

Preach the Word

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Treasures Old and New

The Blessings of Lectionary Preaching

By Joel J. Gawrisch

This article is also available at wels.net/blogs/worship-blogs. We welcome your comments or questions.

Where it all comes from, no one really knows for sure. Every time you think that there couldn't possibly be more, more is revealed from the depths of the mythical storeroom. It really is the stuff of legend. All of it saved, stored, treasured, and later brought forth in thankful celebration and joyful affirmation.

I'm writing, of course, about my father-in-law's collection of Greyhound Lines paraphernalia. (Okay, maybe you didn't see that coming. But his family certainly has known this for many years.) His connection with Greyhound began in 1965 when he first started driving the Chicago to Milwaukee route by night and teaching in an elementary school classroom by day. He eventually drove full-time, rising within the company to become Director of Safety, training other drivers and setting a standard of safety excellence within the industry. One particularly fond memory is of meeting John Madden after training the drivers for his "Madden Cruiser."

One can easily imagine the awards, recognitions, mementos, and corporate gear he accumulated over more than 30 years of service. Actually, one really can't imagine it all. From that mythical storeroom have come watches, bus route posters, bus banks, belt buckles, note pads, hats, pens, photos, and so much more. Each item is connected to a memory, an experience, an



accomplishment, or an insight. It doesn't matter how many questions you ask, there are always new stories to be heard and treasured items to share.

As this article is being written, Pentecost 10A is quickly approaching. The Gospel appointed for the Sunday is from

Matthew 13. Matthew recounts how Jesus not only instructed about the kingdom of God with parables and explained their meanings but also explained how this approach was fulfillment of prophecy, part of the Father's divine plan. He then makes this statement, "Therefore, every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old" (Matthew 13:52).

To the disciples, who grew up in a generation of contradicting and confusing spiritual teachers, these words must have been a revelation. Indeed they were a divine revelation as Jesus himself taught "with authority" about the kingdom, revealing the heart and will of the Father. Through bold proclamation and ready parables Jesus made the connections from the Old Testament to the New, from Moses and the Prophets to fulfillment in the very presence of the people, from the kingdom of this world to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Each and every Sunday, each and every preacher has the very same opportunity to bring forth "new treasures as well as old" from the immeasurable depths of the biblical storeroom. Each treasured item brought forth is connected to remembrance of what God has done for his people, the human experience of divine plans, the accomplishment of salvation, and insight into the work of the Spirit empowering the Body of Christ. This and more is all there to behold as His Story is told afresh and treasured items are brought forth in thankful celebration and joyful affirmation.

Frank Senn writes of this relationship between celebration and affirmation as previously proposed by philosopher Josef Pieper (*Christian Liturgy*, p.20). In essence, he proposes that by proclaiming the gospel, our new creation in Christ is affirmed. As our new creation is affirmed, the result is thankful celebration. In other words, as we bring forth "new treasures as well as old" from the storeroom of God's Word, the result is Spirit-wrought affirmation and celebration. Peter brought forth treasure in Acts 2. Paul brought forth treasure in Acts 13. Jesus brought forth treasure in Matthew 13. (There are many more examples.) But Jesus also brought forth treasure beyond just the hillsides of Galilee and his journeys in Judea. He brought forth treasure (along with the apostles) within the framework of the synagogue worship rite (Luke 4).

In Volume 4, No. 4 of *Preach the Word*, James Tiefel makes the connection between Jesus' preaching within the framework of the synagogue worship rite and the Lutheran preacher's opportunity to preach within the framework of the Lutheran liturgy. (See *Treasures from the Archive* in this issue or the aforementioned volume for the entire article: worship.welsrc.net/archived-resources.) Luther Reed further explains the blessings of preaching which is closely connected to the appointed readings, themes, and seasons of the Church Year:

By building upon the thought of the lessons, the Sermon becomes the climax of the Office (Service) of the Word. By relating the Sermon and the Service of any one day to the cycle of the church's year, completeness and strength are gained....

The liturgy with its varied and harmonious structure supports and strengthens the Sermon (*The Lutheran Liturgy* p.306-7).

The reason for this strength of relationship is found in the clear proclamation of the gospel in both Word and Sacrament within the liturgical context. The Ordinary summarizes and proclaims the life of Christ. The sacraments assure and celebrate the life of Christ "for you" and in you. The Propers bring out the details and give special focus to the life of Christ each Sunday throughout the Church Year. The development of this focus was no accident. It is intentionally by design.

As believers have gathered for worship, they have developed and adopted forms which mostly clearly proclaim the gospel. Consider the development of the lectionary. Acts tells us that first century believers "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). By the second century, Justin Martyr describes "Lord's Day" (Sunday) readings from "the memoirs of the apostles or the prophets as long as time permits" (*First Apology* chapter 67). Soon, specific readings were selected for annual festival services like Christmas and Easter. Then, "octaves" (eight Sundays) were added to the festivals before, after, or on either side of the festival resulting in festival seasons. Last to develop were the readings assigned to the "time of the church" half of the Church Year. By the time of Gregory the Great (late sixth century), the Roman *Ordo* had been established. With only minor adjustments along the way, the *Ordo* became the basis for the "Historic Lectionary" which served the Western Church for centuries. It was amended by the Reformers



and continues to find use in some churches today. In addition, a number of more recent lectionaries were developed including the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship's three-year series. (This series has been adopted and enhanced by *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* and *Christian Worship Supplement*.) Luther Reed describes the value of the selected readings of the lectionary:

The mature judgement of the church has retained them because their use is a guarantee of sound and complete teaching of fundamental Christian truth. Altogether they constitute a solid block of fundamental material...[and] are a most important part of the common liturgical inheritance of the universal church, with a continuous history of nearly fifteen hundred years" (*The Lutheran Liturgy* p. 291).

The preacher, of course, is free to preach on whatever text he deems appropriate for God's flock. He is not required to preach on John 1 for Christmas Day, First Corinthians during Epiphany, or the Gospel of Matthew on the Sundays of the year of our Lord 2017. Specific circumstances, needs, and emphases may bring the preacher to the treasure storeroom for the good of the local gathering without turning to the appointed texts for the following Sunday. But the difference between lectionary preaching and non-lectionary preaching would be like the difference between bringing raw gold from the treasure storeroom and bringing out sculpted works of art. Both have immeasurable value but the former requires shaping and honing to achieve beauty similar to the latter which has already been crafted into specific beauty for the occasion.

Certainly, as Paul wrote to Timothy, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." Preaching will certainly include all of these "uses" for God's Word as the preacher summarizes, expounds, and applies the text. But "throughout history the Church has indicated that the primary objective of its primary gathering is to put the Gospel to use in Word and Sacrament as a natural outgrowth of Christian faith and life" (*WELS School of Worship Enrichment*). As the lectionary presents the gospel within the liturgical context, the preacher does well to use it on a regular basis as a way to bring forth the treasure of God's Word in keeping with this primary worship objective.

With this volume of *Preach the Word*, we begin a look at preaching with the expressed purpose of bringing forth *Treasures Old and New* through lectionary preaching. Research leading up to this focus indicates that there was a desire to strengthen preaching from the lectionary within the liturgical context. Comments included references to how the Sunday's fit together, how to better preach the Church Year, finding doctrinal connections in the lectionary, and developing thematic series for worship based on the lectionary readings. There is much to explore in the months ahead.

The lectionary presents the gospel within the liturgical context.



For now, consider that lectionary preaching is closely aligned with worship planning. In fact, the best place to start are the revised *Planning Christian Worship* resources available through the Commission on Worship's website worship.welsrc.net/download-worship/planning-christian-worship-revision). Read through the selected scriptures, especially the Gospel, and the summary paragraphs while keeping in mind the identified Theme of the Day. Often, the Prayer of the Day and the Hymn of the Day can also help tie the readings together.

But don't pick a text yet.

Next, consider the readings and Theme of the Day in consideration of the season in the Church Year. How do these readings prepare, support, or enhance the overall message of the season? How do these readings build on the readings from the previous Sundays? How do they anticipate the readings for the Sundays to come? If the readings are part of a *lectio continua*, what obvious threads run through each selection? Is there opportunity for a series on this particular book? If the readings are from the gospel, how does this account fit into the synoptic gospels? What is the prophetic and fulfillment connection between the First Reading and the Gospel? Where is Jesus in his ministry? What opportunity is there to bring the listeners into the account? (Edersheim's *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* is of particular help with this.)

But don't pick a text yet.

Next, consider the service itself. What ready connections are to be found between the readings and the Ordinary, between the

readings and the prayers, between the readings and the hymn suggestions? (I admit that many times I have chosen a hymn on the “wrong” Sunday simply because I didn’t look ahead.)

But don’t pick a text yet.

Finally, consider factors *beyond* the liturgical resources *in view* of the liturgical resources. This is where local needs and challenges, special emphases and themes are taken into consideration.

We have all been tempted at times to start here when an issue needs to be addressed. But as a preacher with now 20 years of preaching experience, I can’t tell you how many times the lectionary provided the exact Word of the Lord for the Lord’s people exactly when they needed to hear it. As you look first to the lectionary to provide what is needed, you will likely not need to look beyond it.

Now, pick a text and begin your text study process.

Within the process suggested above for choosing a text, there is plenty of room for more questions to be asked, more considerations to be made, and more resources to explore. These aspects and others will be covered, Lord willing, over the next year. As we do so, we will explore some creative ways to preach the lectionary while connecting to the “varied and harmonious” emphases of the liturgical year. In addition, supporting articles from past issues of *Preach the Word* will be summarized in a feature called *Treasures from the Archive*. It is my prayer that these efforts will enrich your lectionary preaching to the joyful affirmation and thankful celebration of God’s holy people. Preach the Word as you bring forth from its storeroom treasures old and new.



Treasures from the Archive

With twenty years of archives to hand, there is a storeroom of treasure to behold in past issues. The following is a summary of a past article which supports the main article in this issue.

Jesus preached on mountainsides and from fishing boats more often than he did in public worship. But at times both he and his apostles preached in synagogues, and synagogue worship was carried out with a standard ritual. As Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus certainly wasn’t bound to observe the synagogue’s ritual. Nevertheless:

- He respected the synagogue’s order.
- He respected the synagogue’s ceremony.
- He respected the synagogue’s customs.

There are no rules here, no New Testament ceremonial laws. There is an example here, however, of how the greatest preacher preached in the context of ritual.

The Ritual of Lutheranism

The order of service we use in public worship is not that of the Old Testament synagogue, but a version of the rite used in the Christian church since the second century. The early Church formed its worship rite to highlight what it knew Christians needed the most, Word and Sacrament.

The western rite, the order of worship we usually call the liturgy, consists of the Ordinary and the Proper, both of which serve the Word and the Sacrament. The Ordinary is a set of five song texts (one of the texts, the Creed, is spoken in our version of the liturgy) that repeat the central themes

of salvation Sunday by Sunday. The Proper is a set of lessons, songs, and prayers that retell Jesus’ life and work on a year by year basis.

Preaching that Respects the Liturgy

How might 21st century Lutheran preachers imitate the respect Jesus had for the ritual of public worship in his day?

- Preach on the basis of a text that respects the liturgy’s Proper. The lessons, prayers, and hymns chosen for the various Sundays of the church year intend to carry a theme. The preacher respects that theme by allowing it to come through in his sermon.
- Allow the ceremony of the liturgy to remain intact. The liturgy anticipates that all three lessons will be read consecutively and that they will be adorned and highlighted by the Psalm, Verse, and Hymn of the Day.
- The liturgy has two central foci, the Word and the Sacrament. Both the Ordinary and the Proper focus on those two means of grace. The architecture of Christian churches since the time of Constantine takes these same two highlights into consideration.*

Most WELS preachers...preach within the context of the Liturgy. What are the implications for this kind of preaching? How does the liturgical context affect the sermon’s style and form? How can we preach the Word and respect the liturgy at the same time? Jesus gives us some examples, and we are wise to apply his practice to our own.

James Tiefel, Volume 4, No. 4

*Since Reformation times baptisms are usually administered in church, giving public worship a third central focus.