarkable self-awareness. Near the end of the book, having retired from his life as a barber and church sexton, he has moved some miles away from the town of Port William to live out the length of his days in a cabin along the river. Taking stock of his own story, he considers the plans he had once made, and then acknowledges that he has “never lived by plan.”

Any more than if I had been a bystander watching me live my life, I don’t feel that I ever have been quite sure what was going on. Nearly everything that has happened to me has happened by surprise. *All* the important things have happened by surprise. And whatever has been happening has usually happened before I have had time to expect it. The world doesn’t stop because you are in love or in mourning or in need of time to think. And so when I have thought I was in my story or in charge of it, I really have been only on the edge of it, carried along. Is this because we are in an eternal story that is happening partly in time?¹

I suspect most preachers can locate their own experience somewhere in Jayber’s musings, even if only in identification with his uncertainty about what’s been going on. Most of us know the knee-knocking reality of trying faithfully to unpack and reflect on “an eternal story that is happening partly in time.” Knowing the story and knowing the times are two necessary homiletical tasks that each of us performs with varying skill and varying success.

The same is true, of course, in the long stretches of Ordinary Time, which begins again just after Trinity Sunday and extend wells into November and Christ the King (Reign of Christ) Sunday. Knowing the eternal story that defines that journey is of foremost importance, but it also helps to note the character of the times. In what follows we will examine the parts of the story that make their appearance in Ordinary Time in Year A of the lectionary, even as we remind ourselves once again regarding the character of Ordinary Time, and then consider how preaching through these months can find its shape. We begin with Ordinary Time itself.

The Character of Ordinary Time

By this stage in our shared liturgical history there is not much need to explain the

“ordinary” in Ordinary Time. It refers to what is standard and customary in worship, rather than that which is shaped by particular festivals and seasons. To borrow a phrase, Ordinary Time is “Christian Standard Time.”

Although our worship frequently lives down to the rather demeaning connotations of “ordinary” in our culture, in Christian usage “Ordinary Time” has a distinctive structure shaped by the story of Jesus Christ. In liturgical usage, “Ordinary Time” refers to that which is standard, the norm of time kept by the church in worship. This standard time is that of weekly Sunday worship, the worship of the Lord’s Day.²

With Pentecost falling in mid-May this year, the summer cycle of readings for Ordinary Time begins with the Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time over Memorial Day weekend. For those keeping count, it will be evident that this particular calendar year has no Fifth-through-Eighth Sundays in Ordinary Time, a peculiarity that derives from the way “ordinary” Sundays are counted. Specifically, Ordinary Time is not counted forward from the first Sunday after the Baptism of the Lord in January, but backward from Christ the King Sunday, which is always the Thirty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time. That reverse numeration, coupled with the lunar calendar and the subsequent setting of Easter, determines the number or “ordinary” Sundays in any given year.

More important for preaching is the fact that the long summer-and-fall stretch of Ordinary Time offers up similarly long stretches of semi-continuous readings from the year’s Gospel (Matthew in this Year A), and more often than not similar continuous readings in particular books of the Old Testament (Genesis and Exodus in 2005) and the Epistles (Romans, Philippians, and 1 Thessalonians this year). If one chooses to stay within the lectionary and to stay focused on one track, Ordinary Time affords an opportunity to take a more in-depth look at particular biblical books and, thus, to identify more thoroughly recurring themes and patterns than one usually is able to do at other times in the church calendar.

The Character of Ordinary Time in Year A in the Lectionary

The prospect of spending concentrated time with Matthew’s Gospel may be of particular interest. Too often preachers get pressed by the demands of preaching into week-by-week consultation of commentaries and lectionary aids and do not have or take the time to step back to get a larger perspective on an entire Gospel. That is a shame in the case of Matthew, because several excellent Matthean commentaries have been published in recent years, offering some new perspectives to go with the solid scholarship that preceded them. This preacher has found two particularly helpful: David Garland’s *Reading Matthew* and Warren Carter’s *Matthew and the Margins*.³

Garland’s work offers an excellent, well-written distillation of recent scholarship on Matthew in a very accessible form and with relative brevity (only 273 pages). Particularly helpful are his summary introductory comments about Matthew’s six-fold purpose in writing the Gospel. Matthew wrote the Gospel, Garland suggests, a) to tell the story of Jesus, of his life and his teaching; b) to bolster faith among those familiar with that story; c) to convince and refute, defending the community’s tradition by taking on those from contemporary Jewish circles who have not allowed the faith of Christians to go unchallenged; d) to explain the present circumstances, in which

Jerusalem and the temple lies in ruins, and thus to stand with the disciples of Jesus over against the Pharisaic teachers and their followers; e) to exhort, not only reminding Christians who they are, but demonstrating the link between that identity and their behavior; and f) to arm the church for mission as a light to all the world, even amid opposition.⁴ The preacher will discover that keeping such purposes in mind can be most instructive and helpful in reading individual pericopes.

Carter's *Matthew and the Margins* offers an engaging new understanding of Matthew, exploring brilliantly the way the competing themes of empire and marginality play out in the Gospel, and portraying the followers of Jesus as an alternative community of resistance. He lays out his theory in the very beginning of his Introduction:

I read Matthew's gospel as a counternarrative. It is a work of resistance, written for a largely Jewish religious group. It "stands and/or speaks over against" the status quo dominated by Roman imperial power and synagogal control. It resists these cultural structures.

But it is also a work of advocacy and hope. The Gospel constructs an alternative worldview and community. It affirms a way of life marginal to the dominant structures. It challenges its audience to live this resistant way of life faithfully in its present circumstances. And it promises that Jesus will return to establish God's empire and salvation in full.⁵

Carter proceeds to lay out factors that shape his reading of the Gospel and follows with the substance of his argument that the Gospel advocates a voluntary marginal identity and way of life for the community of disciples.⁶ In a time when conversation about the interplay of religious and cultural values in America is lively and, at times, contentious, Carter's reading is a most useful reminder of the profoundly alternative and counter-cultural construct of Christian faith.

The opening verse of the Gospel text for the Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, the call of Matthew, offers a case in point. Carter provides a most helpful description of the role of tax collectors like Matthew who collected tolls on transported goods, and who thus secured an infrastructure in occupied areas to consolidate and extend Rome's power, while also undergirding the comfortable lifestyle of the region's elite. Tax collectors were not part of the elite and, as representatives of Rome, were despised by the vast majority of the people. It was that neither-fish-nor-fowl character that made Matthew a "marginal" character similar to the cast of other marginal characters in Matthew 8-9 whom Jesus "calls" – "a call that welcomes him into God's life-giving empire." By abandoning his role and no longer collecting taxes, Matthew does his part to undermine the empire's way of life and its control. Says Carter, "Despised tax collectors can walk away from the oppressive imperial tax system to find in God's saving presence manifested in Jesus a new life and an empire that is life giving and merciful. It is a profoundly subversive, and witty, story."⁷

Carter and Garland each offer fresh ways of understanding the Matthean texts of Ordinary Time, which begin with the concluding verses of the Sermon on the Mount and move chronologically through stories of Jesus' healing and feeding miracles, other demonstrations of his power, extended sections of teachings, the commissioning of his followers, resulting conflicts with religious authorities, passion predictions,

reminders of servanthood, and, in the end, the path to Jerusalem and the reign unlike any other. For the preacher, such new readings and interpretations are often grist enough to frame some very creative new approaches to familiar texts. Spending the summer and fall exploring nuances in those texts as framed by new scholarship could thus be beneficial for both preacher and congregation alike.

Of course, the same could be said about devoting time to new or deeper readings of the Year A Old Testament texts in Genesis and Exodus. The familiar terrain of these foundational books is not so familiar to many in the churches today, and pulpit assumptions of such familiarity are often met by blank stares from those in the pews. Spending a summer exploring the beginnings of our Judeo-Christian ancestry might be most constructive. These are rich and provocative narratives for preaching, and sharp intersections of the divine story in human time.

Walter Brueggemann's seminal commentary on Genesis in the Interpretation series and Terence Fretheim's splendid essay on Genesis in *The New Interpreter's Bible* continue to offer excellent insights that seem fresh with each new reading.⁸ The same pair arguably wrote two of the three most helpful commentaries on the Book of Exodus as well, with Fretheim having authored the Interpretation commentary and Brueggemann the *New Interpreter's* essay. Though now more than thirty years old, Brevard Childs' *The Book of Exodus* in the Old Testament Library series remains the standard for a substantial theological and textual understanding of Exodus.⁹

If one wants to spend a fruitful, albeit somewhat more demanding summer, the Epistle lessons for Ordinary Time this year feature semi-continuous readings in Paul's *magnum opus*, the Letter to the Romans, from late May until mid-September. There is so much depth and richness in its sixteen chapters, but preaching Romans well requires much thought and imagination. In addition to Brendan Byrne's excellent commentary in the *Sacra Pagina* series, there are three new volumes that can be most beneficial in shedding new light on Paul and Romans. Luke Timothy Johnson has written *Reading Romans*, from the same series as Garland's volume on Matthew; Paul Meyer's splendid work on Paul and Romans (and a few other biblical subjects) is included in a wonderful new collection of essays, sermons, and commentary called *The Word in This World*; and Stephen Westerholm has written a very helpful analysis of recent scholarship on Paul and the entire corpus of his writings, entitled *Perspectives Old and New on Paul*.¹⁰

Trying to find one's way in and through new scholarship can be a demanding task for the preacher, but such is a key, we should argue, to proclamation that is fresh and full of intelligence and energy. Such study also keeps us from riding our own hobbyhorses and depriving our congregations of the breadth and depth of even the most familiar texts. Lest we need convincing that this is true, Meyer offers a strong reminder in this excerpt from the inaugural essay of *The Word in This World* (which was also his inaugural address at Princeton Seminary some years ago):

Each of us, in our reading of the [scriptures], will always appropriate from its diversity what most meets a present need; and that has been the case throughout the history of exegesis.... But we harden and systematize such choices at our peril, for then we truncate our scriptures, reduce them to the familiar and the already known, and deprive ourselves of those unexpected and unanticipated insights they supply for our nourishment on unexpected

occasions. No curse lies more heavily upon our study of the Bible...than the confidence that we already know what is written upon its pages. It is worse than ignorance or indifference, for like the unforgivable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, it is beyond being taken by surprise, even by God.¹¹

Stepping Out of the Lectionary

Finally, the summer Sundays of Ordinary Time may offer an opportune time to think about taking a break from this cycle of the lectionary, with the thought that such a respite might afford a different kind of energy in preaching. One might then consider a series of more topical sermons. There would seem to be any number of possibilities. Some months removed from the rhetoric of last year's presidential campaign, a series on Christian "moral values" might garner interest, particularly if one stays away from the so-called "values" of the campaign. A week-by-week exploration of some of the underlying values of the Christian community – kindness, compassion, righteousness, justice, integrity, shalom, mercy, and others – could offer a helpful corrective to the distorted emphases of recent public discussions of morality.

Perhaps a series on stewardship, without the customary distractions of the fall stewardship campaign, would offer the congregation a chance to wrestle with biblical mandates on the use of our resources. A series on sin, perhaps on the Seven Deadly Sins, might provide an opportunity to wrestle a bit with an oft-neglected part of our understanding of human nature. One warning: years ago this preacher offered such a series, and we had to bring in chairs that day we talked about "lust"; we were no more than half-full the next Sunday, when the topic was "greed."

If one feels guilty about straying too far from the lectionary, a summer series on the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount would provide an excellent window into Matthew's understanding of Jesus and what Carter calls the "community of resistance" Jesus seeks to form. Such series, or others like them, may offer a refreshing change of pace, and may well, like good lectionary preaching, offer a glimpse through the window of time at the eternal story unfolding in our midst.

Notes

1. Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow: A Novel* (New York: Counterpoint Press, 2001), 322.
2. Stanley P. Saunders and Charles L. Campbell, "Anything But Ordinary: Worship and Preaching in Ordinary Time," *Journal for Preachers* 18 (Pentecost 1995): 25 – 31.
3. David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, Ga.: Smyth and Helwys Publishing Inc., 2001) and Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2000). This is perhaps the best place to acknowledge my gratitude for the valuable assistance of a number of biblical scholars who have helped identify the best of current scholarship on the texts of Year A, including Clifton Black, Charles Cousar, Beverly Gaventa, Frances Taylor Gench, Beth Johnson, Tom Long, Paul Meyer, Dennis Olson, and Stan Saunders.
4. Garland, 5-8.
5. Carter, 1.
6. Carter, 1-49.
7. Carter, 218-219.
8. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: Interpretation commentary* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), and Terence Fretheim, "Genesis," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994). A solid and more recent literary study of Genesis is also available in Paul Borgman, *Genesis: The Story We Haven't Heard* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

9. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation commentary (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991); Brueggemann, "Exodus," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994); Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974).
10. Brendan Byrne, S.J., *Sacra Pagina: Romans* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1996); Luke Timothy Johnson, *Reading Romans: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, Ga.: Smyth and Helwys Publishing, 2001); Paul W. Meyer, *The Word in This World: Essays in New Testament Exegesis and Theology*, ed. John T. Carroll (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004) [Note that the Meyer volume includes the entirety of his Romans commentary from *The HarperCollins Bible Commentary*]; and Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New in Paul: The "Lutheran" Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003). Ordinary Time also takes us this year into the Letter to the Philippians and the First Letter to the Thessalonians; there are very helpful newer commentaries available on these texts as well, including Charles Cousar's *Reading Galatians, Ephesians and 1 Thessalonians: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, Ga.: Smyth and Helwys Publishing, 2001) and Beverly Gaventa's *First and Second Thessalonians*, Interpretation Commentary (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998).
11. Meyer, "The This-Worldliness of the New Testament," *The Word in This World*, 15.