

Protagonist Corner

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As a seminary-employed theological ethicist who spends considerable amounts of time teaching in various churches, I have the opportunity to hear many sermons from many different people. I hear our students in daily chapel services. I hear area pastors when I attend their worship services after I've led one type of adult education class or another. I hear preachers from around the nation at various conferences and gatherings. And even when I'm not listening to them preach, I still get to talk with small groups of pastors who regularly meet to talk with each other about what they will be preaching and who have invited me to spend time with them. And in the midst of all this hearing and talking about sermons, I am increasingly convinced that preaching the lectionary is bad for the church.

This is not to say that I think sermons ought to be about something other than the explication of scripture for the edification of God's children. Indeed, I think preaching always ought to be about letting the Holy Spirit breathe fresh life through old texts for new times. The church is a community that gathers around and then becomes formed around these texts. Nor is it to say that I hear bad preaching; I am regularly fed by the sermons I hear and often even pleasantly surprised by them. The processes of exegesis and sermon development that are being taught in our seminaries are very good. Nor is it to say that I am opposed to the lectionary in general. I like, I read, I *use* the lectionary. I am saying, however, that *preaching* from the lectionary is bad for the church.

I recognize, of course, that there are good reasons to preach from the lectionary. Theologically, it reminds preachers that the whole Bible—and not just a set of favored passages—can become the word of God. Ecclesiastically, it connects them to other preachers around the world who are preaching from the same text. Pastorally, it saves them from what Kierkegaard called “the anxiety of infinite options” by allowing them to bypass the initial crisis of choosing a text. Practically, it gives them easy access to resources structured around the lectionary. (And fiscally, I should confess, it pays a little bit, as when David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor come knocking on the door asking for yet another essay for the *Feasting on the Word* series. Of course, that benefit may come to an end after the W/JKP folks read this essay. For that matter, the *Journal for Preachers* might have second thoughts about continuing to give me a space in which to register dissenting views about matters important to its readers!)

Yet each of these reasons conceals within itself flaws that threaten the coherence and integrity of the “preaching event” and undermine the theological significance of scripture for the church. Reminded to preach from the whole Bible, even those preachers who regularly preach across the lectionary texts (from the Old Testament this week, an epistle the next, then a gospel) regularly take the texts supplied them by the lectionary and either contort them to the point of breaking in order to mesh a standardized text with a distinctive context or ignore the specificities of their contexts to maintain the integrity of the text. The former violates a coherent theology of scripture, the latter a substantive theology of preaching. And claims about the serendipitously frequent matching of universal text to specific context beg the question: we may live in grace

and rely on providence, but serendipity is a synonym for neither, so why should we presume to lie on the serendipitous—and hardly universal—meshing of text and context?

Moreover, preaching out of specified pericopes—especially when preachers leap from Old Testament to epistle to Gospel to Psalm in proceeding weeks—tends to hinder the ability of those in the pews to discern any coherent narrative that connects texts and helps them make sense of scripture for themselves. At least *lectio continua* allows listeners to get a sense of a whole book over time! Why contribute to biblical illiteracy in order to maintain claims about the biblical integrity? Those who would defend preaching the common lectionary on theological grounds at least ought to think more about the theological costs that come with the practice.

What of the ecclesiastical defense of the lectionary—the one about being reminded that preachers all over the world are preaching from the same texts and therein manifesting the unity of the one church? Setting aside facile criticisms of such a claim (many preachers and traditions don't use the lectionary, and some use different lectionaries; as long as there are multiple texts each week, not everyone will be preaching from the same text; "But everyone else is doing it" isn't a better argument in this context than it was when you tried it on your mother and she responded with "If everyone else was jumping off a cliff . . ." or something like that), the question still remains: what makes preaching the lectionary a more coherent display of church unity than, say, recognizing that we all preach from the same Bible? If agreement among preachers is such a valuable manifestation of church unity, why not have everyone preach the same sermon each week? Besides, the point isn't to express unity among preachers. It's to express unity among believers. Surely there are better ways to express this (weekly communion in all our traditions comes to mind, but that's a debate for another day).

Or what of the pastoral benefit that comes with being supplied a text rather than having to choose one? At best, this benefit simply defers the struggle: having been supplied a set of texts, the preacher faces an even greater dilemma about how to preach from those texts—a dilemma that is exacerbated by the theological tensions I describe above. Ministers have been entrusted with the privilege of sharing—of *participating in the manifestation of*—God's word. If we are willing to trust them with that, surely, we should trust them in making preliminary choices about texts.

You'll note, moreover, that reducing the number of available texts isn't the only way to resolve the tension in choosing one. Another solution would be to become more familiar with more texts. This is one reason that I'm still a fan of the lectionary. Only rather than preaching from it weekly (a practice that instrumentalizes the text by giving it attention only as the basis for getting the next sermon ready), I think preachers should read from it daily—as, for that matter, should other Christians. The discipline of daily lectionary reading not only helps locate each text in relation to what comes before and after it (thereby helping to resolve the problem of dislocated pericopes), but brings greater familiarity with the whole of the Bible. Choosing a text may not be easy, but it may become more meaningful when we have more texts that are ready-at-hand. Get the daily lectionary sent to your email account. Join the Company of Pastors. Make the daily readings part of your devotional time. In so doing, you may discover the joys of texts you'd otherwise either ignore in the press to find a sermon text or miss altogether.

Finally, there are practical considerations. One sort of practical consideration has to do with figuring out ways for the church to learn to inhabit time: a lectionary shaped around the liturgical year reminds us that the church thinks about its time in history in distinctive ways (though see my “Protagonist’s Corner” from the 2009 Easter edition of this journal for questions about at least parts of the liturgical year). Again, though, I’m not arguing against reading the lectionary. I’m arguing against preaching from it. Surely the daily reminder of lectionary readings ought to be more than sufficient for the church, especially if daily lectionary reading becomes a discipline of the church and not just its preachers.

The other sort of practical consideration has to do with the availability of lectionary resources. Again, setting aside facile criticisms (practical considerations shouldn’t trump theological concerns; many lectionary resources could still prove useful, albeit in a way that might take some additional indexing), it is helpful to remember that the revised common lectionary was only formally established in 1994, and many of the lectionary resources are considerably younger. In an age of internet and entrepreneurialism, need we really worry whether new resources would come into existence? I hear Bartlett and Taylor are always looking for new work; maybe they’ll come up with something.