

Lectionary Mosaics

Three Readings Juxtaposed for
Reflection and Proclamation

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Introduction

The three-year ecumenical lectionary presents Christians with a treasure that can deepen preaching in their assemblies, present those assemblies with a rich and diverse banquet of scripture, and enliven biblical reflection when people are alone or at home with others. The paragraphs written here about each set of lectionary readings are intended to help with all those projects: reading at home, preparing for worship, and specifically preparing to preach.

This collection of such paragraphs is based upon the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), the most widely used lectionary in the ecumenical world today. Still, this book and its reflections can also be helpful more widely—among Christians whose churches have adopted but slightly revised the RCL, and also among Roman Catholic Christians whose three-year lectionary formed the original basis for the RCL, though the RCL has sometimes diverged from that source, especially in regard to the length of the readings.

The deep conviction alive in this book is that the RCL, its denominational variants, and the Roman Lectionary all share the same goal: that the scriptures be read in the assembly on Sunday to proclaim the crucified and risen Jesus Christ and to enable the encounter in him with the very presence of the grace of the triune God for the life of the world. These lectionary texts are intended to be read at eucharist and to be read in remembrance of baptism. The same Spirit that enlivens the bath and the meal gives us life in these words. The same Jesus Christ into whose death we have been baptized, who gives his own body and blood in the bread and cup, also gives himself away in the readings.

The same Father of Jesus to whom we give thanks at the font and the table speaks here in these expressions of the word of God. The texts of the lectionary enable us to know who it is in whom we die and rise in baptism, who it is whom we encounter and receive in the holy communion. Preachers do well to use the readings to make this triune God known and to invite people to eat and drink the gospel they have heard, the same gospel that was washed over them in baptism.

This ecumenical three-year lectionary has sometimes been compared to a banquet: the churches in using it have determined to set out richer fare, more diverse material from the Bible, a several-course feast, the various readings being seen as those courses. Just as Ezekiel and John the elder both were given a scroll to eat and then were sent to speak (Ezek. 2:8—3:3; Rev. 10:8-10), so we too—and especially our preacher—may “eat” God’s word, finding there both the “lamentation and mourning and woe” of our needy world and the sweetness of the life-giving gospel. Our assemblies are to live from this feast.

This lectionary might also be compared to a mosaic. Diversely colored and jewel-like bits of glass or stone (*tesserae*) are put together. Juxtaposed to each other, they can make one image. With the *tesserae* used carefully, the image will show us the presence here of the triune God centered in the presence of Jesus Christ. Our assemblies are to find their purpose in that presence. The cover of this book includes one such image: a mosaic from the mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna, Italy. The monogram at the top center represents the Greek letters for *Chr*, thus for Christ. The Alpha and Omega can represent that the risen Christ is the beginning and the end of all things, or they can represent God who was the beginning of all things and the Spirit of God coming to us now from the end. Amid the swirling vines around and below that monogram and beneath the thin stone window letting in the light, two deer drink from a fountain. The mosaic, like the paragraphs in this book, stands for the presence of the living and life-giving God from whose word we drink: “As the deer longs for the water-brooks, so longs my soul for you, O God” (Ps. 42:1).

Both images, banquet and mosaic, urge us to pay attention to all three readings. We ought not omit the gift of one of the courses of the feast, or we may go hungry. We cannot leave out some of the bits of glass or stone, or the image will be unclear or even absent. In a faithful liturgy, all three readings will have been proclaimed in our hearing. We do well to think about all three together. Our preacher will do well to preach amid the echoes in the room from all three.

Nonetheless, we cannot always meet in assembly or gather around the eucharist. Most of the lectionary paragraphs collected in this present book

were originally written during the great coronavirus pandemic, when care about our neighbors, especially about the spread of disease to the most vulnerable among us, required that we not meet together in person at all. The scriptures were still available to us, however, and many Christians read the Sunday lectionary at home. The sentences written here were originally intended to help people at home encounter the risen Christ in the readings in a time when the full assembly was impossible. Such a time may return. Even more, there will always be personal times when sickness or distance or imprisonment keeps us from the assembly. The lectionary can still be there for us, speaking grace into our lives. “We eat the flesh and drink the blood of the divine Savior in the holy eucharist,” said the fourth-century biblical scholar Jerome, “but so do we in the reading of the scriptures.”

Each of these paragraphs, then, is intended for any preacher preparing to preach in the assembly, as a few beginning ideas for that preparation. The paragraphs are not themselves sermons; they are meant to be little mosaics showing one way that the stones of the readings might be patterned together to image the presence of Jesus Christ in the assembly. Each of these paragraphs is also intended for the lector preparing to read, for the assisting minister or deacon preparing the intercessions, and for all of us, simply preparing to go to church. Reading the readings ahead of time and reflecting on how they work together can be a splendid preparation for worship participation, a grounding preparation for interceding for the world, and a focusing preparation for the ministry of public reading. The paragraphs are also, at the same time, intended for the isolated Christian or group of Christians enacting a memory of assembly, reading the lectionary in a sort of domestic church, when they cannot join the assembly itself.

With such purposes in mind, you will find several characteristics of the lectionary accentuated in these paragraphs. For one thing, there are three readings in every lectionary set except the set for the great Vigil of Easter, and there one hears between six and fourteen readings, depending on local choice. How the readings are juxtaposed to each other—the diverse ways their multiple voices speak together—these are among the most important and joyful discoveries of lectionary study. The major concern of the paragraphs here is that juxtaposition of the three texts. So, again, I have aimed for each paragraph to be a small mosaic.

I am quite aware that such an approach may be seen as new—even contrary to what some pastors have been taught about preaching as attending to the unique circumstances of any one text, apart from the others. I simply ask you to consider what is here outlined as an alternate way. The assembly is not a Bible study. It is a gathering in the presence of Jesus Christ, drawing us into

the life of the triune God and turning us toward the needs of the world. I think the lectionary can best be seen as serving that purpose when the three readings are viewed together.

Here are two biblical images for what is proposed: It is as if the readings were all working together—like the living creatures of Revelation 4 and 5, the quite diverse living creatures, surrounding the throne of God and of the Lamb and calling out their praise. Or it is as if the readings were like the two golden cherubim on the lid of the ark in Exodus 25, between which the living God encountered Israel from what was called “the mercy seat.” In, among, and between the readings—at every Sunday and festival—we meet the living God, we find the mercy seat, we encounter the Lamb who was slain, now standing and alive.

“The Lamb who was slain”: the lectionary is always about the crucified and risen Christ. For us, the Crucified and Risen One is where we find the mercy seat of God. Just as Paul, the source of the great majority of the second readings in the RCL, determined “to know nothing” among the churches “except Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2), so the lectionary has determined. Just as the gospels find that every story of Jesus has lines that run on to the end of the book, to the passion and resurrection narrative of that gospel book, so the lectionary uses the gospel reading. Every gospel reading becomes a resurrection appearance now, with Christ showing us his wounds. Indeed, stories of the life and ministry of Jesus are read to us as images of what Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit is doing among us now: healing, forgiving, teaching, welcoming, raising the dead. And taught by the way the New Testament is so strongly built out of imagery from the Old Testament, the lectionary borrows that imagery repeatedly, using the first reading to show us the meaning of the gospel of God amid our failure and hope.

More: with Isaiah, when we encounter the living God, as we do in reading the scriptures, we may say, “Woe is me! I am lost” (Isa. 6:5). The scriptures not infrequently accuse us. And they always give us images for our utter need and the need of the whole world: “lamentation and mourning and woe” (Ezek. 2:10). But much more than that accusation and that accurate description of need, they pour out the restoring and life-giving mercy of God. The three-year lectionary gives us, Sunday after Sunday, sometimes more in one reading than another, but always all together, words of law and words of gospel: descriptions of our failure, sin, and need, and the very gift of God’s mercy.

And to trust in that mercy, to let our faith in God be awakened again, to thus be united with the risen Christ, inevitably means to turn to our neighbor in loving service. The lectionary encourages us, as Paul says, toward “faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6). And awakening us to faith again, to trust in God, is another way to speak of the core purpose of reading the lectionary in assembly.

In each mosaic paragraph that follows here you will find then, briefly set out,

- ideas about how all three readings can be made to speak together, both in tension and in concert;
- seriousness about the critical reading of the scriptures, including the awareness that there are four gospels, each with a different voice;
- the texts of the lectionary always seen as proclaiming the ministry, the cross, the resurrection, and the assembly presence of Jesus Christ;
- the texts as a doorway into the life of the holy Trinity—that is, into the life of God as known in Christ;
- the texts as materials the Holy Spirit may use to call us again to faith, to enable us to trust God;
- the texts seen as both law and gospel, both judgment and hope;
- the texts as celebrating the meaning of Sunday—the resurrection of Christ and the assembly gathered around the Risen One—and the meaning of the great seasons: human longing for God in Advent, the incarnation in Christmas and Epiphany, baptism in Lent, and yet again the resurrection in the fifty days of Easter;
- ways in which the readings can be seen as illumining at least one of the sacraments: baptism—along with absolution, the return to baptism—and eucharist; and
- the call to turn with Christ in love toward the needs of those around us.

Each paragraph is prefaced by the name of the Sunday or festival or, in the case of the standard Sundays—the Sundays between Baptism of Our Lord and Transfiguration, and the Sundays between Holy Trinity and Christ the King—the lectionary or proper number, two different ways the lectionary sets are designated in the diverse churches. Then the readings are listed, beginning with the gospel for the day. That order does not represent the order of reading in the liturgy but the symbolic priority of the text that most especially stands for Jesus Christ risen. The psalm is included, along with

the antiphon proposed for that psalm in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. The psalm is not a reading but a communal sung response to the first reading, though its antiphon frequently provides both a key to that psalm and a way to reflect deeply on all the readings together. In this book, the first reading is always drawn from the “complementary series” on the standard Sundays. The semicontinuous option makes the construction of an assembly-purposed mosaic much more difficult. Sometimes the RCL, on various Sundays and festivals, has yet other options for one or the other of the readings. This book has made a choice, hoping the sentences will still be useful to you even if that particular reading is not your assembly’s choice.

The book is primarily organized around the three years. However, some major festivals have the same readings in all three years. Rather than print the paragraphs for those festivals three times, they were gathered together in the two chapters at the beginning of the book, one for the Christmas cycle and one for the Lent and Easter cycle. Furthermore, in the use of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, there are some lesser festivals that, if they occur on Sunday, can bring their own readings to replace the given readings for the Sunday. The lesser festivals that often (though not necessarily) replace the Sunday readings are Name of Jesus; Presentation of Our Lord; Reformation Day; and All Saints Day. The lesser festivals which may, by local choice, replace the standard Sunday readings are John the Baptist; Peter and Paul, Apostles; Mary, Mother of Our Lord; Holy Cross Day; and Michael and All Angels. All of these lectionary sets, except for All Saints Day, are considered together in the final chapter. All Saints Day has three sets of readings, one in each of the three years. These readings are then considered in their place in years A, B, and C.

Of course, much more could be—and has been—written about these texts. Three readings together leave a lot of room for interpretation. These mosaics simply present one way to see them meaningfully juxtaposed. People who read the texts when alone, or preachers and readers who are preparing to read or preach in the assembly, are urged to do much wider reading: biblical exegesis, denominational and ecumenical resources about the lectionary, books about liturgical meaning, books about preaching. Those living with these texts are also urged to read regular sources of the news, so to juxtapose the texts to events in our time. They are also urged to read the natural world around us and to see how the earth-loving character of the scriptures invites us to care about that earth.

Still, the special concern here has been to briefly indicate the importance of more than one text, the ways that a juxtaposition of readings enriches us, and the essential assembly purpose of the three-year lectionaries. A further rationale for what is included in these paragraphs can be found especially in my *Proclaiming the Living Word: A Handbook for Preachers* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2018).

May these little word-mosaics be helpful to you.

Gordon W. Lathrop

A NOTE ON THE CALENDAR

To make use of this book it will be helpful to have access to a church calendar. But with a few pointers, it would be possible for you to construct such a calendar yourself. The Easter cycle stretches from Ash Wednesday to Pentecost and is determined by the date of Easter. The Christmas cycle stretches from the first Sunday of Advent to Epiphany and is determined by the date of Christmas. The date of Easter in the Western churches is the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox. Six Sundays in Lent precede Easter. Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, is the Wednesday before the first Sunday in Lent. Easter is fifty days long and includes eight Sundays, the first being Easter Day itself, the eighth being Pentecost. Christmas, celebrated on December 25, is preceded by four Sundays of Advent and followed by Epiphany on January 6 as well as the one or two Sundays that occur between Christmas and Epiphany.

The lectionary, then is organized in three years:

- Year A begins on the First Sunday of Advent in 2022, 2025, 2028, 2031, and every three years after that.
- Year B begins on the First Sunday of Advent in 2023, 2026, 2029, 2032, and every three years after that.
- Year C begins on the First Sunday of Advent in 2024, 2027, 2030, 2033, and every three years after that.

The first Sunday after Epiphany is celebrated as Baptism of Our Lord, and the lectionary numbering begins on that day with Lectionary 1. The standard Sundays using these numbered lectionary sets, both after Epiphany and after Pentecost, are also dated within a range of dates so that they can be easily

found. The last Sunday after Epiphany, the Sunday just before Ash Wednesday, is celebrated as Transfiguration of Our Lord. The Sunday after Pentecost is celebrated as the festival of the Holy Trinity. The numbered lectionary sets and the dated standard Sundays then begin again after Holy Trinity and continue to the end of the year, the Sunday before Advent begins. That Sunday is kept as the festival Christ the King.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

John 10:1-10

Acts 2:42-47

Psalm 23 The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not be in want. (Ps. 23:1)

1 Peter 2:19-25

Having read these readings, consider this:

There are lots of “thieves and robbers” about. That is, there are church leaders who do not present the gospel, and there are political leaders who serve only themselves. The Bible calls such leaders “false shepherds.” But in the Bible the Good Shepherd, the one who gathers the flock and does not misuse or kill them, is God. In his death and resurrection, Jesus—who is called the Lamb of God—becomes our Good Shepherd. By his wounds we were healed. In the current valley of death, he is with us. In the scriptures, as in the preaching of faithful pastors and the witness of each other, we hear the voice of God the shepherd, calling us by name. In baptism the Spirit leads us beside still waters. In the supper, the Risen One prepares a table for us. And this holy Trinity turns us again toward people in need, toward people hurt by the thieves and robbers.

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

John 14:1-14

Acts 7:55-60

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16 Into your hands, O LORD, I commend my spirit. (Ps. 31:5)

1 Peter 2:2-10

Having read these readings, consider this:

Thomas knows neither the way nor where Jesus is going. Philip wants to see God. These disciples stand for us, now, in our need and confusion. But Jesus himself is the way, the truth, and the life. He is himself the presence of God. The amazing thing is that he goes to God now by going to the cross, and he makes that place of suffering to be the very dwelling place of God with us. Henceforth, in every place of suffering, we see the risen Christ already there, as Stephen sees him coming. In Jesus, God has mercy on us and makes us together the house of God and the witnesses to God’s mighty acts. In the Spirit, Jesus’ words come to us in assembly—and in our own homes—and make our assemblies and our homes to be part of this house of God with many rooms. From this house we can turn to our neighbors with our prayers and gifts, for God’s mercy is for all.