

LITURGY,  
MUSIC,  
PREACHING,  
AND THE ARTS

# Call to Worship



Read and Proclaimed

Volume 57:3



Presbyterian Association of Musicians

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# Call to Worship

Liturgy, Music, Preaching, and the Arts

Volume 57.3  
Read and Proclaimed



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# Call to Worship

Liturgy, Music, Preaching, and the Arts

Continuing the tradition of *Reformed Liturgy & Music* (1971–2000) and *Reformed Liturgics* (1963–69), *Call to Worship* seeks to further the church's commitment to theological integrity, corporate worship, and excellence in music, preaching, and other liturgical art forms.

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Front cover: Meg Hitchcock, *An Endless Succession of Appearances*, oil on canvas, 24 x 20 in., 2023, from the *Bhagavad Gita*

Back cover: "Do you want to be healed," the Rev. Larissa Kwong Abazia asked, preaching from John 5:1-15 on June 22, 2023, the fourth full day of the Presbyterian Association of Musicians Worship & Music Conference at Montreat Conference Center in Montreat, North Carolina.

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# Call to Worship

Read and Proclaimed  
Volume 57.3

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# About the Art in this Issue

**M**y work explores the nature of religion and the psychological impact it has on its followers. When I left the church in my early thirties, I began to use my artwork as a commentary on the limitations of language and interpretation, questioning the exclusivity of fundamentalist belief systems. In my work I have addressed such themes as sin, salvation, and the patriarchal authority of religious traditions. I work with sacred texts, cutting letters from one text to form the writings of another. In one piece I cut letters from the Bible to create a passage from the Koran, in another I cut letters from the Koran to create a passage from the *Bhagavad Gita*, and so on. By deconstructing and recombining the holy books of diverse religions, I subvert them to undermine their authority and animate the common thread that weaves through all scripture.

—Meg Hitchcock

# Introduction

Sally Ann McKinsey

To make a clay pot on a wheel, a potter first finds center, then starts to make space in the form from that center by defining a base and building the walls of the vessel. In this part of the process, called “throwing,” the turning clay comes back around again and again to meet the potter’s steady hands, which remain still but move upwards ever so carefully with each turn. The slight movement means that the clay continues to come back around in a cycle, but the potter’s hands never meet it at the same spot.

Lectionary cycles turn in circles, but a repeated text never meets us in the place we were the last time we read it. How many times have preachers reached back into their files, only to recognize that the sermon they preached on the same text three years ago does not work today? This issue explores this question and others about the texts we read and proclaim in worship.

What do we choose to read, when, and how? What do these decisions reveal about what we believe and how we engage in the liturgical cycle, give pastoral care, and foster spiritual formation in our ministry contexts? Some articles in this issue explore questions about *which* texts to read, *when*. David Gambrell offers an analysis of the history of lectionaries and the Revised Common Lectionary in particular, revealing its often misunderstood or forgotten features. Rolf Jacobson writes about the Narrative Lectionary, sharing reflections about its formation and organization. Kamal Hassan explores the practice of reading texts for preaching in series, drawing relationships between this practice and the history of Black liberation theology in preaching.

Other articles explore translation—the language we use when we read. Margaret Aymer writes about the history of translation in the Christian faith and about the task of choosing translations today, offering several contemporary translations and giving examples about decisions in the process of producing those translations. Eric Sarwar shares

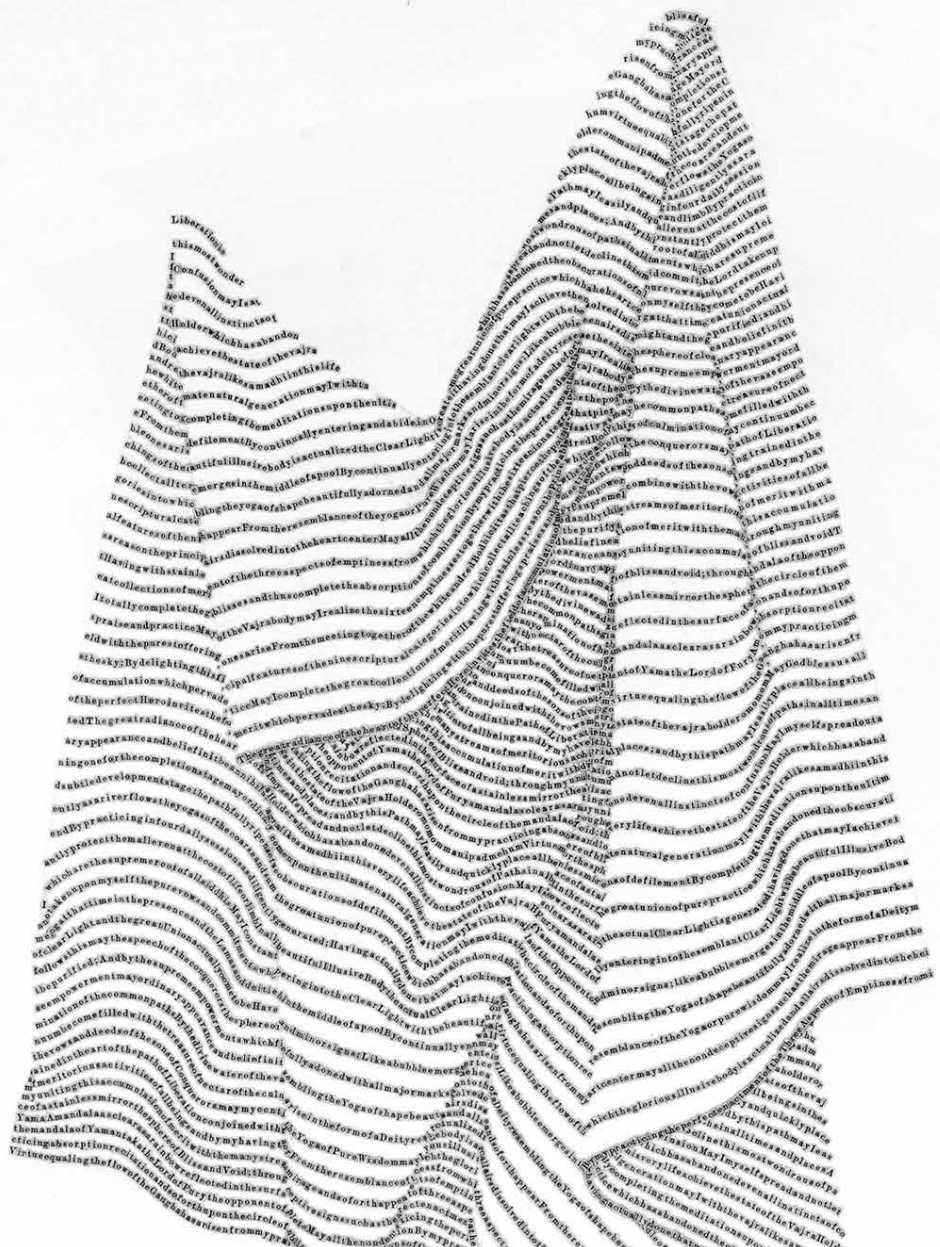
reflections about the power of words from the book of Psalms in interfaith contexts to build bridges with sacred texts and music.

Still another way to approach the topic of this issue has to do with *how* we read texts in worship, which includes both issues of interpretation in proclamation and the physical practice of reading in worship. Jimmy Hoke shares their project, “Queering the Lectionary,” in which they interpret the texts in the Revised Common Lectionary with a queer theory lens, and Lis Valle-Ruiz’s preaching column gives fresh methods for interpreting a familiar text, citing other hermeneutical approaches. Derrick McQueen’s liturgy column develops a liturgical theology around the physical practice of reading, making connections with performance theory.

Of course, there’s also the vital *why* we read Scripture in worship. Reformed theology and tradition places Scripture at the center of worship. In the PC(USA)’s Directory for Worship we read, “Where the Word is read and proclaimed, Jesus Christ the living Word is present by the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, reading, hearing, preaching, and affirming the Word are central to Christian worship and essential to the Service for the Lord’s Day” (W-3.0301). The throwing metaphor also offers a way to think about the centrality of Scripture in forming a worship service and us as participants. In the process of throwing, a pot is likely to collapse if the clay is not centered on the wheel from the beginning. Reformed worship places texts read and proclaimed in the center of the service. The text becomes the center that forms the liturgy and music, pieces of the service’s structure that couldn’t exist without the text.

As we prepare to hear the word read and proclaimed, let us pray . . .

—Sally Ann McKinsey,  
Editor



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Meg Hitchcock  
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letters cut from the Bible, paper, 30 x 22 1/4 in., 2016



# Call to Worship

Feature Articles

# The Revised Common Lectionary: Sources and Secrets

David Gambrell

*This article is adapted from presentations at the 2023 Presbyterian Association of Musicians Montreat Worship & Music Conference, “Thirst No More.”*

For forty years the people of God wandered in the wilderness. They were living in “liberation limbo,” a dry and dusty place somewhere between Pharaoh and the Promised Land. Exodus 17 suggests that this was the first “protestant” congregation—the people protested bitterly to Moses that they were parched with thirst. God answered their prayer, giving them water from a rock. According to midrash, this rock followed the people of God through the wilderness for forty years. It was called “Miriam’s well,” named after Moses’ older sibling. Whenever the people were thirsty, they would “sing to it” (Num. 21:17); water would spring forth and they would thirst no more.

For the past forty years—since 1983—contemporary protestants have lived with the ecumenical Common Lectionary and with its younger sibling, the 1992 Revised Common Lectionary (RCL). When this project was published—just two decades after the Vatican II liturgical reforms of 1963—the lectionary represented great hopes and dreams for the renewal, transformation, and unity of the church through worship. In the forty years since, sometimes it feels as though we are living in “liturgical limbo,” somewhere between the promise and fulfillment of that ecumenical vision. But the RCL keeps rolling along. It keeps spilling out living water as, week after week, churches turn to the lectionary for guidance, inspiration, and refreshment in God’s Word.

This article examines the sources of the RCL from ancient times to the twentieth century, demonstrating continuity and change through three millennia. It also seeks to reveal some of the “secrets” about how the RCL works in worship—features that were never meant to be secret but are often neglected or misunderstood. By uncovering some of these sources and secrets, I hope to reintroduce the RCL as a deep well of wisdom for the people of God.

## Sources: The History of Lectionaries

The first part of this article traces the development of lectionaries through three thousand years. Watch for recurring themes as the story unfolds—unity and diversity, continuity and change, schism and reconciliation, simplicity and complexity. At the heart of this history, there is a pendulum oscillating between two different approaches to proclaiming the Word: *lectio continua* (sequential reading) and *lectio selecta* (selective reading).

### Tabernacle, Temple, and Synagogue

Long before there were Christian lectionaries there were patterns and practices for proclaiming God’s word in ancient Israel. At the end of Israel’s time in the wilderness, as the people prepare to cross the Jordan, Moses commands the reading of the Law every seven years during the Festival of Booths (Deut. 31:9–13). Centuries later, after a long line of unfaithful leaders in Jerusalem, a good king named Josiah unearths a long-lost copy of the book of the Law during repairs to the temple. He tears his clothes in grief and immediately institutes a major religious reform, grounded in the word of the Lord (2 Kgs. 22:1–23:3). After the Babylonian exile, the Persian king sends Nehemiah back to Jerusalem to

David Gambrell is associate for worship in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Office of Theology and Worship and a representative to the Consultation on Common Texts, the ecumenical body responsible for the Revised Common Lectionary.

rebuild the community and restore the city walls. When construction is complete, Ezra the priest gathers all the people for a public reading of the Law, where they rededicate their lives to the Lord (Neh. 8:1–18).<sup>1</sup> These three scenes illustrate how God's word forms faith from generation to generation, calls us back to faithfulness when we fall away, and rebuilds community in the aftermath of destruction.

The companion books of Luke and Acts offer valuable insights into Jewish lectionary systems of the first century. In Luke, Jesus goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath day and reads a provocative passage from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, adding some commentary of his own (Luke 4:16–21). This story reflects the way in which readings from the Prophets (*haftaroth*) came to be attached to existing schedules of readings from the Law (*Torah*). Luke has Jesus again interpreting the Law and the Prophets on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:27) and just before his ascension (Luke 24:44). In Acts, Paul hears the reading of the Law and Prophets at a synagogue in Antioch, and then offers a sermon (Acts 13:15). Preaching in Jerusalem, James says, “For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every Sabbath in the synagogues” (Acts 15:21).<sup>2</sup> These passages seem to confirm long-standing traditions of weekly readings from the Law and Prophets.

Despite these glimpses of ancient lectionaries, there is uncertainty around exactly where, when, and how these schedules of synagogue readings took shape. We know that cycles of Torah readings flourished after the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE) as services of the word replaced the sacrificial rites. There seems to have been an older, three-year Palestinian schedule of readings, but this was replaced by a one-year Babylonian cycle in the sixth or seventh century CE. Because these early Jewish lectionaries depended largely on oral tradition, complete lists or books of readings only date back to the Middle Ages. As it exists today, the one-year cycle of Torah readings consists of fifty-four weekly portions (*parashot*). Each portion has a Hebrew name, usually drawn from the first verse of the passage. The weekly cycle of Torah readings is interrupted for the festivals of Passover, Weeks, and Booths, just as the Nativity and resurrection cycles of the Christian year break into the flow of ordinary time.<sup>3</sup>

## Early Christian Churches

We might think of the Bible itself as a kind of lectionary. For several thousand years, people of faith have been telling and writing stories about their experiences of God in the world. Some of those stories ended up in the Bible, but not all of them. Storytellers and editors had a hand in shaping and selecting these texts for public reading among the people of God. Ultimately, councils of religious leaders made decisions about which of these stories were inspired by the Spirit and measured up for inclusion in the canon.<sup>4</sup> New Testament scholars and church historians have advanced a variety of theories about how the Gospels might have developed as schedules or sequences of readings for Christian worship.<sup>5</sup> For instance, the Gospel of Matthew mirrors the five books of the Torah, structured around a series of narratives and discourses of Jesus, and explicitly mentions “the church” (*ekklesia*).<sup>6</sup> The epistles of Paul, generally thought to pre-date the Gospels, appear to have been designed for public reading in their intended destinations. At the end of First Thessalonians, Paul says, “I solemnly command you by the Lord that this letter be read aloud to all” (1 Thess. 5:27). The Epistle to the Colossians offers further evidence that these letters were collected and exchanged among other churches (Col. 4:16).<sup>7</sup>

Beyond these biblical texts, early Christian writings reveal emerging practices of reading and proclamation among the first followers of Jesus. A Greek philosopher and convert to Christianity named Justin (100–165 CE) wrote a defense of Christian faith and practice before his martyrdom under the Roman Empire. Justin recounts eucharistic gatherings on the first day of the week at which Christians would read from the Old and New Testaments: “For as long as there is time, the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read. Then, when the reader has finished, the president verbally gives a warning and appeal for the imitation of these good examples” (*First Apology*, 67).<sup>8</sup> A fourth-century church order from Syria demonstrates how these patterns continued to develop, with Sunday readings from the Law, the Prophets, the Epistles, Acts, and the Gospels (*Apostolic Constitutions*, 8.5). As these examples suggest, for the first few centuries of Christian history, the primary rhythm of worship seems to have been the weekly celebration of Christ's resurrection on the Lord's Day. These times of worship featured continuous readings through sequences of Scripture (*lectio continua*).

From the fourth century forward, the rhythm of Christian worship was increasingly inflected by annual commemorations of events in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. These festivals and seasons of the Christian year were accompanied by selected readings (*lectio selecta*), biblical passages deemed especially appropriate for these occasions. Records of sermons from early church leaders such as Ambrose of Milan (339–397), Augustine of Hippo (354–430), and Leo the Great (400–461) attest to the shift from *lectio continua* to *lectio selecta* preaching. By the fifth century, many churches were using a series of three readings—Old Testament, epistle, and Gospel—very much like the pattern of the RCL. Through the Middle Ages, however, readings from the Hebrew Scriptures began to fall away, leaving just the Epistles and Gospels. Under the reign of Charlemagne in the eighth century, a monk named Alcuin (735–804) standardized the Catholic lectionary, developing a one-year system that combined the Roman pattern of Gospel readings with a Gallican schedule for the Epistles.<sup>9</sup> In subsequent centuries we find illuminated manuscripts of lectionary books and markings in medieval Bibles that indicate the beginning and endings of lectionary readings.<sup>10</sup>

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#### The Reformation

When Martin Luther (1483–1546) posted his Ninety-Five Theses on the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg in 1517, the lectionary didn't make the list. Luther regularly preached from the Gospels and Epistles of the Catholic lectionary and encouraged others to do so. But Luther also found opportunities to teach on Genesis, Exodus, and the Psalms; a systematic reading of the Epistle to the Romans was especially influential in his theology. Until the middle of the twentieth century, most Lutherans and Anglicans continued to rely on the Catholic lectionary for the proclamation of the Word, with its *lectio selecta* approach to the Bible.<sup>11</sup>

For other branches of the Protestant family tree, *lectio continua* preaching was the rule. Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531) began his ministry in Zurich by

preaching verse by verse by verse through the Gospel of Matthew. At St. Pierre Cathedral in Geneva, John Calvin (1509–1564) preached through the Gospels and Acts on Sunday mornings and the Psalms and Epistles on Sunday evenings; on weekday mornings he preached on books of the Old Testament. There are records of two thousand sermons by Calvin, touching nearly every book of the Bible.<sup>12</sup>

The influence of John Calvin, along with the Scottish Reformer John Knox (1514–1572), is clear in the English Reformation of the seventeenth century. The 1644 *Westminster Directory for the Public Worship of God* called for the sequential reading of Scripture, covering all of the canonical books of the Bible, ordinarily one chapter at a time. At the same time, it granted some freedom to ministers in determining the selection of Scriptures and length of readings.<sup>13</sup> Presbyterians in North America used variations on the *Westminster Directory for Worship* to guide and govern their worship for generations. It would not be until the mid-twentieth century that Presbyterians began to reconsider the value of a lectionary.

At the Council of Trent (1545–1563), the Roman Catholic Church sought to respond to the challenges of the Protestant Reformation. This council reaffirmed the books of the biblical canon, including some (such as Baruch and Maccabees) deemed apocryphal by Protestant churches. It also doubled down on the authority and authenticity of the Latin edition of the Bible. Notably, Trent standardized the one-year medieval lectionary in a version that consisted of 138 different biblical passages, almost exclusively from the Gospels and Epistles. Readings from the Hebrew Scriptures were only used on Epiphany, Good Friday, and at the Easter Vigil. Of the four Gospels, twenty-two readings were from Matthew, twenty-one from Luke, fourteen from John, and four from Mark. This Catholic lectionary would become the norm for four hundred years, from 1570 to 1969.<sup>14</sup>

#### The Twentieth Century

In 1962, on the eve of the Second Vatican Council, calls to reform the lectionary came from many quarters. Biblical scholars lamented the narrow use of the Old and New Testaments. Historians cited more expansive approaches to the Bible in the early church. Pastors called for a deeper well of Scripture to draw from in teaching the Christian faith.<sup>15</sup> Taking this feedback to heart, the first major act of Vatican II was to approve the *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, or *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, in 1963. Along with

other groundbreaking decisions—using vernacular languages in the liturgy and encouraging “fully active and conscious participation” in worship—this document called for a radical revision of the lectionary: “The treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that the richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God’s word” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 51).<sup>16</sup>

From 1964 to 1969, a working group labored to develop the new Catholic lectionary. They set forth guiding premises, including the affirmation of the presence of Christ in the word proclaimed, a focus on Sundays and festivals (rather than saints’ days), a strong commitment to an expanded use of Scripture, adaptations to contemporary contexts, and attentiveness to church tradition. They invited prominent biblical scholars to recommend important passages and used these lists to compile the lectionary. Key features were a three-year cycle organized around the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), a pattern of three readings (plus a psalm) for each day, and a combination of the *lectio selecta* method (for seasons and festivals) and the *lectio continua* approach (for Ordinary Time). In 1967 a draft was shared with hundreds of church leaders; their input informed the final draft that was approved by Pope Paul VI in 1969. This *Lectionary for Mass* went into effect on the First Sunday of Advent in 1971.<sup>17</sup>

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Presbyterians were among the first to publish an adaptation of the new three-year lectionary in their 1970 *Worshipbook*—even before its premiere in Catholic churches.

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Protestants were paying attention. Presbyterians were among the first to publish an adaptation of the new three-year lectionary in their 1970 *Worshipbook*—even before its premiere in Catholic churches.<sup>18</sup> Within the decade, other denominations followed suit, releasing alternate versions of the Vatican II lectionary. But these disparate and diverging efforts were at odds with the hope for Christian unity espoused by the ecumenical liturgical movement. In 1978, the Consultation on Common Texts (CCT), a group of Protestant and Catholic scholars working on shared versions of important liturgical texts (such

as the Lord’s Prayer and Apostles’ Creed), undertook the development of an ecumenical lectionary.<sup>19</sup> It was determined that the new lectionary would follow the Catholic *Lectionary for Mass* in several important respects: observing the same liturgical calendar, using the three-year cycle, and (for the most part) retaining its Gospel and Epistle readings. A significant difference was in the presentation of the Hebrew Scriptures—offering semicontinuous readings from the Old Testament during the time after Pentecost. These ecumenical endeavors bore fruit in the 1983 Common Lectionary.<sup>20</sup>

A six-year trial period (two lectionary cycles) followed, during which the CCT received feedback from preachers, educators, denominational leaders, and international partners. Some respondents called for more biblical stories of women. Others sought expanded readings from the Prophets. Still others raised concerns about the piecemeal use of psalms. Anglican and Lutheran member churches lamented the loss of the Gospel-related readings from the Hebrew Scriptures in the time after Pentecost. After three more years of work to address these and other matters, the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) was released in 1992. The RCL added passages foregrounding women’s experiences, expanded the readings from the Prophets, revisited the use of psalms, and provided two tracks of Old Testament readings in the time after Pentecost: a semicontinuous track, moving sequentially through major stories of the Hebrew Scriptures, and a complementary track, with readings thematically tied to the Gospel.<sup>21</sup>

The RCL was immediately published in the 1993 Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship*; notably, given the Reformed preference for *lectio continua*, only the semicontinuous track of Old Testament readings was included.<sup>22</sup> Twenty years later, research for *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* (2013) revealed that many Presbyterians were using both tracks interchangeably, drawing from online resources and ecumenical publications. Thus the 2013 hymnal and the 2018 edition of the *Book of Common Worship* provide both tracks of readings from the Hebrew Scriptures in the time after Pentecost.<sup>23</sup> The official website of the Episcopal Church also now uses both tracks of the RCL.<sup>24</sup>

## Secrets: How the RCL Works

I have organized the second part of this article around “seven Cs”—key principles in the development and design of the RCL that have important implications

for how it may be effectively used in Christian worship. The first three Cs are based on three “foundational assumptions” identified by Horace Allen in his introduction to the 1983 Common Lectionary. (Allen used “cult” as a technical term for worship; I have substituted “context”).<sup>25</sup> The other four Cs are drawn from my own research and reflection as one who relies on the RCL in teaching, preaching, and planning worship. They are also informed by and indebted to countless conversations with ecumenical partners from the Consultation on Common Texts.

### 1. Calendar: Christian Year

Lectionaries are inextricably connected with the calendar. In our brief review of church history we observed how the earliest Christian lectionaries emerged alongside the seasons and festivals of the liturgical year. The RCL, following the 1969 Catholic *Lectionary for Mass*, was designed to support the proclamation of salvation history and the celebration of the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Christ through the Christian year.

Specifically, the RCL is built around two seasonal cycles: the incarnation cycle, anticipating the coming (and return) and celebrating the Nativity of Jesus through the seasons of Advent and Christmas; and the resurrection cycle, anticipating the passion and celebrating the resurrection of Jesus through the seasons of Lent and Easter. Generally speaking, readings from the beginning of the Gospels are featured around the Nativity of the Lord, while readings from the conclusion of the Gospels are found around Holy Week and the Resurrection of the Lord. Outside of these seasonal cycles, the primary pattern of Christian worship is the rhythm of the week; in these periods of “Ordinary Time” we proclaim the extraordinary mystery of Christ’s resurrection on the Lord’s Day. During the Sundays after Epiphany, the RCL offers sequential Gospel readings from the early days of Jesus’ ministry, including the call of the disciples; during the Sundays after Pentecost, the RCL tells the stories of Jesus’ life and teaching.

The narratives of the Hebrew Scriptures are presented in a systematic way through the semicontinuous track of the RCL in the time after Pentecost. Year A features the early history of Israel: the ancestral narratives of the people of God from Genesis through Judges. Year B focuses on the reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon, as well as

the Wisdom literature traditionally associated with Solomon. Year C highlights the prophets, beginning with Elijah and Elisha and continuing through many of the major and minor prophets, with special attention to Jeremiah.

### 2. Context: Christian Worship

Lectionaries are designed for liturgical contexts—they have certain orders of worship and ritual practices in view. Sunday/festival lectionaries support the proclamation of the Word and the celebration of the Eucharist; daily lectionaries are used for disciplines of daily prayer. The RCL is a Sunday/festival lectionary, intended for services of Word and sacrament, primarily on the Lord’s Day. (The RCL *Daily Readings*, published in 2005, expands on the Sunday/festival RCL by offering passages that anticipate the Lord’s Day on Thursday through Saturday and reflect on the Lord’s Day on Monday through Wednesday.)

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Sunday/festival lectionaries support the proclamation of the Word and the celebration of the Eucharist; daily lectionaries are used for disciplines of daily prayer.

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The configuration of three readings (plus a psalm) in the Sunday/festival RCL represents a theological conviction: that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament together point to Jesus Christ, whom we encounter in Christian worship through the proclamation of the Word and the celebration of the Eucharist, and then go forth to follow and serve. The first reading is ordinarily from the Hebrew Scriptures (or Acts in the season of Easter); the psalm is provided as a musical and prayerful response to the first reading. The second reading is drawn from the New Testament Epistles (or Revelation in Easter of Year C). This pattern culminates in the proclamation of the good news through the Gospel reading—welcoming the Word made flesh.

When we remember the ritual setting of Lord’s Day worship, the biblical selections of the RCL spring to life. The voices of the prophets, messages of the apostles, and teachings of Jesus resound in the proclamation of the Word. Stories of water and meals

gesture toward the font and table. Calls to love and serve God and neighbor lead us into the world.

### 3. Canon: Christian Scripture

Lectionaries are made up of readings from Scripture. Yet lectionaries are not intended to be plans for reading the whole canon of Christian Scripture, nor are they substitutes for Bible study in Christian formation. They have other priorities in view, such as the celebration of the Christian year and the context of Christian worship. Within those parameters, the RCL seeks to represent the breadth and depth of the biblical canon as fully and as faithfully as possible.

The RCL provides readings from all but five books of the Old Testament: First Chronicles, Second Chronicles, Ezra, Obadiah, and Nahum. First and Second Chronicles overlap considerably with other parts of the Hebrew Scriptures from Genesis through Kings. Ezra is a companion to Nehemiah, originally considered a single book. The minor prophets Obadiah and Nahum are among the shortest books of the Old Testament. Selections from all but three books of the New Testament are included in the RCL: Second John, Third John, and Jude. The three omitted epistles are very brief, each consisting of a single chapter. In summary, of the sixty-six books in the Bible, the RCL draws on fifty-eight.

The use of the Gospels in the RCL merits special attention. The RCL highlights one of the Synoptic Gospels in each of its three years: Matthew (25 of 28 chapters) in Year A, Mark (all 16 chapters) in Year B, and Luke (all 24 chapters) in Year C. The Gospel of John (20 of 21 chapters) is by no means neglected; the fourth Gospel is used prominently in the seasons of Lent and Easter, along with Nativity of the Lord and the Three Days (Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Resurrection of the Lord). Distinctive passages from the Synoptic Gospels are used on other festival days, such as Luke on Christmas Eve and Ascension, or Matthew on Epiphany.

### 4. Catholicity: Ecumenical Hope

Lectionaries serve the church. They gather the people of God together around the reading and proclamation of the Word and send us out to share the gospel with the world. As grains of wheat are gathered into one loaf, lectionaries can help to unite the body of Christ.

The RCL represents a fervent hope for the unity of the church—that Catholic and Protestant churches might be united in the reading and proclamation of

the Word. This hope is evident in the shared use of the three-year cycle and the fact that New Testament readings are held in common; the appearance of deuterocanonical (or “apocryphal”) readings help us remember that other churches tell other stories. Because of the ecumenical hope embodied by the RCL, local ministerial alliances can gather and study Scripture together as they prepare for worship; because of the RCL, church publishers have been able to produce a wealth of common commentaries and worship companions; because of the RCL, on any given Sunday congregations across the street or around the world may find themselves “on the same page” or “singing the same tune.”

### 5. Continuity: Church History

Lectionaries have histories. Some patterns of reading, such as the Catholic lectionaries of the Middle Ages and Counter-Reformation, have deep roots in church history. Even when contemporary lectionaries are devised or revised, they carry with them the histories of interpretation that are attached to certain biblical texts.

Because the RCL is grounded in Catholic lectionaries, there are threads you can trace back centuries and millennia into the practices of Christians who have come before us. There are patterns of readings in Lent, for instance, that reflect practices of preparation for baptism in the early church in places like Italy, Constantinople, and North Africa. And in a more personal sense, from generation to generation, we can imagine our parents and grandparents and so on reading these same readings through the Christian year. But there are also important examples of intentional discontinuity with church history—paying more attention to the experiences of women, for instance, and avoiding texts with histories of discrimination, violence, and oppression.

### 6. Community: Forming Relationships

Lectionaries foster relationships. They put stories alongside other stories, as well as symbols of the faith. As we remember these stories and share these symbols, we grow closer to God and one another. Thus, lectionaries help to shape our faith and build up the body of Christ.

The RCL makes use of two kinds of relationships between and among biblical texts: synchronic (at the same time) and diachronic (through time). Synchronic relationships are formed when Scriptures occur

together on the same day, as stories and images in one text illuminate or expand on those of another passage. Synchronic relationships are especially prominent in the first half of the Christian year, the time from Advent to Pentecost, as we celebrate the festivals and seasons of the church. Diachronic relationships are formed when sequential passages of Scripture occur through the weeks and seasons of Christian worship, as we journey with the people of God and follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Diachronic relationships are especially featured in the second half of the Christian year, during the times after Epiphany and Pentecost, as we trace the narratives of Hebrew Scripture, read the writings of the apostles, and tell the stories of Jesus.

#### 7. Choice: Selected Readings

Lectionaries are selective. By definition, they make choices about which texts to include and how, where, and when to include them. The word “lectionary” comes from the Latin root *lego*, *legere*, *legi*, *lectus*, meaning “to gather” (as in “collect”), “to choose” (as in “select”), or “to read” (as in “lecture” or “lectern”).

This whole range of meaning is implicit in the design of the RCL. It *gathers* together appropriate readings for each Sunday, festival, or season. Drawing on the whole canon of Scripture, it *chooses* particular readings for particular occasions. And it exists to support the *reading* of the Word of God in worship. The RCL makes choices; but it also offers choices. Examples include the two tracks of readings from the Hebrew Scriptures in the time after Pentecost, or the option of longer readings (through the use of verses in parentheses).

For forty years and counting, the Common Lectionary and the RCL have been a source of wisdom and a sign of hope for the universal church. With our ancestors in the faith, let us continue to sing:

Spring up, O Well of Wisdom,  
and fill us with your grace.  
Let streams of blessing cover  
this dry and dusty place.  
Pour out your Holy Spirit  
to make our spirits soar  
and give us living water  
that we may thirst no more.  
(David Gambrell, 2023)

#### Notes

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# A Hymn on the Texts We Preach

*Oluwatomisin Olayinka Oredein*

*(Today, we sing a song of holy insistence in the key of confession.)*

## Verse One

Do we know we are texts  
read in the carefullest of ways?  
—lest we forget our constitution,  
the declarations  
that got us here,  
stay us here,  
in history's substantial  
yet somber junctures?

*(A chorus gathers to our tongues.)*

(We) welcome the interrogation  
of our insides,  
gut-wrenching as they are.  
(We) covet catechisms of right confession,  
for we are all sobering, serious questions.

What else can we proclaim as truth?

## Verse Two

Do we know we are read—  
by communities, close  
and afar,  
adjacent to us and us-plagued? —  
communities scanning body-marks  
on their own,  
on ours,  
summarizing scars  
and incarnations  
the Gospel has done to them?

*(The chorus meets us.)*

If news transparents truth,  
what makes it good? —  
certainly not callow handlers  
or brutish handling.  
Why import assumptions  
of where the g<sup>o</sup>od lies?

## Verse Three

Do we notice  
our biting textualities,  
our past-wearings,  
the fracturing  
laced in our stories? —  
how we tell ourselves,  
our parables of progresses,  
how close we sound to something else  
if we are not careful  
in our beings?

*(The Chorus Crescendos.)*

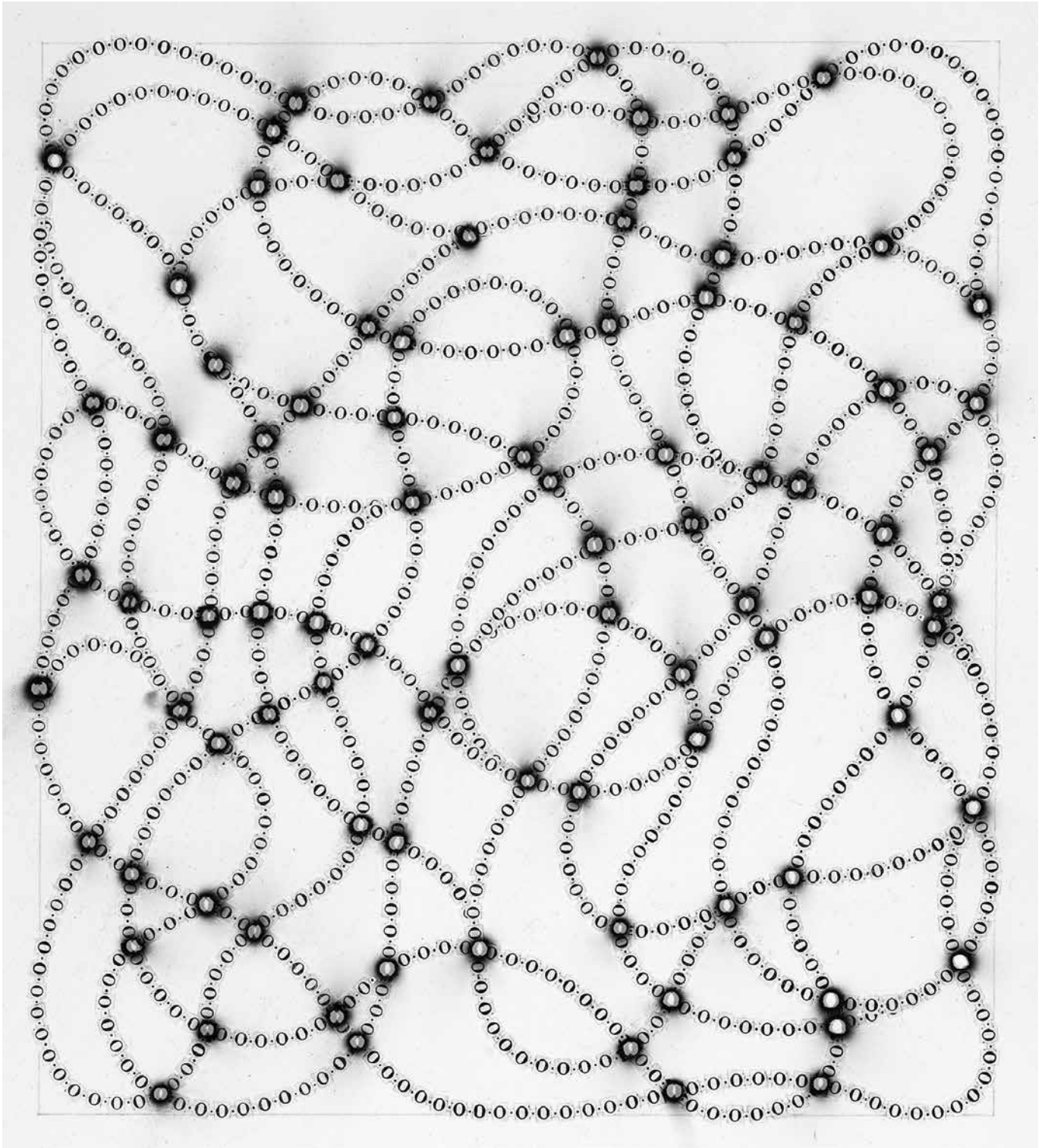
Self-translation  
is not ours to wear.  
Translation-tasks live  
deeply,  
so deeply,  
beyond  
us.

*Vamp (repeat)*

On the tongues  
of another  
is our interpretation.

How do they preach us?

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Meg Hitchcock  
*Rosary, No. 1*, letters cut from the Bible,  
paper burned with Tibetan incense,  
paper, 17 x 14 in., 2018

# Widows, Sodomites, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Lectionaries?

Jimmy Hoke

## Casting Bricks and Bruising Injustice

In the second chapter of *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, Robert McRuer analyzes the case of Karen Thompson, whose live-in partner, Sharon Kowalski, was disabled in a car accident. Because this happened in the 1990s, these two women's relationship could not be legally recognized. Kowalski's medical care and consent defaulted to her parents, who denied Thompson the ability to visit Kowalski and insisted that Kowalski was too disabled to go home, effectively incarcerating their daughter to a medical facility.

McRuer observes that Thompson originally had faith in the justice of the legal system: her case that Kowalski could come home with her had ample evidence. Kowalski had clearly indicated her preference was to go home with Thompson, and the medical experts and professionals who spent the most time with Kowalski attested that this was the patient's clear desire, that she was medically able to go home, and that Kowalski clearly was healthier and happier when Thompson was present. Justice can be muddy, but this was not a legal gray zone. The bulk of the best evidence was on Thompson and Kowalski's side.

But justice was denied. Kowalski's parents argued their daughter was not capable of consent; they hired medical experts—who spent little to no time with the patient—to back up their claim and counter Thompson's claim. Those who denied justice knew from the testimony that these expert opinions were less credible; some of them were so unbelievable they had to be retracted. But the system is ableist: the decision was made by the assumption that disabled people cannot make autonomous, rational decisions. The system is homophobic: if given the chance, it will rule against queer people.<sup>1</sup>

In Luke 18:1–8 (Proper 24, RCL Year C, Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost), Luke's Jesus tells the story of a widow who repeatedly appears before a judge and demands that they rule in her favor (and, therefore, justly) against her adversary. Since this judge, Jesus tells his audience, “was not afraid of God and did not feel regard for humanity” (18:2), they don't want to grant her justice.<sup>2</sup> Eventually, they realize it is in their best interest to rule in the woman's favor: “Because this widow produces hardship for me, I will rule justly in her favor so that she does not bruise me until she comes to a conclusion,” the judge says to themselves (18:5). Jesus tells this story as a contrast to God's justice: unlike the judge, God makes their remedy swiftly. God's justice will not require this woman's persistent demands for the barest of tolerance because God will remedy and rule swiftly in favor of the oppressed and marginalized. But then, Luke's Jesus ends this story with a vexing question: “Only, will the son of humanity, when they arrive, find faith upon the earth?” (18:8).

Like the judge in Luke 18, our current system of justice and power does not fear God's justice, nor does it care about it. It doesn't feel regard for any humanity that doesn't look or love like it. The system feels regard for its own benefit. Like the widow of Luke, Thompson's persistence eventually paid off—Kowalski came home—but only due to a fight with a system that could refuse no longer.

In Luke 18:5, the judge acts because they do not want the widow to *bruise* them until she receives justice. The verb translated “bruise” (Greek: *hupōpiazo*; NRSVue: “wear me out”) derives from the root meaning “striking someone under their eye,” thus bruising it (i.e., giving them a black eye). Its meaning extends to general bruising as well as wearing out. The woman forces the judge

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to consider how they materially benefit from doing justice when they otherwise would not. She must make it painful for the judge. Otherwise, they will rule with the status quo that works for them—and not her.

On June 28, 1969, cops raided the Stonewall Inn and arrested mainly trans women and drag queens as part of their enforcement of anti-queer “decency” laws. As the crowd who fled the bar stood outside watching these folks get loaded into vans, headed for incarceration, they grew more restless. They began throwing pennies and then bricks against the unjust system and police corruption. They threw bricks and demanded justice. Queer activists—spurred by trans women of color like Marsha P. Johnson—bruised the justice system that sought to lock them down.

Four years later, at the 1973 Christopher Street Liberation March (i.e., the NYC Pride Parade), trans activist Silvia Rivera stormed the stage and grabbed the mic. “Y’all better quiet down,” she bellowed. She asked what gay liberation was doing for their trans women sisters—many of whom were women of color—who were in jail. To a chorus of boos, Rivera persisted: she bore witness to the abuse and dehumanization she and her sisters faced. She demanded that queer justice must cry out: “Free our sisters, free ourselves.” Rivera bruised queer folks who celebrated “love is love” but failed to do justice for the folks whose genders, whose races, whose ways of having sex in the streets offended them because not all love is truly considered love.<sup>3</sup>

This widow’s story is a queer story. Like Pride, the gospel story is about injustice and about how marginalized people demand justice. It is a story about the persistence of injustice in a world that oppresses poor folks, queer folks, and countless others. It reminds audiences how oppressed people must persistently demand justice from a system that persists in denying it to them, even when the rules of the system say they must. In the face of a faithless system, what kinds of faith can we find on earth?

## The Need for Queerer Lectionary Resources

In June 2022, I started a Patreon project (Patreon is a digital platform where authors can share content

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Why start queering the lectionary? Let me tell a bit of the origin story that, like Genesis 2:4b–25, is both true and also shapes multiple real experiences into the memory of a single event.

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directly via paid subscriptions.) called “Queering the Lectionary”<sup>4</sup> that provides pastors and lay folks with queer resources to help understand and interpret the weekly Scripture readings in the Revised Common Lectionary. Though a little longer and more polished than average, the commentary-reflection above exemplifies the work I am doing. My goal is short, accessible reflections (usually five hundred

to nine hundred words) on each lectionary text, which connect historical and linguistic elements of biblical texts to ideas from queer and trans studies and activism.

Why start queering the lectionary? Let me tell a bit of the origin story that, like Genesis 2:4b–25, is both true and also shapes multiple real experiences into the memory of a single event.

One Sunday, I worshiped with a congregation that was clearly committed to including LGBTIA2Q+ folks and to doing justice for trans and queer folks in our local community and across the world. The pastor preached on one of the week’s lectionary texts whose verses included a command to shun “sexual immorality” as part of the “old life” before being in Christ. Though these words were read aloud to the entire congregation, they never came up in the sermon. The pastor talked about the goodness of a new life that they contrasted to the generic “badness” of the old “pagan” life of the text’s original audience. By leaving untouched the condemnation of “sexual immorality” (one of many terms that explicitly connoted queer people in the ancient world), the pastor missed an opportunity to address how this text helps create the model for a church that still assumes members must leave queerness behind as part of their former lives before accepting Jesus.

Beyond the religious traumas inflicted on us by churches and theologies that overtly condemn LGBTIA2Q+ lives, many trans and queer Christians bear scars from purportedly open-and-affirming congregations where we have been welcomed with open arms, only to learn that acceptance only extends to certain “good gays” whose queerness is palatable to the straight majority. The pastor’s approach to this text leaves trans and queer folks (especially any visitors) wondering what limits this mention of “sexual immorality” implies for their

participation in the justice the church proclaims to seek. It does not help allies to better understand how to support and accept LGBTIA2Q+ loved ones. Ignoring queerness in and around lectionary texts does not do justice for the trans and queer lives who are presently endangered in the United States and globally. In fact, it risks perpetuating injustice and causing us further harm. I left worship frustrated.

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As a queer worshiper, I usually leave church frustrated. “Queering the Lectionary” was born from these frustrations with lectionary-based preaching that did not account for the rich insights queer biblical scholars have brought to these texts for decades.

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As a queer worshiper, I usually leave church frustrated. “Queering the Lectionary” was born from these frustrations with lectionary-based preaching that did not account for the rich insights queer biblical scholars have brought to these texts for decades. This is not the fault of the pastor in my story, who clearly consulted commentaries and lectionary aids that offered insights into the text’s historical context.<sup>5</sup> There is a lack of good queer resources that are available and accessible to pastors who preach the lectionary.

Aside from the landmark *Queer Bible Commentary* (now in its second edition), most queer work on biblical texts exists in academic books, articles, and essays.<sup>6</sup> This important work usually focuses on individual passages and does not offer the comprehensive details that commentaries provide across an entire book of the Bible. Even the *Queer Biblical Commentary* is limited in this regard—and, like much queer biblical scholarship, it sits behind a considerable paywall.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, few pastors and lay interpreters have time to wade into wider work in queer and trans studies (beyond scholarship in religion and the Bible) and understand it enough to make connections between these academic insights, biblical texts, and the concerns of their congregations. When I peruse more accessible resources in LGBTIA2Q+ readings on the Bible (print and online), most of them are not written by folks with doctoral-level training in biblical studies.

To be clear: I do not think advanced training is a prerequisite for producing good queer biblical interpretation. But this work often misses critical insights about the contexts in which different biblical texts were written, the literary and linguistic background of different passages, and the value that understanding multiple critical lenses can bring to reading texts.

“Queering the Lectionary” starts to fill this gap. I distill arguments from trans and queer biblical studies down to what an interpreter needs to understand in order to deepen their study of the text and live into their commitment to justice for all LGBTIA2Q+ folks. I show interpreters ways they can apply queer insights about one biblical text to help read other biblical texts. And I offer some guidance by suggesting ways they can connect what we see in the biblical text to our concerns for the present and future. “Queering the Lectionary” aids pastors in their work to read and proclaim texts in ways that—instead of frustrating and alienating LGBTIA2Q+ parishioners—challenges and inspires them.

## What Does “Queering the Lectionary” Do?

One goal I have with the resource is to distill a wide range of scholarly insights into digestible portions. In the opening commentary-reflection, I give examples of how “Queering the Lectionary” does this. Instead of walking through all the Greek terms, I highlight one term that could (or, I would argue *should*) be translated differently. By understanding how the term *hupōpiazō* derives from the idea of giving someone a black eye, for example, readers understand why they might translate it as *bruise* in order to emphasize the material inconvenience of the widow’s efforts. By showing them why, readers can confidently make their own decision (whether they decide to emphasize the bruising or stick with the NRSVue’s “wear out”) instead of just taking for granted my or other scholars’ insights. I also give a quick literary overview of the passage and highlight important or interesting details. In other reflections, my overview might remind readers of the historical context of the passage: for example, with many texts from the Hebrew Bible, I note how situating the passage into the author’s and audiences’ post-exilic context under imperial/colonial rule shifts our understanding of the words and their impact. It also might remind readers how an individual passage fits into the larger argument or agenda of the text. I tend

to do this frequently with Paul's letters. In every case, I show the value of these historical, linguistic, or literary insights for queer and trans readers and our lives today (e.g., connecting the widow's bruising of the judge to the bricks thrown at Stonewall and Silvia Rivera's activism).

I often make these connections using the insights of academic work in trans and queer studies. This means that I also distill the longer arguments (which can be quite dense) of this work into quickly readable portions. In my commentary on the widow, I lay out the story about Kowalski and Thompson and show how McRuer's argument about the intersections of queerness and disability helps us better understand and apply the widow's plea to the ways our current system is structurally designed to deny justice to trans and queer disabled folks.

I do something similar with trans and queer scholarship in biblical studies. For example, when the lectionary includes Psalm 137 on Proper 22 in Year C, I explain how Erin Runions analyzes this text in light of the ongoing uses of "Babylon" to justify imperial oppression by the United States—specifically emphasizing how U.S. troops used Psalm 137 (in song form) as part of the process of torture at Abu Ghraib.<sup>8</sup> I asked, "How do we lament with a text that itself has been used to perpetrate the imperial violence it laments?" I connect the text of the psalm and Runions's analysis to Sara Ahmed's work on "melancholic migrants" and "unhappy queers" in *The Promise of Happiness*. She finds (kill) joyous potential in figures who refuse to perform thankful happiness in the face of toxic systems that treat queer immigrants as strange and abnormal.<sup>9</sup>

Drawing these insights together, I conclude by posing questions to readers that help them to critically examine the psalm and the world around their congregants. Here is an excerpt of what follows:

The demands of mirth from Babylonian captors resonate with the ways heteronormative, capitalist culture celebrates queerness that is profitably cheerful: drag being one example. Most people want to see the glitz, the humor, the cheery shade of drag queens . . . but they do not want to see or think about the ways these performers often live on the margins and scramble to make ends meet. Few drag performers make RuPaul money. In a haunting line in his chapter on queer and trans subcultures, Jack Halberstam

notes that, despite the popularity of the film *Paris Is Burning*, less than five years after the film was produced, all of the queens featured in it were dead.<sup>10</sup>

Sing us one of the songs of Zion.

The use of this psalm by U.S. forces to torture and harm so-called "enemies" should caution how we read the final wish for God to dash the oppressors' children against rocks. When the rage of the oppressed is co-opted by oppressors, it leads to disastrous consequences. At the same time, we might understand this ending as an expression of queer, migrant, melancholic rage. In response to your demands of mirth, we will end our song with anger. We will laugh at them, not for them. Though we must take caution with this violence, we can also remember how the language of rage has long been important for the queer and the oppressed.<sup>11</sup>

Queering the lectionary means making explicit how colonialism, militarism and torture, housing inequity, police violence, unequal pay and exploitative labor conditions, and disparities in healthcare are queer issues because, first and foremost, they all disproportionately impact trans and queer people. This is especially the case for trans and queer populations who experience racism, ableism, or sexism in addition to transphobia or queerphobia. For the lectionary to proclaim a queer gospel, it must account for the intersectional nature of oppression and marginalization in both biblical texts and the contemporary world.

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My queer commentary frequently spends a significant amount of time unpacking anti-Judaism in New Testament texts and their interpretation. I warn Christian readers of potential anti-Jewish pitfalls (e.g., villainizing the Pharisees and assuming

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When knotted into systems of economic injustice, patriarchy, and white supremacy, heteronormativity also oppresses many straight people.

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the Gospels' presentations of this group is accurate).<sup>12</sup> I walk them through strategies for interpreting these texts in queer alliance with ancient and contemporary Jewish folks.

In her landmark essay "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" Cathy J. Cohen challenged queer activists and scholars who honed in exclusively on the differences between gay and straight. She claimed that the radical potential of queer theory lay in its critique of *heteronormativity*: the system that makes a particular form of sexual expression "normal" while all others are deemed "deviant." This *heteronormative* form of sexual expression is the heterosexual nuclear family: husband, wife, and 2.5 kids who all live in a nice home supported by stable employment. Cohen observes that when politicians demonize "welfare queens," they tend to target straight Black women with the same sexualized rhetoric they use against queerness. When knotted into systems of economic injustice, patriarchy, and white supremacy, heteronormativity also oppresses many straight people. Cohen demands a more radical and transformative queer politics: "I envision a politics where one's relation to power, and not some homogenized identity, is privileged in determining one's political comrades. I'm talking about a politics where the *nonnormative* and *marginal* position of punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens, for example, is the basis for progressive coalition work."<sup>13</sup>

Starting queer politics with the folks who are most marginalized and nonnormative expands the range of topics and perspectives that can be inherently trans and queer. Rahab, as Runions shows, is a queer figure in Joshua 2 because, though she appears to be heterosexual, she stands at the margins of the text and society because she is a sex worker and a woman racialized as foreign.<sup>14</sup>

For good reason, the RCL excludes the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah from its textual cycle. However, the story hovers over Christian anti-queerness today. It turns out the story also hovers over many lectionary texts, which provide their readers with opportunities to counteract harmful legacies around Genesis 19. When Sodom pops up in Isaiah 1:10 (Proper 14, RCL Year C, Ninth

Sunday after Pentecost), I unpack God's promise not to treat Israel in the same way they treated the Bible's "quintessential immoral cities," even though Israel has not been faithful to God. "In 1:18–20, God declares themselves faithful to Israel: though Israel is like Sodom, God will 'argue it out' with them and make room for God's people to become 'willing and obedient'; though God's children are like Gomorrah, God will wash away their sins." Like queerness, this passage presents a promise that is simultaneously a threat. God's promise requires good behavior: it requires cleaning up what is queer.<sup>15</sup>

This queer approach to texts refuses to silence the legacies of Sodom that haunt the Bible and its interpretation today. Grappling with these legacies requires recognizing how the story of Sodom racializes its presentation of the Sodomite men who demand Lot hand over God's messengers for nonconsensual sexual assault. The story intentionally presents outsiders as inhospitably queer in their sexual attitudes and their treatment of traveling guests.<sup>16</sup> I draw upon how the story of Sodom participates in the racialization queerness to conclude my commentary on Isaiah:

This promising threat discomforts the language of cleanliness at the end of the passage. Though some readers find comfort in the image of God clearing away the stains of sin, others recall the racialized and sexualized ways that language of cleanliness has been used to oppress. Only certain people (those who aren't white) and certain sex practices (the queer ones) get deemed *dirty*. Does our dirtiness need to be washed away? How might we imagine a God who, with us, digs through the dirt, who plays in the mud? Do we want God to clean the orphan and the widow—to make them "whole"? Or do we want a God who defends them, who stands alongside them and lets them speak for what they want and need?<sup>17</sup>

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza notes that a feminist approach requires bringing a "hermeneutic of suspicion" to biblical texts that were written

from androcentric perspectives that ignore women's presence and agency.<sup>18</sup> In addition to bringing this feminist lens to lectionary passages, my queer commentaries require being suspicious and critical of texts whose ideas about bodies, relationships, and social structures assume everyone is cis and straight. At the same time, like Schüssler Fiorenza, I bring a hermeneutic of recovery to these texts by suggesting where queer perspectives could be buried within them (e.g., when I considered how we could read the "sisters" Mary and Martha as a lesbian couple). Though suspicion is difficult to bring to the pulpit, I show my readers how suspicion and recovery must go hand in hand when they want to use lectionary texts to proclaim queer liberation.

As an example of how all this comes together, consider my commentary on Matthew 9:35–10:8 (Proper 6, RCL Year A, Third Sunday after Pentecost).<sup>19</sup> I hone in on the passage's implications for confronting unjust labor conditions, especially when we consider the context of Roman-era enslavement. Jesus tells his students, "There is much harvest; there are few workers. Therefore, beg the master of the harvest so that they might cast workers into their harvest" (Matt. 9:37–38). Pointing out the brutal realities that many enslaved workers faced under Roman "masters of the harvest," I ask what it meant for Jesus to urge his students—as workers whom he metaphorically enslaves—to beg an enslaver to acquire and send *more* workers. I ask readers to consider: "Why aren't there enough workers in the first place?"

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I challenge the ways Matthew's Jesus' rhetoric around labor and enslavement encourages hard work and productivity under unjust conditions, all of which only benefits the enslaver-employer.

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I challenge the ways Matthew's Jesus' rhetoric around labor and enslavement encourages hard work and productivity under unjust conditions, all of which only benefits the enslaver-employer. Jesus' question sounds like complaints about "laziness," about which Roman enslavers wrote. Both are echoed in the discourse around "quiet quitting" and complaints we hear from employers today who ask, "Why doesn't anyone want to work anymore?"<sup>20</sup>

I suggest we see a queer approach to labor in the refusal to work, as signaled by the lack of workers for the harvest in Matthew. I note how historians of Roman-era enslavement write that workers "quiet quit" by slowing down their work, making purposeful mistakes, and behaving in ways that made their enslavers call them "lazy" and "slow" in ancient sources.<sup>21</sup> My comments on this text end by encouraging readers to consider what it might mean to resist and reread Jesus' call for labor in ways that do not reinscribe the oppressive conditions that the ancient and contemporary worlds expect workers to endure.

I return to the theme of "queer labor" in my comments that connect the four lectionary texts for that Sunday. I outline how queer scholars have shown how the nuclear family and capitalism emerge in tandem. Our heteronormative family structure is part of the design of building labor conditions that encourage workers to be most productive.<sup>22</sup> I express concern over how Paul's valorization of suffering in Romans 5:1–8 could support the ways workers often suffer cruel, unsustainable conditions because so many of us believe our suffering will, someday, lead to "the good life." Yet, for most of us, this good life is unattainable because the labor is designed to produce suffering that *actively prevents workers from flourishing*.<sup>23</sup> As I challenge readers to consider resistant readings of that week's passages, I introduce them to Matt Brim's pedagogy of teaching students to be "better queer workers." Brim recognizes that we all work under compromised conditions in order to survive and support ourselves and our loved ones. He teaches his students skills they need to thrive in the workforce—including (most importantly) how queer theory can help them effectively advocate for themselves, for justice, and for a better future under conditions that teach such advocacy is hopeless. I ask readers, then, to consider how a lens of queer labor could help them to use these lectionary texts to challenge congregations to become better queer workers.

## The Radical Potential of Queer Lectionaries

Cohen (quoted above) envisions queer politics that are rooted in transformation. Truly placing "punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens" at the political center would transform society into one that does justice for *all* people.<sup>24</sup> This is the radical potential of queer politics. This is also the radical potential



of queering the lectionary. My suspicious critiques of some biblical texts centers marginalized queer perspectives, both ancient and contemporary. “Queering the Lectionary” assumes that placing these voices at the center transforms how we understand biblical texts and the faiths we build upon them. I believe that by making this radically queer approach to Scripture accessible, it will help church leaders to live into their commitments to doing justice.

“Queering the Lectionary” is about social and spiritual transformation. As seen above, my approach does not simply include LGBTIA2Q+ people in an already familiar, established, analytical structure. Queer and trans studies transform the structure itself and present new possibilities for justice. A queer approach to the lectionary does likewise. It explodes the traditional ways of proclaiming the gospel and takes root in the multiple and different ways that trans and queer people find faith in and around the Bible. Like Sam Smith and Kim Petras’s Grammy-winning hit, it proclaims holiness from the spaces and bodies deemed “Unholy.”

#### Notes

1. The above three paragraphs present portions of Robert McRuer’s *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 77–102.
2. All translations are my own, unless noted otherwise.
3. Sylvia Rivera, “Y’all Better Quiet Down,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jb-JIOWUw10>.
4. Jimmy Hoke, “Queering the Lectionary,” Patreon project, <https://www.patreon.com/queerlectionary>.
5. These sources must have been fairly dated, since only the most conservative of evangelical New Testament scholars still use pejoratives like “pagan” in contexts like this.
6. Mona West and Robert E. Shore-Goss, eds., *The Queer Bible Commentary*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 2022).
7. The retail price of the *Queer Bible Commentary* is \$112. Queer biblical scholarship in books and book collections is often priced between \$30 and \$60 per book, but since this scholarship tends to be limited to a single biblical text or genre, one needs to purchase a vast quantity to achieve the comprehensive nature of the QBC. Journal articles are potentially the most expensive, since they are most accessible via library databases that require affiliation with an academic institution. An individual annual subscription to *Biblical Interpretation*, one journal with a long history of publishing queer biblical scholarship, costs \$224.
8. See Erin Runions, *The Babylon Complex: Theopolitical Fantasies of War, Sex, and Sovereignty* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 148–178.
9. Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).
10. Jack Halberstam, In *a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 158.
11. Hoke, “Queering the Lectionary,” Proper 22, RCL Year C, Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost.
12. A good introductory resource for avoiding anti-Judaism with the Gospels’ portrayal of the Pharisees is Amy-Jill Levine, “Quit Picking on the Pharisees!” *Sojourners Magazine* 44, no. 3 (March 2015): 26–29. Another great, comprehensive resource can be found in the essays and study notes in Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
13. Cathy J. Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3 (1997): 438.
14. Erin Runions, “From Disgust to Humor: Rahab’s Queer Affect,” in *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Teresa J. Hornsby and Ken Stone (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2011), 45–74.
15. Hoke, “Queering the Lectionary,” Proper 14, RCL Year C, Ninth Sunday after Pentecost.
16. On this story and its racialized queerness, see Randall C. Bailey, “They’re Nothing but Incestuous Bastards: The Polemical Use of Sex and Sexuality in Hebrew Canon Narratives,” in *Reading from the Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation*, vol. 1, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 121–138; Matthew Elia, “Sarah’s Laugh, Sodom’s Sin, Hagar’s Kin: Queering Time and Belonging in Genesis 16–21,” *Biblical Interpretation* 28 (2020): 398–427; and Kent L. Brintnall, “Who Weeps for the Sodomite?” in *Sexual Disorientations*, ed. Brintnall, Joseph A. Marchal, and Stephen D. Moore (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 145–160. A great book on the contemporary impact of Sodom on Protestant discourse about sexuality is Heather R. White, *Reforming Sodom: Protestants and the Rise of Gay Rights* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015).
17. Hoke, “Queering the Lectionary,” Proper 6, RCL Year A, Third Sunday after Pentecost.
18. See, as one example from her corpus of feminist scholarship, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001).
19. Hoke, “Queering the Lectionary.”
20. On the mythical recurrence of this and other complaints, see Micah Loewinger, “Why We Argue about the Same Things Over and Over,” *On the Media*, Dec. 16, 2022, <https://www.wnycstudios>.

org/podcasts/otm/segments/why-we-cant-stop-arguing-about-same-things-over-and-over-on-the-media.

21. See Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), esp. 103–129; Keith R. Bradley, “Servus Onerosus: Roman Law and the Troublesome Slave,” *Slavery and Abolition* 11 (1990): 135–157; Sandra R. Joshel and Laura Hackworth Peterson, *The Material Lives of Roman Slaves* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
22. See especially Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010) and Dana Luciano, *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), esp. 9–12.
23. The idea of cruel optimism and its relation to fantasies of “the good life” comes from queer theorist Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011). I have argued these ideas impact Paul’s theological construction of faith in Romans 1–5; see Jimmy Hoke, *Feminism, Queerness, Affect, and Romans: Under God?* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2021), 139–200.
24. This sentiment is also expressed in the 1977 queer, Black feminist statement of the Combahee River Collective, “The Combahee River Collective Statement,” <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/combahee-river-collective-statement-1977/>. It also aligns with critical race theorist and legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw’s foundational work on intersectionality. Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 139–167, <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>.

# “So Much Things to Say”: Preaching by Sermon Series

*Kamal Hassan*

## A Preaching Story

When my preaching career began in earnest in 1994, I was a minister in training at Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Los Angeles, California. The worship experience there was not governed by *chronos* time, but by the *kairos* time of the Holy Spirit. Sunday worship services started at 11:00 A.M., but we were never sure about the time they would end. It was not unusual for worship to last two to three hours each week, but few complained. It was a lively, Pentecostal-inspired experience which allowed time for “the Spirit to have its way” among the ministers and the people. We shouted, sang, and danced. If we were hurting, we openly shared our moans, wails, and tears in God’s sacred space. There were even times when our pastor, the Reverend Ronald L. Wright, was so overcome with spiritual energy that he would leap from the pulpit, sail over the altar rail, land on his feet, and then move around the sanctuary as he continued to deliver the Word. Amazing!

Reverend Wright set a preaching model I and other members of the ministerial team at Emmanuel followed. He was a practitioner of the Black prophetic tradition in homiletics. This meant that his messages drew from Black liberation theology, offered a Black critical lens on events in the news, and interpreted the biblical text in opposition to racism and white supremacy. He preached about one of the important works of the Spirit—to inspire and empower African Americans to confront injustice in society and join the ongoing fight for Black freedom. He taught that Black bodies were the very handiwork of God, cast in the image and likeness of the Divine with inestimable value and worth. These values were reinforced and expanded by preachers who were

annually invited to come and share with us each year. Some of them were legendary pulpiteers like Dr. Samuel DeWitt Proctor, Dr. Gardner C. Taylor, and Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr.

During my five years at Emmanuel, I grew accustomed to hearing and preaching sermons that were typically forty-five minutes in length. I was never told they were too long because there was a sense of so many things for the preacher to say to the community. The people came expecting to receive strength for the journey of life from the sermon as they struggled to navigate a society lethally hostile to their Black bodies. There was so much to tell those attempting to hold on to their hope despite the odds and the obstacles stacked up against them every day. So many people came to church on Sunday feeling dehumanized, burdened, and low, but they came with expectations that the preached word would help them move on up a little higher in their hearts and minds. Could they really bring their burdens to the Lord and leave them there? I learned to be keenly aware of this each time I stood at the “holy desk” to proclaim the Word of the Lord. Each time, there was so much to say.

Those who feel this is a bit much to load onto any one sermon would be right. However, the practice of Black preaching from its beginnings during slavery up to the present time has needed to be multifaceted in scope and effect, addressing both the personal and the political, the sacred and the social, the penitent life and the funk.

In this article I will discuss and demonstrate some of how I try to do this when I preach in a sermon series. Preaching a series can take two basic forms. The first is thematic, gathering several different pericopes that can be used to focus on

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a particular subject. For example, each year the Narrative Lectionary curated by Luther Seminary offers several series of this kind selected for use during the summertime: one from the Hebrew Bible, one from the New Testament, and one catechetical series. These are spread out over three to four weeks each until the turn of the lectionary calendar in the fall of each year. On the lectionary's website they suggest that "preachers and worship planners are encouraged to exercise their evangelical freedom in selecting preaching series that best suit the needs of their particular community of faith."<sup>1</sup>

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I see this as a chance to delve deeper into textual meaning and authorial intent and to use more time to consider their application to the lived experiences of the hearers.

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I will focus on a second form of preaching a series that involves preaching several sermons from the same text over several weeks. I preach this way in my own practice, using my evangelical freedom in the context of an African American majority Presbyterian congregation. This homiletic method allows me to dive deeper in tracing and building ideas as they unfold in a particular Scripture and to make points relevant to the lives, challenges, and questions of this Black community of hearers. I see this as a chance to delve deeper into textual meaning and authorial intent and to use more time to consider their application to the lived experiences of the hearers. This gives me a chance to spread the medicine of Scripture in a thick layer from a particular section of the text, rubbing more of the balm of Gilead on our wounded and sin-sick souls. I also lift up the ways in which more time with the same text gives more opportunity for the hearers to understand and participate in the Jesus movement for the building of a new heaven and a new earth. Preaching this way also allows me to address a general goal of telling the main biblical story from the Black left tradition of resistance, achieving the sacred goals of freedom and people's liberation. My sense of the main biblical story comes from the one expressed in *The Liberating Pulpit* by Justo and Catherine González:

Much of what has been preserved in Israel is the perspective of the powerless over against the viewpoint of the powerful. Included also are the repentant powerful who have learned through their own bitter experience that God is the defender of the poor and oppressed and not the supporter of the unjust, whether they be kings or nation.<sup>2</sup>

### Preaching from the Black Left

*Eh! But I'll never forget, no way  
They crucified Jesus Christ  
I'll never forget, no way  
They sold Marcus Garvey for rice, oo-oooh  
I'll never forget, no way  
They turned their backs on Paul Bogle, hey-ey  
So don't you forget (no way) no youth  
Who you are and where you stand in the struggle<sup>3</sup>*

The lyrics above are from the song "So Much Things to Say," by Reggae icon and Rastafarian prophet Robert Nesta (Bob) Marley, from his 1977 album, *Exodus*. Here he associated Jesus Christ with two Jamaican Christian leaders of local and international movements for Black freedom.

Paul Bogle was a Jamaican Native Baptist deacon who was a powerful preacher, a charismatic activist, and one of the leaders of the Morant Bay rebellion, a struggle against British colonialism on the island in 1865. The Jamaican poor and small farmers in the parish of St. Thomas opposed the unjust conditions colonial oppression and class warfare imposed on them. Bogle, with Bible in hand, and the suffering people of Stony Gut united and marched over one hundred miles to the capital at Spanish Town with a list of demands to address issues of land reform, unemployment, disenfranchisement, and hunger. They were disrespected by the governor, who refused to even meet with them. A rebellion ensued that lasted for several days. The colonial courthouse was burned to the ground. After the unrest was ruthlessly put down by colonial forces, Bogle and many others were arrested and executed. Today he is considered a martyr and national hero by the Jamaican people.

Marcus Mozhiah Garvey was a Jamaican-born Black Nationalist and Pan Africanist who relocated to the United States and eventually led one of the largest Black organizations in US history. From the Universal Negro Improvement Association headquarters in Harlem, New York, Garvey's

organization drew millions of Black people in the United States and the diaspora to support a “Back to Africa” program for the struggle to achieve Black liberation. Garvey did not believe that racial justice would ever be achieved in the United States and proposed that a critical mass of Black people make an exodus from their colonial capture in America and repatriate the African continent and help build the largest united African nation to rival the European empires which had colonized Black people on the African continent and in the diaspora. Garvey emphasized Black self-sufficiency, establishing a newspaper, businesses, social service organizations, and religious institutions. The UNIA established a Christian church with Black icons and a theology that believed in a God who was deeply involved in the worldwide struggle for Black freedom.

Garvey’s black nationalism blended with his Christian outlook rather dramatically when he claimed that African Americans should view God “through our own spectacles” . . . for African Americans needed to worship a God that understood their plight, understood their suffering, and would help them overcome their present state.<sup>4</sup>

State repression, class conflict, and internal contradictions prevented the UNIA from achieving its lofty goals, but the movement resonated so powerfully with Blacks across the globe that its numbers swelled into the millions (with its largest chapters in the United States), and it has had a lasting impact on Black radical thought and anti-colonial struggles in Jamaica, on the African continent, and throughout the diaspora in and outside of the church.

When Bob Marley associated Jesus Christ with Bogle and Garvey, he identified him as one of the same kind: the Son of God as a movement founder who was one with, and one of, the vulnerable masses yearning to breathe free and throw off the yoke of colonial oppression. This is a Jesus who is not just Lord and Savior but also a liberator who suffered an unjust and untimely death at the hands of an oppressive state because he organized his people to oppose it. This Pan African Christology resonates with Black liberation theology and the Black Prophetic tradition as they are understood and practiced among African American Christians. This view of Jesus shares important similarity with

the one described by Richard Horsley, who has argued that

in fact, Jesus’ opposition to Roman imperial rule belonged to the more general Judean and Galilean opposition that took the forms of protests, strikes, movements and widespread revolts by scribal groups as well as peasants. Like those protests and movements Jesus was deeply rooted in and drew upon a long Israelite tradition of opposition to foreign imperial rule.<sup>5</sup>

I seek to preach a post-colonial Christology remembering the class and racial conflicts besetting the lives of BIPOC people who have said “yes” to Christian discipleship. Preaching from the Black left also encourages the hearers to consider how the way of Jesus could include their participation in social, economic, and political movements for social righteousness and Black self-determination, to remember who they are and where they stand in these struggles. This homiletical intention also serves the wider church because, as Justo and Catherine González have said,

the powerless have a more ready access to an authentic understanding of the gospel than the powerful. The powerful need to hear the word through voices they have rejected in their own society. Liberation theology is an understanding of the gospel arising precisely from such traditionally rejected voices.<sup>6</sup>

## Sermon Series: A Life Worthy of Our Calling

What does it mean to live into an apostolic faith? In his book *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, the Reverend Dr. Frank Thomas offers “a brief homiletic method for preaching Moral Imagination.”<sup>7</sup> I will use the Behavioral Purpose Statement and Five Questions for the Moral Imagination included in Thomas’s method to show my process for constructing a sermon series from a single pericope.

Thomas’s five questions are:

1. Where in the text do we find equality envisioned and represented by physical presence?
2. Where in the text do we find empathy as a catalyst or bridge to create opportunities to overcome

the past and make new decisions for peace and justice?

3. Where do we find wisdom and truth in this ancient text, the wisdom of the ages?
4. Where is the language of poetry and art that lifts and elevates by touching the emotive chords of wonder, hope, and mystery?
5. To what contemporary moral concern would you apply your responses in these questions of the four qualities of the moral imagination?

The following is an example of a sermon series outline I've developed based upon Thomas's method. This series explores 2 Peter 1:1–13 and includes three sermons.

2 Peter 1:1–13 (NRSVue)

### Salutation

<sup>1</sup>Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who have received a faith as equally honorable as ours through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ: <sup>2</sup>May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

### The Christian's Call and Election

<sup>3</sup>His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and excellence. <sup>4</sup>Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust and may become participants of the divine nature. <sup>5</sup>For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with excellence, and excellence with knowledge, <sup>6</sup>and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, <sup>7</sup>and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. <sup>8</sup>For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup>For anyone who lacks these things is blind, suffering from eye disease, forgetful of the cleansing of past sins. <sup>10</sup>Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never stumble. <sup>11</sup>For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you. <sup>12</sup>Therefore I intend to keep on reminding you of these things, though you know them already and are established

in the truth that has come to you. <sup>13</sup>I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to refresh your memory,

Sermon 1: "Living into an Apostolic Faith"

2 Peter 1:1–2 (NRSVue)

### Behavioral Purpose Statement for 2 Peter 1:1–2

I propose to experientially demonstrate that those considered lesser or inferior in society are equally loved and called by God, so that those who hear will challenge oppressive social norms inside and outside of themselves and contribute to the building of a new world.

### Where in this text do we find equality envisioned and represented by physical presence?

Peter resists the tendency in his community to see Gentiles as lesser Christians because they are not people of the covenant. He declares that their faith is just as honorable as the Jewish Christians.

### Where in this text do we notice empathy as a catalyst or bridge to create opportunities to overcome the past and make new decisions for peace and justice?

Peter uses the name Simeon to identify himself, though he is known in the Jewish community by the name of Simon, because Simeon would be a more common name among Gentiles. He also emphasizes "knowledge of God and Jesus," a nod to Hellenistic ways of knowing that would resonate with the Gentile audience of this writing. He had to transgress cultural barriers and risk being misunderstood by people in his family and community to stand with the people God had called him to serve. We should be able to take a public stand with those who are ostracized and seen as lesser in our family, church, and community, even those who are not people of our race, gender, or faith tradition.

### Where do we find wisdom and truth in this ancient text, the wisdom of the ages?

Peter identifies himself as a servant and apostle of Christ. He says the authenticity and inspiration for his ministry comes not from himself but from Jesus Christ. As his apostle he claims the authority to preach, teach, and make disciples in Jesus' way and name. He also names false prophecies which seek to co-opt or distort the Jesus movement for selfish purposes. God is still calling people of all kinds to servant leadership and exposing heresies and false representations of the faith in church and society.

**Where is the language of poetry and art that lifts and elevates by touching the emotive chords of wonder, hope, and mystery?**

“May grace and peace be yours in abundance.” This is an uplifting word that touches on a need all people carry—to experience unearned, unconditional love and kindness from God.

**To what contemporary moral concern would you apply your responses in these four questions of the four qualities of the moral imagination?**

The rise of Christian nationalism and Christian capitalism are moral threats to the apostolic faith in the United States. This is a part of a continuing conversation that questions whether the apostolic faith in Jesus Christ can exist in white churches in Europe and North America because of their white supremacy and institutional racism. We find more evidence of the Jesus movement faith in the churches created and inhabited by oppressed BIPOC people.

Sermon 2: “Go Beyond the Basics”

2 Peter 1:3–9 (NRSVue)

**Behavioral Purpose Statement for 2 Peter 1:3–9**

I propose to experientially demonstrate that those who commit to the way of Jesus are expected to deepen their relationships with God and one another by seeking to live interdependent virtuous lives.

**Where in this text do we find equality envisioned and represented by physical presence?**

Basic faith is not enough to properly follow Jesus. One must participate in an organized effort for justice and liberation that enacts and embodies what he lived and taught as the founder of an anti-imperial movement. The Poor People’s Campaign is one expression of this effort.

**Where in this text do we notice empathy as a catalyst or bridge to create opportunities to overcome the past and make new decisions for peace and justice?**

Peter shows empathy for Gentile believers who were not a part of his culture. This created an opportunity for new relationships. Supporting the victims of human trafficking is an opportunity to create new relationships and form radical kinship with others.

**Where do we find wisdom and truth in this ancient text, the wisdom of the ages?**

A virtuous way of living will increase our moral

imagination. Living into the way of Jesus saves us from the corruption of a world that promotes lust for wealth, power, and control.

**Where is the language of poetry and art that lifts and elevates by touching the emotive chords of wonder, hope, and mystery?**

The poetic phrase “participation in God’s divine nature” says we can join in the very being of God, and that enacting a set of practices that create social righteousness will so deepen our relationship with the Divine that we can declare with the late prophetic mystic Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman not that “God is in me, but that I am in God.”

**To what contemporary moral concern would you apply your responses in these four questions of the four qualities of the moral imagination?**

The self-absorption and lusts of celebrity and consumer culture created by capitalism are threats to the moral imagination. God did not create people as “brands,” but as recipients of everything needed for life and godliness. The emphasis on individual achievement and accumulation is a threat to the common good.

Sermon 3: “Confirming Our Call and Election”

2 Peter 1:10–13 (NRSVue)

**Behavioral Purpose Statement for 2 Peter 1:10–13**

I propose to experientially demonstrate that call and election are at the heart of the apostolic faith that began as a movement to build a new heaven and a new earth led by the person and work of Jesus Christ, that those who work for a liberated world would find sustenance and encouragement.

**Where in this text do we find equality envisioned and represented by physical presence?**

Peter offers Gentile believers a new identity and entry into a sacred community of resistance that intends to teach and to live a liberated way of life with opportunities to build new relationships in self, church, and society.

**Where in this text do we notice empathy as a catalyst or bridge to create opportunities to overcome the past and make new decisions for peace and justice?**

Empathy is found in the promise that those on a spiritual path are not alone. We all need to have “faith journey friends” and to engage with them

for mutual support. Following Jesus in this new movement is not simply a solitary endeavor; it is faith in community.

### **Where do we find wisdom and truth in this ancient text, the wisdom of the ages?**

Calling and election are the fundamental building blocks of religious life. This is when God sets someone aside for special service, and they say yes to the call. Living into this call is a daily walk. There is a need to move beyond the basics and into ever deeper levels of commitment to the movement for resistance, justice, and struggle.

### **Where is the language of poetry and art that lifts and elevates by touching the emotive chords of wonder, hope, and mystery?**

“Entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you.” What is best for us is not something for which we can work or qualify. This touches our need for belonging and freedom. This is the way to experience the kin-dom of God while we yet live.

### **To what contemporary moral concern would you apply your responses in these four questions of the four qualities of moral imagination?**

God’s call is expressed in the question “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Election is when the called replies, “Here I am, send me.” But apostolic faith is more than assent; there must be some public action for social justice and Black liberation that changes relationships and power dynamics. Our churches are engaging in much more assent than action.

## **Conclusion**

Once I became a Presbyterian minister of Word and Sacrament, my days of preaching forty-five-minute sermons came to an end (what a mutiny that would have caused!). But I still preach several sermons from the same reading of Scripture, which, I have found, allows the preacher and the hearers to dive deeper by tracing and building on ideas as they unfold in the biblical text, making points that are relevant to the lives, challenges, and questions of the community of hearers. It is also a chance to delve deeper into textual meanings, explore in further detail the context and purpose of the author, and to have more time to consider the text’s application to the lived experiences of the hearers. Preaching this way, I have found, can thicken the spread of the medicine of Scripture from a

particular section of the text, giving more of the balm of Gilead for wounded and sin-sick souls. Ultimately, I hope this practice lifts hearers’ awareness as they understand and participate in the Jesus movement for the building of a new heaven and a new earth.

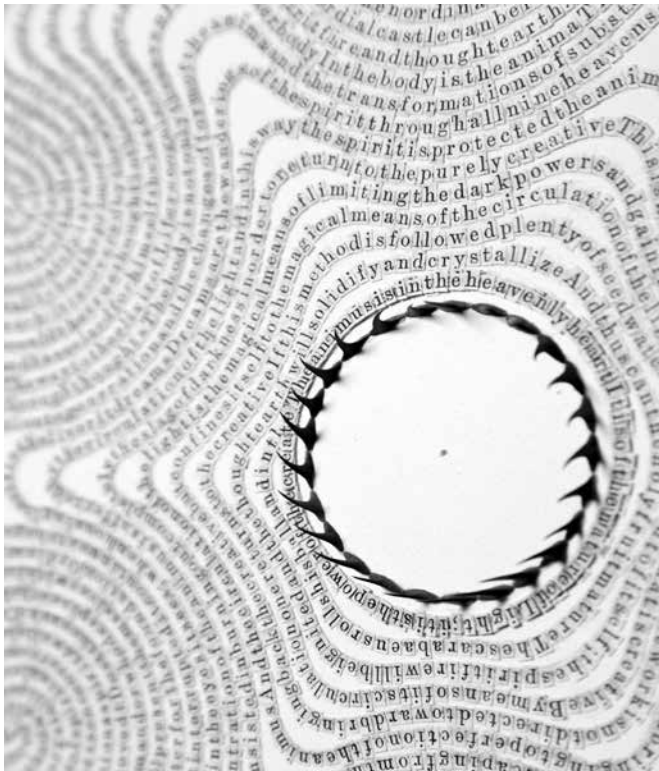
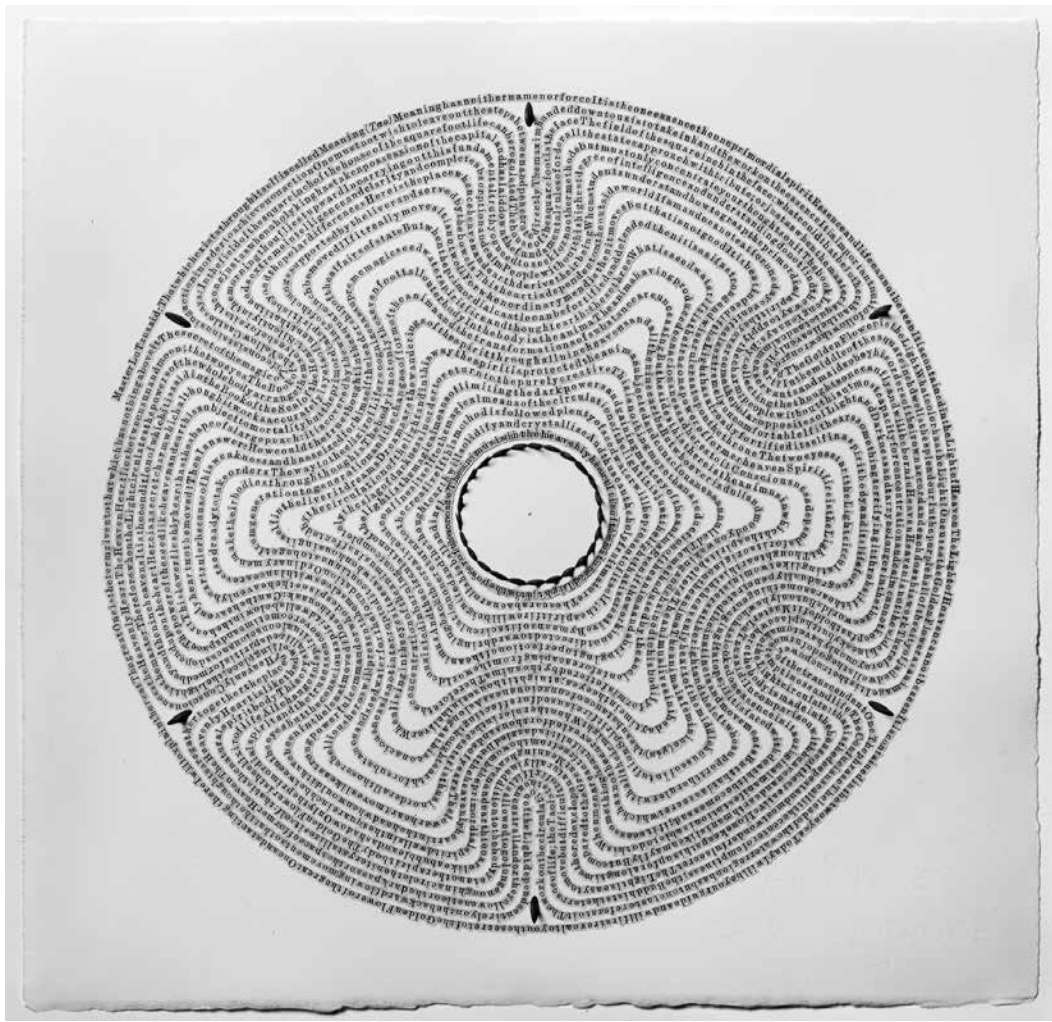
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## **Notes**

1. Narrative Lectionary Summer 2023 Readings, [https://www.workingpreacher.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/narrative\\_lectionary\\_summer\\_2023\\_rev1.pdf/](https://www.workingpreacher.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/narrative_lectionary_summer_2023_rev1.pdf/).
2. Justo and Catherine González, *The Liberating Pulpit* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 19.
3. Bob Marley and the Wailers, *Exodus*, Island Music, 1977. *Exodus* was named the twentieth century’s most important album by *Time* magazine.
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5. Richard A Horsley, *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 95.
6. González, *The Liberating Pulpit*, 21.
7. Frank A. Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2018), 87.





Meg Hitchcock  
*Secret of the Golden Flower* and detail,  
letters cut from a family Bible, paper,  
15 ¼ x 15 ¼ in., 2018

# The Narrative Lectionary: An Introduction (narrativelectionary.org)<sup>1</sup>

Rolf Jacobson

**A** lectionary is a list of biblical passages to be read in Christian worship. Presumably, these passages serve as the basis for the sermon, homily, or meditation, although, having swallowed and survived a lifetime's dose of Christian sermons, I am aware that this presumption is, well, sketchy. There are three major models for reading Scripture in worship. First, many congregations follow one of the large, public lectionaries such as the Revised Common Lectionary or the Narrative Lectionary. These lectionaries are generally produced by large church structures such as the Committee on Common Texts in the case of the Revised Common Lectionary, or by seminary professors in the case of the Narrative Lectionary.

Second, many congregations use thematic sermon series to choose and group texts together. These series are usually either produced locally by pastors and congregations or originate in large congregations such as Saddleback. These short series are also lectionaries, even though many have not regarded them as such. Third, many preachers will read and preach through one book of the Bible from beginning to end—most often, a New Testament book. This is also a form of a lectionary.

The Narrative Lectionary is one of many lectionaries that organize biblical readings for worship. As I begin an exploration of the particularities of the Narrative Lectionary, I want to be emphatic about one thing: *there is not one perfect way for the church to organize the reading of Scripture in worship. Those of us who work with the Narrative Lectionary know that it is not perfect—it isn't for everyone, everywhere.* We also believe that no lectionary can be perfect for everyone, everywhere. Every lectionary makes compromises and choices. It

is the nature of the challenge of deciding what parts of Scripture to read every week.

## The Narrative Lectionary: A Brief Explanation

On the Working Preacher website, where we publish and support the Narrative Lectionary, we describe it this way:

The Narrative Lectionary is a four-year cycle of readings. On the Sundays from September through May each year the texts follow the sweep of the biblical story, from Creation through the early Christian church.

The texts show the breadth and variety of voices within Scripture. They invite people to hear the stories of Abraham and Sarah, Moses and the prophets, Jesus, and Paul. Listening to the many different voices within Scripture enriches preaching and the life of faith.<sup>2</sup>

The Narrative Lectionary is a four-year set of readings that serves the preaching of the Word by setting forth biblical passages in narrative order, with one Gospel as the center during each year. The arrangement is shaped by both the biblical narrative and the liturgical year:

- 14–16 Old Testament readings (the late Pentecost season, from September through the first part of Advent)—each Old Testament reading is accompanied by a Gospel passage from the Gospel of that particular year.
- 20 (or so) Gospel readings from one Gospel each year (from mid Advent, through Christmas, Epiphany,

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- and Lent, until the first part of Easter)—each Gospel reading is accompanied by a psalm reading.
- 6 (or so) readings from Acts and a Pauline letter (Easter through the Day of Pentecost)—each of these readings is accompanied by a Gospel reading.
- Non-narrative readings follow in the Pentecost/Ordinary Time (series include Psalms, Wisdom, Ten Commandments, Lord's Prayer, Hebrews, etc.).

Christian worship does not occur in a cultural vacuum, and neither does the act of reading and preaching the Bible within it. As the (updated) old saying goes, a preacher proclaims the gospel with the Bible open in one tab and a news source open in another. Therefore, designers of lectionaries must pay attention not just to the biblical narrative and the liturgical year, but also to the rhythms of the secular year. The Narrative Lectionary was produced in the United States, with the rhythms of the American “school year” in mind, one that churches have also learned to follow alongside the liturgical year. It gets going in September, when the church program year winds up (late Pentecost), continues throughout the program year, and it winds down around June 1 (the Day of Pentecost).

## The Heart of the Narrative Lectionary: One Gospel Annually in Narrative and Liturgical Order

I have been both a preacher and a member of congregations that have followed the Narrative Lectionary. From my own experience, I have concluded that the heart of the Narrative Lectionary is the experience of annually reading passages from one Gospel, in narrative order, aligned with the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Advent, and Lent. I once heard Gail O'Day, who was a John scholar, remark something to the effect that “every year is the year of Luke, because the liturgical calendar was essentially shaped by Luke.” That well-aimed skewer has some truth to it. But consider:

- Each of the Gospels has some sort of introduction, which can be read during Advent.
- Matthew, Luke, and John have versions of the incarnation story, which can be read during the Christmas season.
- All four Gospels are essentially divided into two halves, with the first half telling the story of the manifestation of the Son of God in history—also

- known as Epiphany. The Transfiguration is the turning point in the Synoptics, so we follow that organization in the Narrative Lectionary.
- The second half of all four Gospels tells the passion story, so each year the Narrative Lectionary follows the story of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, passion, and death on the cross during Lent and Holy Week. (One exception to the narrative order is the story of the triumphal entry—most congregations want their palms and donkeys.)
- During the Easter season, we read resurrection accounts from the appropriate Gospel, some stories from Acts, and then a few readings from Paul (either Romans, Galatians, 1 Corinthians, or Philippians).

What the Narrative Lectionary does, therefore, is to read through the majority of one Gospel each year in narrative order and in harmony with the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, and Easter. Building out from there, in the fall season the Narrative Lectionary reads and preaches through the Old Testament each year in hops, skips, and leaps. The Old Testament lessons in the fall are chosen in order to correspond to each Gospel's interpretation and quotes from the Old Testament. For example, in the year of Luke, in which Jesus quotes Isaiah 61 in his inaugural sermon, Isaiah 61:1–11 is read in Advent. Or again, in the year of Matthew, in which Jesus reinterprets the law in his Sermon on the Mount, the story of Moses giving the law in Exodus 19–20 is read in Pentecost. And so on. (For a full overview of the texts of the Narrative Lectionary, see <https://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative-faq>.)

## A Closer Look: The Year of Luke

In order to get a clearer sense of what the Narrative Lectionary is all about, it might be helpful to take a look at the year of Luke, which will next occur 2024–2025. Each year, as the story is told in hops, leaps, and bounds, we have at least one story from the key theological loci of the Old Testament, such as creation, Abraham and Sarah, the Exodus, the wilderness experience, the judges, David, Solomon and the temple, the prophetic word, and so on. *Note that in the following chart, I am listing only the “preaching text” and not the “accompanying text” for each Sunday.*

Week 1: The Pre-history	Genesis 2 & 3— Creation, Adam and Eve, the sinful condition	Creation is essential; God is first creator. Every year, week 1 is from Genesis 1–11; other years we read Genesis 1, the flood, and the tower of Babel.
Week 2: Abraham and Sarah	Genesis 15—God's renewed promise to Abraham and Sarah	The Abrahamic covenant is crucial theologically. Every year, week 2 is a story from the Abraham & Sarah cycle.
Week 3: Jacob & Joseph	Genesis 37 & 50—God works through Joseph, even in betrayal.	Stories from Jacob or Joseph's life occur in week 3.
Week 4: Exodus	Exodus 12— The Passover	In the OT, God is above all the one who redeemed Israel from slavery. Stories from Exodus occur in week 4; other stories are Moses' call, the name of God, and salvation at the Red Sea.
Week 5: Wilderness	Exodus 32— The golden calf	Other years: stories of God's gift of manna, the gift of the Law, or the Great Commandment
Week 6: Time of Judges	1 Samuel 1 & 2— Samuel's birth and Hannah's song	Other years: call of Samuel, Ruth, and Joshua's covenant renewal
Week 7: David	2 Samuel 7— The Davidic covenant	The Davidic covenant is essential to understanding Jesus the Christ. Other years: David's call, David's great sin with Bathsheba, David moves the ark.
Week 8: Solomon & Divided Kingdom	1 Kings 5— Solomon builds the temple.	The temple is also essential theologically, as is the failure of the united kingdom. Other years: the kingdom divides, Solomon's prayer
Week 9: Elijah and Elisha	1 Kings 17— Elijah and the widow	We also have a story from the Elijah-Elisha cycle, because Elijah is essential for both Christology and Judaism's theology. This story is chosen because Jesus refers to it in Luke 4.
Week 10: Prophets	Jonah— Jonah and God's mercy on Nineveh	In other years we read from Micah, Hosea, and Amos. Jonah fits well with Luke because of the discourse on the sign of Jonah in Luke 11.
Week 11: Isaiah	Isaiah 6— The call of Isaiah	The prophet Isaiah may be the prophetic book from a NT perspective. In other years we read Isaiah 5 & 11, 9, and 36–37.
Week 12: Jeremiah or Josiah	Jeremiah 37 & 31— The king burns Jeremiah's words, and Jeremiah promises a new covenant.	This text of the king burning the scroll occurs on Reign of Christ Sunday. In other years, we read the letter to the exiles (29), the call and temple sermon (1, 7), and the story of Josiah's reform.

Week 13: Into Exile	Daniel 6— The lion's den	The exile is the most significant rupture and crisis in the OT story. Other years, the fiery furnace (Dan. 3), Habakkuk, and Jeremiah's promise of Messiah (33). This is often the Advent 1 lesson.
Week 14: Return from Exile	Joel 2:12-13, 28-29	The return from exile is the most surprising new life moment in the Old Testament. Joel's promise of the Spirit falling on male and female, slave and free, young and old, is essential. In other years, Ezekiel 37, Esther 4, and Isaiah 40 are read.
Week 15: After the Exile	Isaiah 61— The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.	Jesus quotes these words in his inaugural sermon. In other years, Isaiah 42 (servant), 55 (the Word), and Ezra 1 (temple rebuilt) are read.
Week 16: Preparing for Messiah	Luke 1: Annunciation and Magnificat	In Advent, we turn now to the Gospel of Luke.
Christmas Season: Early Life of Jesus	Luke 2a (Birth) Luke 2b (Shepherds) Luke 2c (Simeon and Anna) Luke 2d (Jesus is 12 in the temple.)	The Christmas season varies in length, but these four key stories are read.
Epiphany Season: The Revelation of the Son of God in History	1: Jesus is baptized. (Luke 3) 2: Inaugural sermon (Luke 4) 3: Catch of fish, call of Peter (Luke 5) 4: Jesus is lord of the Sabbath. (Luke 6) 5: Healing of centurion's son; widow of Nain's son is raised. (Luke 7a) 6: Tell John what you see. (Luke 7b) 7: Sinful woman weeps and is forgiven. (Luke 7c) 8: Jesus' true family (Luke 8)	The key point here is that these stories are read in canonical order, matching the season of Epiphany with the first half of Luke's Gospel. Hearing the stories preached on in order and in a fitting liturgical season has a different and powerful impact.

<p>Lenten Season: Jesus Turns His Face to Jerusalem</p>	<p>Ash Wednesday: Jesus turns toward Jerusalem; don't turn back. (Luke 9)  1: The Good Samaritan (Luke 10)  2: Tower of Siloam and lament over Jerusalem (Luke 13)  3: Lost sheep, coin, son (Luke 15)  4: Rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16)  5: Healing of the blind man; Zacchaeus repents (Luke 18-19)  Palm Sunday: Entry to Jerusalem (Luke 19)  Maundy Thursday: Last Supper (Luke 22)  Good Friday: Trial and crucifixion</p>	<p>Again, a key is to hear these stories in canonical order in a fitting season. In Luke, Jesus turns toward Jerusalem—the city looms over the story until Jesus arrives. In other years, it makes a major difference to hear stories such as “no one knows the hour so keep awake” (Mark 13) immediately prior to the passion rather than in November before Christ the King.</p>
<p>Easter Season</p>	<p>Easter:  1. Empty tomb (Luke 24a)  2: Emmaus road (Luke 24b)  3: Controversy over the care of widows, Stephen is martyred. (Acts 6-7)  4: Ethiopian eunuch is baptized. (Acts 8)  5: Council of Jerusalem; faith gives Christian identity. (Acts 15)  6: Conflict between Peter and Paul (Gal. 1, 2)  7: Neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female (Gal. 3)  Pentecost: Story of Pentecost and God pours out the Spirit; fruits of Spirit (Acts 2; Gal 4-5)</p>	<p>In Easter, we read resurrection accounts. Then move to the story of the early church and move to one of the letters of Paul that fits with the sections of Acts we have read.</p>

Note that we have to make compromises. When you read through an entire Gospel in around twenty weeks, you cannot include everything, and sometimes the readings include two or three stories or parables (such as all of Luke 15 in one day). We do not read every miracle every year. We read the parable of the Sower in the year of Mark, and we read the story of the cleansing of the temple in the year of John. Stories that only appear in one Gospel—such as the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, or Zacchaeus in Luke or the Beatitudes in the year of Matthew—we read in the year of that Gospel. Again, compromises have to be made in any lectionary. A strength of the Narrative Lectionary is the readings in the Advent season. In Advent, it has never made sense to us to have the adult John the Baptist announcing that the adult Christ is coming—only then to have the Christ born as an infant. The Narrative Lectionary prioritizes prophetic texts in Advent that promise that the Christ will come and that the Spirit will be poured out.

One unique aspect of the Narrative Lectionary is that we include some key stories that other lectionaries, specifically, the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), do not include. For instance, though the RCL does include the story of the woman anointing Jesus at Bethany as part of a longer text on Palm/Passion Sunday, in the year of Mark we highlight this story specifically. Though the RCL leaves out the story of Josiah's reformation (2 Kings 22–23), we include it. There are more.

## How the Narrative Lectionary Began

The creation of the Narrative Lectionary was an accident. Maybe that is how the Holy Spirit best works, through accidents. We did not sit down and plan the Narrative Lectionary from scratch. It happened because of a holy invitation, a dare, really, that grew out of a pedagogical adventure.

My now-retired colleague Craig Koester used to teach one of the most popular courses at Luther Seminary, "Genesis to Revelation." The course was a week-long, intensive event. A romp through the biblical story with singing, reading, drama, movement, and noise. Lots of noise! Craig developed the course as a year-long, adult Sunday school class—from Genesis in September to Revelation in June. He taught it in three congregations and brought it into our curriculum. I asked him, "Did any of the preachers in the congregations where you taught this course also preach through the Bible at

the same time?" He said, "No, I invited the pastors of the second and third congregations to do so but they declined."

In May 2010, I was teaching a group of leaders in northern Minnesota about biblical fluency. At one point in a fairly long lecture, I told the story of the above conversation with Craig and said, "Why wouldn't someone try that?"

After the session, Pastor Daniel Smith approached me and said, "I talked the leaders of twelve congregations into trying it. What's next?" I said, "Trying what?" (After all, it was a long lecture and I had covered more than a few subjects.) He replied, "Preach through the Bible from September through June. What's next?" I went back to the Seminary and told Craig I had gotten him entangled in an experimental lectionary. He signed on. We came up with the Year of John and went to work supporting the work.

By the time we started in September, we had forty congregations on board for this holy experiment. I thought everyone would quit before Thanksgiving. Instead, the experiment grew throughout the year.

We support the Narrative Lectionary with podcasts and commentaries at Workingpreacher.org. There are also partners who produce liturgical support materials and Sunday school materials.

## Why the Narrative Lectionary? An Intervention for Biblical Fluency (It's Not for Everyone)

So why would a congregation or preacher adopt the Narrative Lectionary? Before I answer that question, let me say that it is not for everyone everywhere. The Narrative Lectionary is designed to be an intervention in a system that has created a lack of biblical fluency.

When we created the Narrative Lectionary, we were in part responding to the concern that the RCL tries to do too much with too many texts, and that it does so in a very random fashion that creates a lack of biblical fluency. Every week, the RCL includes three texts: one from the Old Testament, New Testament, and a Gospel, plus a psalm. Though the Committee on Common Texts that produced the RCL may intend for the psalm to be used as a responsorial or sung text, it is often included as a fourth text in practice. Having a Ph.D. in Bible helps when following four texts at the same time. But we found in our research at Luther Seminary fifteen years

ago that it can be difficult for those in the pews to follow all four texts at once, unless they have taken an in-depth Bible course such as Crossways or Bible Study Fellowship. This is especially so because the Old Testament texts and, often, the New Testament texts, are out of canonical order, chosen to accent the Gospel reading. Often, texts are connected to one another based upon common motifs. There may be a widow or a mountain in both the Gospel and the Old Testament reading, for example. This matter is made more confusing because most preachers choose whichever of the four readings speaks most to them that week—the Gospel this week, the Old Testament the next, and so on. In the Narrative Lectionary, one preaching text is assigned ahead of time—the preacher and her listeners know what the text will be.

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God has chosen to reveal himself through the biblical text—the heart of which is the story of Israel and the story of Jesus.

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God has chosen to reveal himself through the biblical text—the heart of which is the story of Israel and the story of Jesus. Through those stories, God is not only revealed—those stories literally bear God and deliver God's grace to broken people who need God. We believe that knowing the overall story of the Bible helps people receive God grace. One who knows the overall story well is more likely to receive the God whose very person and grace are borne on any one story as it is preached.

Shortly before he died, an old saint asked me what the Narrative Lectionary was. He had been in worship almost every Sunday his entire life. He was over seventy. I asked him, "Do you know the biblical story?" He said, "I know all of the major stories and people—Jesus, Moses, David, Abraham, Mary—but I don't know the order. I don't know who came before whom."

The Narrative Lectionary organizes the reading of Scripture in worship so that preachers preach on texts in narrative order. We believe that mature Christians know the overarching story of the Bible so that when they hear a text, they can locate it in the biblical story and apply it to life.

## Criticisms of the Narrative Lectionary

No lectionary is perfect. The Narrative Lectionary is not perfect. It is a series of choices and compromises. There are criticisms of the Narrative Lectionary.

**It is anti-ecumenical.** One criticism of the Narrative Lectionary is that it is anti-ecumenical, because it undermines the ecumenical purpose of the RCL—to get as many church bodies as possible around the world reading common texts on Sundays. One of my colleagues went so far as to say that the Narrative Lectionary is an attack on the church catholic. This is a fair criticism. But we believe this boat has sailed anyway. The many options presented as part of the RCL, especially in the choice to follow the Catholic or semicontinuous tracks, weaken the "common" part of the RCL because there are different lanes, and many congregations do not read four texts each Sunday anyway. We believe there are far more important ways of being ecumenical than following a common lectionary. We do not intend to be anti-ecumenical. In fact, the congregations that are following the Narrative Lectionary come from many ecumenical traditions. But this is fair to a point. Many congregations will go through the Narrative Lectionary as a corrective to establish a base of biblical literacy and then return to the RCL.

**It is not narrative enough.** Some congregations and preachers have found that the Narrative Lectionary takes too many hops, skips, and leaps in the Old Testament. They have experimented with having longer narrative series in September through November, such as reading all of the key stories in a book such as Genesis or Exodus. They ask, why have Genesis 1 (creation in seven days), Genesis 2 (Adam and Eve created), Genesis 2–3 (fall into sin), and Genesis 6–9 (the great flood) in four separate years? Why not read them back-to-back in one year? We like the creativity and are eager to learn from those who are experimenting in this way.

**It expects regular worship attendance.** Another criticism of the Narrative Lectionary is that it expects people to attend worship every Sunday in order to follow the large narrative arc of the Bible, and some "active members" only come once or twice a month. Two responses. First, those who don't attend regularly can still listen to your online sermon archive to fill in gaps. And they will have just as much of a chance to be fed by any one story in the Narrative Lectionary as they would in the RCL. The Narrative Lectionary might even give them a reason to be more regular. Second, part of preaching the Narrative Lectionary



is to fill in the narrative gaps when the story makes a great leap. Preachers have to provide that sort of context for any text they preach.

***It is an educational lecture series, not a lectionary.*** One of my colleagues has complained to me that the Narrative Lectionary is a “lecture series, not a lectionary.” Since a lectionary is any set of texts to be read in worship, I’ve never understood this criticism. But it has been taken up in print and on the web by some folks.<sup>3</sup> One critic, Benjamin Leese, argues that the main purpose of the Narrative Lectionary is educational rather than homiletical: that “the preacher should educate his or her audience.” He is kind enough to say that in the Narrative Lectionary,

the assumption and hope is that [the congregation] will be able to find themselves in the Bible story or discern what God is doing today. Folks may then find in Jesus Christ the fulfillment of God’s relationship with the world and enter into a fuller relationship with him. Some may argue that the NL pattern of proclamation helps hearers to discover what God is up to in their lives and in the world, but without the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the central event, hearers could miss the heart of the Christian story.

On the other hand, the RCL exists for preaching rather than teaching, and the proclamation that flows from its use is more likely to be centered on the Gospel message rather than on Bible literacy. Preaching is not teaching; preaching is about justification, especially when seen from a Lutheran perspective. The preacher preaches in order that God, through the preacher’s words, might justify sinners. Preaching is Law and Gospel. Preaching is accusation and promise. Preaching is about God’s great gift to us in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The RCL serves this purpose well. . . .<sup>4</sup>

I appreciate Leese’s generosity towards the Narrative Lectionary, but he is simply mistaken about the purpose of the lectionary. The purpose is to organize texts so that the good news of Jesus Christ is proclaimed in law and gospel, command and promise, death and resurrection, in order to justify sinners.

Leese goes on to argue that the Narrative Lectionary assumes “that all Scripture is knowable and understandable independent of the lens of Jesus’s death and resurrection.” I find this to be an implication, an assumption that is not consistent with anything we have done. He also makes the accusation that the autumn focus on the Old Testament preaching texts “creates the potential for worship in which Jesus is not necessary.”<sup>5</sup> A reminder that in the fall, every Old Testament preaching text has an accompanying Gospel text whose purpose is hermeneutical—that the Old Testament story is seen through the lens of the life and death of Jesus Christ. And the readings and sermon are surrounded by Trinitarian and christological experiences throughout the liturgical worship service, from the apostolic greeting, through the hymns and liturgical singing, through Creed, through the Lord’s Prayer and Lord’s Supper, and to the Benediction. The text and sermon are surrounded by Christ’s Word. That word is a christological manger in which the lectionary texts are laid. I very much appreciate Leese’s thoughtful criticisms, and I greatly support his vision of evangelical preaching. But I do not find his criticism of the Narrative Lectionary to be substantively correct.

***It is too North American.*** The Narrative Lectionary has been criticized as too North American/European, since it runs September through June. This is a fair critique. We have partners throughout the world who have made it work for them. But it is a contextual lectionary, and its original context is North American. It is fair, though, to note two things. First, the church year was born in the Northern Hemisphere, with the commemoration of the Advent of the Light of the World during the darkest month of the year and commemoration of the resurrection during spring, when new life sprouts. Second, the Old Testament new year (Jewish *Rosh Hashanah*) is in the fall—September or October. So the Narrative Lectionary does align with the Old Testament sense of when the new year begins.

## Join the Experiment

For those who are interested in joining the experiment, the Narrative Lectionary is posted at and supported by [Workingpreacher.org](http://Workingpreacher.org). There are weekly commentaries and podcasts. There are Facebook groups and supporting ministries. I have been a pastor (and thus a preacher) for two years at a

congregation that followed the Narrative Lectionary, and I have been a member for many years at a congregation that uses it. It is one imperfect option among many imperfect options for a lectionary. We welcome any preachers and congregations to adopt this holy experiment—for a year, for four years, or longer.

#### Notes

1. The Narrative Lectionary website redirects to [workingpreacher.org/home-narrative-lectionary](http://workingpreacher.org/home-narrative-lectionary); it is a ministry of Luther Seminary, St Paul, MN.
2. [Workingpreacher.org/home-narrative-lectionary/](http://Workingpreacher.org/home-narrative-lectionary/).
3. See Richard O. Johnson, "The Case for the Lectionary," *Forum Letter* 48, no. 8 (2019): 1-6. Benjamin E. Leese, "Missing the Word and in the Words," *Cresset* 80, no. 3 (2017): 42-45.
4. Leese, 42-3.
5. Leese, 45.

# Translating the Faith

Margaret Aymer

*In memory of J. Michael Morgan, who taught many about the English Bible*

## Why Do We Translate?

“Translations are the devil’s way of confusing Christians so we don’t all read the same Bible.” Quite a theological treatise from my Lyft driver as he drove me to the airport. Many people share his suspicions, neatly summarized in the quip: “If the King James Version was good enough for Jesus, it’s good enough for me.” Multiple Bible translations raise suspicions about accuracy and about the motivations of the translators. Which is the “right translation”? Which should I use in my sermon preparation, in my devotions? Which should we buy for the pews? Devil or no, my driver correctly named many Christians’ reactions to translations as confusion. Here, I hope to allay some confusion and to offer you some tools for your ministry.

... Translated ...

Translation of the church’s Scriptures begins over three hundred years before the birth of Christ, a century after the death of the megalomaniacal Macedonian monarch Alexander the Great. Alexander’s realm stretched as far east as the Ganges River and encompassed parts of northern Africa, western Asia, and southern Europe. When he died, his generals divided his realm among themselves. Greek, the language of Macedonia, became the common (or *koine*) language among these kingdoms, quickly outstripping other languages. Among our Jewish forebears, Greek outstripped even Hebrew and Aramaic, the scriptural languages.

Of necessity, the Scriptures of Judaism—those that Christians call the “Old Testament”—were

translated from Hebrew and Aramaic into Greek, beginning about 250 BCE. This translation became known as the Septuagint.<sup>1</sup> The Septuagint matters to this conversation because it was the early church’s Bible, the New Testament writers’ Scripture. New Testament references to the Scriptures often directly quote or substantially paraphrase the Septuagint.

As Christians, then, we inherited both a translated Scripture and the act of translation as a practice of faith from our theological ancestors. Indeed, without translation, neither they nor we would have retained our stories of faith. We are a faith that began in translation, that was built upon a translation, and that carried this practice of translation down throughout our history.

... And Always Translating ...

Every Pentecost Sunday, some brave soul attempts to read aloud the list of nationalities in Acts 2:9–11: “Parthians, Medes, Elamites . . .” and so on, a story about the translation of the gospel into multiple languages through the power of the Holy Spirit. Ordinations often feature the story of the first deacons in Acts 6, which begins with a conflict between Greek-speaking widows and Hebrew-speaking widows. And notice this: whenever the Gospels include Aramaic words, they provide a translation. For example, in Mark 5, when Jesus raises a child from death by saying “*Talitha koum*,” Mark helpfully adds, “which means, ‘young girl, rise.’” Jesus may have spoken Aramaic, but Mark’s audience does not understand it. If Mark wishes to provide the Aramaic words, he must also provide a translation.

These New Testament writings indicate that translation was practiced within the earliest Christian gatherings. As the church grew, so did

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the need for translation. For the New Testament canon alone, scholars know of early or medieval translations into Latin, Syriac (a language widely used in Mesopotamia), at least seven variations of Coptic (the language of Northern Africa), Armenian, Georgian, Gothic (a Germanic and Scandinavian language), Ethiopic (the language of Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Sudan), and Slavonic (the language of the Balkans). These translations predate any available English language translation!

Thus, Christians have always translated. Our translations built bridges to other cultures, other children of God who would become believers and members of the household of faith.

#### Translation and Accessibility

Accessibility lies at the heart of scriptural translation. William Tyndale, one of the earliest English translators of the Bible, reportedly quipped that he wanted to ensure every boy at the plough knew the Scriptures as well as—or even better than—the Pope in Rome! Translations make Scriptures accessible by building language bridges between words and cultures.

But cultures and languages are not static. They change and evolve, and with them so must translations if the church wishes to keep the Scriptures accessible to the people of God.

Consider this line of Scripture:

*And if I part all my goods into the meats of poor men, and if I betake my body, so that I burn, and if I have not charity, it profiteth to me nothing [italics added].*

This is 1 Corinthians 13:4 from the Wycliffe translation of the fourteenth century. What might it mean to “part all my goods into the meats of poor men”? The New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVue) translates this:

*If I give away all my possessions and if I hand over my body so that I may boast\* but do not have love, I gain nothing [italics added].*

Notice the change in this translation from the word “charity” to the word “love.” For contemporary readers charity connotes “giving to someone who does not have what they need without hope of return.” Our contemporary use of the word “love” makes Paul’s meaning more accessible for the twenty-first-century reader. Now, even a child at

their computer (if not at their plough) might be able to grasp Paul’s meaning.

#### Accuracy and Manuscripts

Notice the asterisk at the word “boast” in the NRSVue. In the Wycliffe, that word is “burn,” a very different English verb. This points to a second reason translations change—new information about the ancient manuscripts. Over the millennia, manuscripts were copied down by hand, and sometimes copyists made changes, either correcting what they believed was an error or adding their thoughts. Usually, these were small changes, but after centuries of copying, they became part of the accepted Greek manuscripts of the Bible.

After the end of the First World War, advances in archaeology and political changes led scholars to manuscripts much more ancient than the ones used by Wycliffe, Tyndale, or the King James Version scholars. These earlier manuscripts caused scholars to amend the words of our translated Bibles out of a commitment to accuracy. In the case of 1 Corinthians 13:4 above, the manuscripts used by Tyndale contained the word *kauthēsomai* or *kauthēsōmai*, translated “I burn” or “I may burn.” The more ancient manuscripts contain *kauchēsōmai*, translated “I boast.” Even in English transliteration, you can see how similarly these words are spelled; in Greek, the difference amounts to one letter. Yet the difference matters: handing over my body so I may burn is not the same as handing over my body so I may boast. In the more ancient manuscripts of this text, Paul’s concern focuses on the pride of the person rather than the condition of their body.

Multiplied over thousands of verses, these small changes required new translations of the Bible. The Revised Standard Version (1946) and the many English translations of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (e.g., NRSV, NIV, NRSVue, CEB) were published to increase accessibility and accuracy for contemporary readers.

#### Who Translates and for Whom?

However, accessibility and accuracy only partially explain the proliferation of Bible translations in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Two other factors to consider are formal versus functional translation and theological differences in the translation of Bibles.

## Formal Versus Functional Translation

Formal and functional translation represent two methods of Bible translation. Formal translations aim to translate each ancient word, even if the resulting translation is not perfectly intuitive to English readers. These translations attempt a word-for-word translation of the ancient manuscripts, granting access to ancient cadences and idioms. Functional translations aim to help contemporary readers understand the Bible, even if the translation does not preserve every word in the manuscript. These translations focus on representing the sense of the ancient authors' words and making those words relevant to contemporary readers of the Bible.

Most contemporary translations combine these two approaches, but some lean more heavily toward functionality, and others toward formality. Compare, for example, these translations of the familiar beginning of the second chapter of the Gospel according to Luke:

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists. This first enrollment occurred when Quirinius governed Syria.

About that time Emperor Augustus gave orders for the names of all the people to be listed in record books. These first records were made when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

The first of these quotations comes from the NRSVue, a more formal translation. The second comes from the 2011 Common English Bible, a translation that tries to blend formal and functional. The last comes from the 1995 Contemporary English Version, a translation geared to a grammar-school reading level that leans toward functionality rather than formality.

Each of these translations helps English-speaking readers access the Bible. However, adding little details like “in the tax lists” or “the names of all the people” may help some English readers better understand Luke’s meaning. A more formal translation better preserves Luke’s cadences, showing readers not only what something meant but how it was said.

## Theological Differences and Translation

Theological and ecclesial differences have also resulted in a variety of Bible translations since the very early days of the English Bible.

### The Earliest English Translations

Although many think of the King James Version as the “original English Bible,” translations of the Gospels into Old English date back at least to the Wessex Gospels (circa 990 CE), some six centuries prior.<sup>2</sup> William Tyndale, executed as a heretic and an outlaw by the Roman Catholic Church, translated the first New Testament in modern English, first publishing it in Protestant Germany in 1526.<sup>3</sup> The Tyndale New Testament relied on the Greek manuscripts developed by Desiderius Erasmus, a Dutch scholar, rather than on the Vulgate, the Latin translation considered canon by the Roman Catholic Church. Tyndale’s translation forms the basis for 80 to 90 percent of the King James Version’s New Testament.

Following Tyndale, five Protestant English translations precede the King James: the Coverdale (1535), the first translation of the entire Bible into English; the Matthew Bible, the first English Bible authorized by a monarch; the Great Bible (1538), developed primarily for use in churches; the Geneva Bible (1560), the Bible of the Scottish Reformers, the Puritans, and the Pilgrims, intended for private study and full of anti-Catholic, anti-episcopal, and anti-monarchical footnotes; and the Bishops’ Bible (1568), a subpar translation authorized by the bishops of the Church of England, free of the antiestablishmentarianism of the Geneva Bible.

These translators faced excommunication and execution for their efforts during the period of active conflict between Roman Catholics and Protestants. Still, the popularity of Bibles in English forced the hand of the Roman Catholic church, and in 1610, it published its own English translation—the Douay-Rheims—for use in English-speaking parishes.

When James VI became England’s monarch, he worked to heal some of these divisions. As part of this effort, he called together Puritans and bishops at Hampton Court in 1604 for a series of discussions. From this gathering emerged the proposal for a new translation of the Bible, authorized by King James. According to the committee, this work was not “to make a new translation, nor yet to make of a bad one a good one . . . but to make a good one better.”<sup>4</sup> Unlike the Roman Catholic Douay-Rheims, a translation of the Latin Vulgate, the translators of this version would work with Hebrew, Aramaic,

Greek, and other ancient languages. Moreover, this translation was to be free of any commentary, anti-episcopal or otherwise, unlike the Geneva Bible.

The King James Version reflected the formal language traditions of its day, in keeping with its intended use as sacred text.<sup>5</sup> Its language supported the theology of the Church of England, translating *ekklesia* as “church” rather than “congregation,” and *presbyteros* as “bishop” rather than “elder.” Similarly, translators supported the reading of Old Testament Scriptures as prefiguring the New Testament and chose Calvinist translation of verses in support of predestination.

Without question, the King James Version translators created a new language for the English-speaking church, both in the United Kingdom and globally. The translation’s poetic cadences, many inherited from its forebears, fundamentally shaped the language of the English-speaking church for generations. Even today, the majority of English-speaking Christians who pray the Lord’s Prayer or recite the Twenty-third Psalm do so in the cadences of the King James Version.

The National Council of Churches Translations:  
RSV, NRSV, NRSVue

The power of the King James Version (KJV) notwithstanding, language shifted over three centuries. Language and the new archaeological discoveries mentioned above created a need for a new translation, one with greater accuracy and accessibility.

Although previous revisions had occurred, the first substantive revision of the King James Version—the Revised Standard Version (RSV)—was commissioned by the National Council of Churches in the U.S.A in 1937 and published in 1946. The committee of white male Christian and Jewish scholars considered this work a revision, staying “as close to the Tyndale-King James tradition as it can in the light of our present knowledge of the Hebrew and Greek texts . . . and our present English understanding.”<sup>6</sup> The RSV committee also chose to translate the Old Testament writings without trying to align them with their New Testament counterparts. Sometimes, this caused theological conundrums.

The biggest controversy lay in the RSV’s translation of Isaiah 7:14. In the KJV, Isaiah 7:14 reads:

“Therefore, the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a *virgin* shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (KJV, italic added).

However, the RSV’s translation reads:

“Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a *young woman* shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanu-el” (RSV, italic added).

The RSV translators were not heretics. The Hebrew of Isaiah 7:14 uses the Hebrew word for “young woman,” not “virgin.” Matthew and Luke derive the word “virgin” from the Septuagint translation. However, this change raised serious theological concerns, as Mary’s virginity is a central tenet of global Christianity. If Matthew and Luke were using a mistranslation, what might that suggest?

After 1946, the RSV was revised twice more. In 1986, the National Council of Churches commissioned the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). This version reconsidered the translation of masculine plural nouns. English, Greek, and Hebrew writers would often use the masculine plural (“men, mankind”) to indicate all persons present, regardless of gender. For example, the Declaration of Independence famously intones: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all *men* are created equal”<sup>7</sup> (italics added). However, in contemporary speech such language is exclusionary.<sup>8</sup> In the NRSV, uses of masculine plurals as placeholders for people of all genders were replaced by more inclusive language such as “men and women,” “brothers and sisters,” and “people.”

In 2022, the National Council of Churches released the NRSV Updated Edition (NRSVue), a collaboration with the Society of Biblical Literature, a guild of biblical scholars that is, to quote its executive director, “agnostic . . . We are an interfaith, ecumenical, academic organization, not a religious one.”<sup>9</sup> Some “12,000 substantive changes” were proposed.<sup>10</sup> A committee worked together to incorporate these, and a committee of potential Bible users were asked for their feedback.<sup>11</sup> Changes included switching from words like “leprosy” and “leper” to “skin disease,” an indication that we do not know exactly what disease is intended. The National Council of Churches will replace the NRSV with the NRSVue, allowing the former to go out of print.

The New International Version<sup>12</sup>

For many churches and seminaries, the RSV and its descendants became the adopted translation. However, some were unsatisfied, especially because of the Isaiah 7 controversy. In 1961, the Christian Reformed Church and the National Association of Evangelicals joined forces to establish a new Bible translation committee, named the Committee on Bible Translation (CBT). The fifteen men of the original committee represented theologically conservative seminaries and schools. They worked with teams of translators, all of whom affirmed a theological statement about scriptural inerrancy.

Whereas the RSV, NRSV, and NRSVue considered themselves revisions of the King James Version, the NIV was an entirely new translation. Influenced by Dr. Eugene Nida, a Bible translator and linguist, the NIV was the first contemporary translation to adopt a more functional rather than formal translation method, resulting in a translation that was, at once, theologically more conservative and more easily understood by contemporary readers.

Compare, for instance, Hebrews 1:1–2. The NRSVue translates these verses:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.

The NIV translates these same words:

*In the past* God spoke to our ancestors *through* the prophets *at many times* and *in* various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by *his* Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, *and* through whom also he *made the universe*.

The italicized words highlight how these translators strove to choose language that was more accessible than the formality of the King James tradition. At the same time, the use of “his Son” (the Greek has “a son”) points to the theological commitments of the NIV translation team.

The NIV is still the single most popular Bible translation in the United States, even though in 2011 it was revised to include more gender-inclusive translation, akin to that in the NRSV/NRSVue.

Other translations have been commissioned for theologically conservative groups, among these

the New American Standard Bible and the Holman Christian Bible. However, none has matched the NIV in its popularity.

Some Contemporary Translations: Inclusive Bible, CEB, and First Nations

Bible translations continue into the twenty-first century. Space does not allow for a full recounting of these, but I will briefly review three of them: the 2007 Inclusive Bible (IB), the 2011 Common English Bible (CEB), and the 2021 First Nations Version of the New Testament (FNV). Each of these versions represent functional rather than formal translations.

Priests for Equality, a Roman Catholic group committed to women’s full inclusion in ordination, began work on the Inclusive Bible in 1998, finishing the translation in 2007. The IB challenges paternal names for God (e.g., “Father”), and attends to sexist and classist language in Scripture. This commitment can sometimes occlude hard truths about the biblical world, especially the presence of enslaved persons in the earliest church. In Genesis 16, for example, Hagar is Sarai’s attendant, not her “slave,” and Ephesians 6 is addressed to “workers,” not “slaves.” In addition, the IB arguably presents the least objectionable translation for LGBTQIA+ Christians. Famously, the word “homosexual” was first included in the 1946 RSV.<sup>13</sup> While it was subsequently removed in the NRSV and NRSVue, the RSV opened the door to its use both theologically and politically in other Bible translations. Rather than “homosexuals” or “sodomites” (NRSV), the IB uses the word “pederasts,” pointing to the historical realities of men who sexually abused underage, usually enslaved boys. The margin notes in the IB reflect both its full support of women and its Roman Catholic origins.

The Common English Bible emerged from an ecumenical coalition of mainstream and evangelical primarily Christian translators as an alternative functional translation to the New International Version. The CEB proposes a theologically centrist translation, using masculine pronouns for the Deity and not attempting to soften the few passages that have been used as “clobber passages” for the LGBTQIA+ community. Central to this work was readability in “common English.” Consider, for example, Romans 8:37, the “more than conquerors” passage. In the CEB, it reads, “But in all these things we win a sweeping victory through the one who loved us.” One may argue whether this choice strips some of the poetry of the text, but “sweeping victory” does reflect common parlance. Like the IB, some of

the CEB choices around human enslavement occlude the issue. Although the Ephesians text parallels more formal translations, in Genesis 16, Hagar is translated as “servant” rather than slave.

The First Nations Bible was developed by a council of First Nations translators guided by Native Intervarsity, One Book Canada, and other more evangelical leaning organizations. Its intent is a “retelling of Creator’s Story from the Scriptures, attempting to follow the tradition of the storytellers of our oral cultures.”<sup>24</sup> As a “retelling,” this version defamiliarizes the biblical text, which allows readers and hearers to experience Scriptures in a new way. Consider the first beatitude in Matthew 5. The FNV reads: “Creator’s blessing rests on the poor, the ones with broken spirits. The good road from above is theirs to walk.” The reimagination of “the kingdom of heaven” as “the good road from above” invites all readers to shift their sense of what Jesus might be teaching here. This is not a biblical translation for those looking for more inclusivity toward the LGBTQIA+ community; however, it does invite readers into a storied world different from the one passed down by William Tyndale and his descendants.

## What Bible Should I Use? Some Guidelines

Given this history, how should worship leaders and pastors proceed in choosing English Bible translations? Here are some suggestions that might help.

- **Read the Preface:** Prefaces to English translations contain helpful information regarding why the translation was created and by whom. This may give you insight into the theological bias of that translation; every translation has one.
- **Translation for whom:** Different translations serve different populations. When choosing an English translation, consider who will be using it. Will this be a gift for a pastor or seminarian, or will it be a Bible for use with grade-school children? How formal or functional should the language be?
- **En Conjunto:** A Latine principle states that we do things “*en conjunto*,” together. This wisdom can be applied both to choosing translations (create a group) and in using translations (use multiple ones). No one translation is perfect, just as no single person can represent the needs of an entire community.
- **Use good resources:** The Christian Scriptures are thousands of years old, steeped in history and

culture. Readers should not only engage the words but the culture behind those words. Therefore, choose resources wisely. Introductory textbooks, Bible dictionaries, and commentaries written by credible scholars help. So too do Bibles with extensive notes, for example the Jewish Annotated New Testament (Oxford), which places the stories of the New Testament within their Jewish context.

Above all, I invite you to read the Scriptures, as Tyndale once wanted. These are the church’s story; they are your story. Take and read.

### Notes

1. A helpful introduction to the Septuagint is Timothy Michael Law’s book *When God Spoke Greek: The Septuagint and the Making of the Christian Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
2. Donald L. Brake with Shelly Beach, *A Visual History of the King James Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 25.
3. I distinguish “modern English” from “old English,” i.e., the language of Chaucer. When I am speaking of twenty-first-century English, I will use “contemporary English.”
4. Preface to the King James Version.
5. Gordon Campbell, *Bible: The Story of the King James Version 1611–2011* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 73.
6. <https://www.nccusa.org/newbtu/aboutrsv.html/>.
7. The author recognizes that the writers of the Declaration of Independence did not believe in the equality of all persons. However, the linguistic use of “men” here is intended to be universal, not gender-specific.
8. Broadway lyricist Lin-Manuel Miranda highlights this in “The Schuyler Sisters.” After quoting the above line from the Declaration, Angelica Schuyler quips, “And when I meet Thomas Jefferson, I’m-ma compel him to include **women** in the sequel” (emphasis mine).
9. This author was the book editor for the Letter of James.
10. Annelisa Burns, “An Even Better Bible,” *Christian Century* (February 2023): 64.
11. Burns, “An Even Better Bible,” 64.
12. An excellent article on the NIV is William W. Combs, “The History of the NIV Translation Controversy,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 17 (2012): 3–34. The information in this section largely derives from Combs’s research.
13. For more on this, see <https://www.1946themovie.com/>.
14. “Introduction to the First Nations Version: An Indigenous Translation of the New Testament,” ix.





Meg Hitchcock  
*Diary, 1971: Excerpts from My Grandmother's Diary,*  
letters cut from the Kama Sutra,  
paper, 30 x 22 1/2 in., 2016

# Psalms and Interfaith Engagement in Global Context

Eric Sarwar

**M**uslims are the famous gospel singers in Pakistan.” This statement always surprises those who talk with me about worship and music in a Muslim context. During my Ph.D. field research, I had an opportunity to host an interfaith psalm festival in Karachi, Pakistan. A young contemporary music band performed Psalm 33:1–5. After their performance, the Christian lead vocalist of the band introduced one of the singers in the band as a Muslim and a *hafiz-e-Qur’an* (one who has memorized the Qur’an by heart in Arabic). It was a strange but pleasant surprise. When asked how he felt about being a part of the interfaith psalm festival as a Muslim, he gladly said that *Zaboor* (Psalm) is also a Word of God and mentioned in the Qur’an. As a Muslim, he said, he has no hesitation in singing the *Zaboor* of *Dawood* (David) as a divine revelation. This event reflects how the book of Psalms provides a shared spiritual and musical common ground for interfaith engagement in a local and global context.

Being trained in the oral tradition of Indian raga music, ordained as a minister of the Word and Sacrament for twenty years in the Presbyterian Church of Pakistan, and a missiologist in a global context, I have had many personal experiences engaging our religious neighbors—Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, and those of other spiritual traditions through music, particularly the Psalms. For brevity, this article’s aim is twofold: first, to critically examine interfaith dialogue, and second, to provide an alternative perspective towards singing, chanting, reading, and reciting psalms as a creative and cultural dialogue in worship from a witness framework. This article attempts to ask the following questions:

1. What is the role of Psalms in Christian worship and witness?
2. What are the critical issues and hindrances of less fruitful Christian witness in the Muslim world?
3. How do the Psalms help us engage in interfaith relationships, and what is the contribution of Psalms in communicating the Christian message?

## Psalms in Worship as Witness

First and foremost, the function of psalmodic literary genres in the arts, poetry and performance (singing and playing, dancing, and craft practices) has been firmly established in the Jewish history of worship (Ex. 15; 31:4–5; 35:30–32, 35; Ps. 90; Judg. 5), David’s tabernacle (1 Chron. 15), and the Levitical families of master musicians (1 Chron. 25) in first temple Judaism.<sup>1</sup> However, the omission of the sacred sound became a protest during the exile (Ps. 137) and was revived in the postexilic period.

Luke echoes psalmodic poetic patterns in the opening of Zechariah’s Benedictus, Mary’s Magnificat, and the angels’ Gloria Patri (Luke 1–3). Jesus alludes to the Psalms in his public ministry when he teaches using parables (Matt. 13; Ps. 78:2). Specific references to psalms can be easily recognized, as in the Beatitudes when Jesus references Psalm 37, saying, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (Matt. 5:5; Ps. 37:11). Second temple religious life in the Gospels is filled with references to the Psalms, whether it is a dialogue about the messianic kingship with religious leaders (Matt. 21:10; Pss. 2 and 110), liturgical life (Matt. 26:17–30; Mark 14:12–26; Pss. 116–118 [also called the Hallel Psalms]), or laments from Gethsemane to the

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The post-resurrection narrative in Luke 24:13–35 describes the dialogue between the risen Christ and sorrowful disciples on the Emmaus Road. The risen Christ expands the disciples’ global perspectives when he opens their minds by giving them the fulcrum of the scriptural proclamation of the salvific plan, “that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44).

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crucifixion (Matt. 26:38; Pss. 42–43; Ps. 31:5). At Golgotha, psalmodic references pour verbatim from Jesus’ lips (Matt. 27:46; Ps. 22:1).

The post-resurrection narrative in Luke 24:13–35 describes the dialogue between the risen Christ and sorrowful disciples on the Emmaus Road. The risen Christ expands the disciples’ global perspectives when he opens their minds by giving them the fulcrum of the scriptural proclamation of the salvific plan, “that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44). The first-century church accepted this mandate and continued praising God and proclaiming the event amidst suffering (Acts 16:25–34).

Mission and liturgical historians have found that throughout church history, Psalms 67, 96, and 98 are “missional gems” and have been vital in Christian practice and proclamation.<sup>3</sup> The patristic fathers in the first three centuries CE continued the heritage of singing psalms. Until the early Middle Ages, psalmody was the backbone of the Divine Office—monastic and cathedral.<sup>4</sup> Worship scholars use the paradigms of “call and response,”<sup>5</sup> “proclamation and praise,” and “revelation and response,”<sup>6</sup> reminding the global church that “the body of Christ has two basic purposes for its existence: worship and witness.”<sup>7</sup> Worship and witness are primarily spiritual processes; therefore, worship and witness mirror each other. Worship and witness are inseparable from God’s interaction in the global context, and the book of Psalms has a critical role in paradigm-shifting approaches to interfaith engagement through worship and witness.<sup>8</sup> The Psalms are an expression of profound worship. Lyrics and music work together to define God’s redemptive work and God’s love as vertically dialogical and horizontally emotive. It happens amidst worship—“inviting and commanding . . . in engaging ethne-nations.”<sup>9</sup> True worship is living a doxological life and declaring witness to our religious neighbors. As mentioned above, the Great

Commission and proclamation in Matthew 28:18–20 took place in a worship context that was already embedded in the Psalms and was the core of religious life during second temple Judaism.<sup>10</sup>

These references remind us that our calling to proclamation is creative and contextual. Like the disciples walking toward Emmaus, often the church can become blinded by denominational dogma, hindering missional engagement. However, worship can lead hearts to start burning, and eyes to open as we recognize him through sacrament and Scriptures (Luke 24:32–35). Old Testament scholars, liturgical historians, and missiologists attest to the Psalms’ role in the mission of the church, engaging the world with God’s proclamation and praise. The critical question is why the twenty-first-century church needs to initiate interfaith engagement. It is a biblical and missional mandate demanding a conscious response from the global body of Christ. The recent Barna study finds that Americans are disconnecting from the Great Commission.<sup>11</sup>

As Christianity declines in the Western Hemisphere, India surpasses China in population and number of languages spoken in the same region (Hindi/Urdu and Punjabi), according to Ethnologue.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, the Muslim population is proliferating. A study by the Pew Research Center predicts that by the year 2050, India will have the largest Muslim population, and Islam will be the second largest religious group in the United States, while the global population of Muslims will exceed the global population of Christians by the end of the century.<sup>13</sup> These soaring statistics demand critical evaluation of Western mission models. Before exploring the role of Psalms in interfaith engagement, it is critical to understand what hinders the mission from bearing much fruit in the Muslim context.

### **Manazra and Muslim Culture**

Concerning Muslim-Christian engagement, early approaches to interreligious dialogue evolved through

confrontational means (polemics), cognitive literary approaches (especially through printing), and cultural alienation. Each of these methods of communication across religious groups played vital roles in unfriendly Muslim-Christian relationships.<sup>14</sup> From a political perspective, since its inception in the sixth century, all Eastern patriarchal sees, excluding Rome, were under Muslim rule for fourteen hundred years. Below are the three critical issues for interfaith engagement in the Muslim culture.

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From a political perspective, since its inception in the sixth century, all Eastern patriarchal sees, excluding Rome, were under Muslim rule for fourteen hundred years.

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First, the *manazra*, a confrontational, polemical approach to Muslim engagement, initiated by Byzantine theologians and monks such as Theodore Abu Qurrah and Theophanes the Confessor (752–818), attacked the genesis of Islam. John of Damascus (676–749) wrote that Islam was a heresy. Nicetas of Byzantium (842–912), to help Emperor Michael II (842–867), assumed a level of political protection in his Christendom context.<sup>15</sup>

From the tenth to the thirteenth centuries, the Crusades engulfed Christian-Muslim relations, followed by Western colonial control. In 1495, Christian missionary efforts and imperialism tipped the balance of power away from the Islamic bloc to the Western monarchs. From the fifteenth century until the nineteenth century, the engagement of Islam by the West exposed the interests of international diplomacy, and expansionism made it the “heyday” of mission and imperialism. Colonial rule by Western nations created a polemic against the Muslim mind, and with the rise of the colonial era, *manazra* reappeared in the late ninth century. Pamphlets, tracts, books, and philosophical reasoning spread and defended anti-Muslim arguments, while Christian missionaries used confrontational methods among Muslim communities to gain converts.

Second, with the Western Reformation's use of printing technology in the Enlightenment era, Christian missions employed a cognitive literary model in an oral Muslim culture. During the Reformation, much of the reforming Western church's

attention was directed toward engaging Roman Catholics rather than religious others, especially Muslims. Reformed historians find two mentions of Islam from Luther in two of his manuscripts. The first is found in the “Libellus,” a tract “on the religion and customs of the Turks,” and the second is in the preface of the new German translation of the 1543 Qur'an translated from the Latin, edited by Theodore Bibliander.<sup>16</sup>

Although Luther's acquaintance with Islam was minimal, his observations were persuasive as he wrote about “the Turks” on the “religion of Muhammad.” Luther was under immense political and social pressure to respond to the rising threat to the church and the state by the Ottoman Turks' invasion of Christendom. He described Turks as “the rod of God's wrath” by which “God is punishing the world.”<sup>17</sup> Luther understood the Turks through the lens of biblical prophecy. The Turks were for Europe what the Babylonians were for Israel—a “schoolmaster” to discipline and to teach the fear of God and prayer.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, Western missionary enterprises acquired literal and cognitive modes of communication in the oral and emotional voice-centric Islamic context.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, amid political and polemical approaches, the introduction of printed textual materials became important. The Western literary revolution leads to written text translation as a mission model that was in conflict with the oral literacy of the Muslim communities in which it operated.

A third reason for tenuous Muslim-Christian relationships centers around a misunderstanding of Muslim music culture on the part of Western Christians. Muslim music culture can be canonical and noncanonical.<sup>20</sup> This author not only explored Pakistan's canonical and noncanonical religious music culture but also discussed the *halal* (permission) and *haram* (prohibition) of music in Islamic thought in detail. In Islamic religious music culture, *adhan* (the call to prayer five times a day) and Qur'anic *qirat*, or cantillation, fall in the canonical category. The noncanonical religious-spiritual music activities of Pakistan are outside the *masjid* (mosque) in social spaces such as Ramadan nights, the Prophet's birthday (*mawlid*), birthdays of Sufi imams (*urs*), weddings, and condolences. The *adhan* from Masjid, Qur'anic *qirat*, Sunni *Milad*, Shi'a *Majlis-e-Marsya*, and Sufi *sama'* are the five mainstreams of Muslim music culture in Pakistan.

In sum, among many other cross-cultural mistakes in the history of Christian-Muslim relations, Western theological influence (seminaries, scholars, and curricula), an uninformed European understanding of Islam, and the practices of colonial-era Christian missions all helped to form a Christian polemic against Muslims that must be critically examined. The confrontational practices, cultural alienation, and literary methods of Christian engagement with Islam has produced furious antagonism, failed missions, and fewer converts. However, in the last century, numerous meetings emphasizing the need for interfaith engagement between Christians and Muslims have been taking place.<sup>22</sup> Post-Christendom mission efforts pursue common ground in interfaith

subcontinent is regarded as a pan-regional entity. Hindustani music features the same subgenres, styles, performance formats, instruments, and repertoire of modes and meters as ragas and rhythms Indian music, whether cultivated for educational purposes by Hindu *shastriya/bhakti* (devotional) *sangeet*, Mughal Empire courts for entertainment, Sufi *qawalli* for spiritual quest, Sindhi *kafi* and *Shah Jo Raag*, Sikh *Gurbani Sangeet*, cultural folklores, or Christian worship music.<sup>26</sup> Myriads of Western missionaries who served on Indian soil transformed their missional understanding and enriched the Western church through their engagement with the Indian subcontinent.<sup>27</sup> The North India Presbyterian mission arrived in the North Indian Punjab and

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engagements between Islam and Christianity.<sup>23</sup> Over a half-century of efforts reveal the vast common grounds between Muslims and Christians. The Vatican Council II (1962–65) of the Roman Catholic Church explored interfaith relationships in the context of mission in the documents *Ad Gentes*, *Lumen Gentium*, and *Nostre Atetate*, and the Office of Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation in the World Council of Churches is exploring dialogue as a way toward justice and peace in a multireligious world, developing practices such as “Common Word,” Scriptural Reasoning, and Scriptures in Dialogue.<sup>24</sup>

The most striking realization I have made is that radicalized social and sacred space diffuses by using contextualized psalms in Pakistan. Where other methods of interfaith dialogue are less fruitful, I propose a new paradigm-shifting prophetic approach to interfaith engagement: using the Psalms.<sup>25</sup>

## Punjabi Psalter and Presbyterian North India Mission

South Asia is the birthplace of Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism, and Buddhism among a pantheon of pluralistic traditions. The Indian subcontinent is known for its sonic spirituality and interfaith engagement. Classical music from the North Indian

established its first mission center at Sialkot in 1855 (currently in Pakistan). In addition to their educational and medical mission, the Presbyterian worship committee produced a most contextual and creative worship resource in 1908 called *Punjabi Zabur: Desi Ragan Vich*. A century-old interfaith corpus, this resource includes the whole book of Punjabi Psalms with Western musical notation, lyrically translated by a Muslim convert, Imam Din Shahbaz (I.D. Shahbaz), and 405 pieces of lyrical poetry composed in the local music system by a Hindu maestro, Radha Kishan.<sup>28</sup> The Tehillim School of Church Music & Worship in Pakistan published a documentary on Sialkot Convention<sup>29</sup> and recently digitized the whole corpus of the Punjabi Psalter.<sup>30</sup>

Punjabi Zabor is a text-driven (*kalam-shbdh Pradhan*) genre, connecting the emotional and devotional aspect of *rag* and *taal*. In this respect, they have traditionally been performed in religious and congregational contexts rather than in a stand-alone presentation.<sup>31</sup> Punjabi Psalms are the Bible of orally literate worship communities in the Indian subcontinent. It is a unique repertoire with religious music import, serving as a bridge to Hindustani music and a religious music model for decolonizing Western hegemony. It also highlights the importance

and richness of the vernacular genres in the Indian subcontinent's religious music culture.<sup>32</sup> Below are a few case studies reflecting the Psalms and interfaith engagements in global contexts.

## **Psalms and Islam: Power Encounters in Pakistan**

A detailed study of my own about the convergences and divergences between the Psalms and Islam was recently published.<sup>33</sup> During a spring 2023 mission trip to Pakistan, I was invited to the largest Presbyterian church in Pakistan, First Presbyterian Church Faisalabad, which gathers six thousand attendees every week. Rev. Emric Joseph (pastor in charge) and I were seminary fellows at the Gujranwala Theological Presbyterian Seminary twenty years ago. During our conversation, he informed me that a land mafia occupied the property for thirty years and hindered church access and activities. However, since his arrival and the last sixteen years of ministry, God's Spirit has moved powerfully, and not only did the land mafia leave the church property but the second- and third-generation members of the Presbyterian church rejoined their congregational family.

While visiting, we witnessed spiritual encounters with God and manifestations of evil spirits during praise sessions. The Friday service started with singing Punjabi Psalm 18:16–18. Suddenly, as the worship team started singing Psalm 10:1–10 in Punjabi, a commotion started on the women's side and later in the men's section. Meanwhile, two women started walking toward the pulpit and trying to reach the pastor. While the choir was singing the Punjabi Psalm 10 enthusiastically in the pentatonic raga-based melodic structure accompanied by upbeat rhythms, both the text and tune of Psalm 10 helped the singers and congregations to call on Yahweh to intervene and vindicate his people, and to judge evil (Ps. 10:5). As the evil spirit manifested, Rev. Joseph rebuked the evil spirit to leave the possessed in the name of Jesus Christ. After deliverance, the three women fainted and lay straight at the front of the elevated stage. Later, Rev. Joseph said that most men and women who come for healing and prayers are Muslims. The cultural music practices have been a bond to bring people together. He wondered if the Psalms might be a critical bridge in connecting Muslims' background in Islam to a new Christian context.

In a global context where people long for spiritual encounters, the Psalms become the “manual

for spirituality.”<sup>35</sup> Though this kind of spiritual expression may not be familiar to many in mainline churches in the United States, it is supported in Scripture. The redemptive saga begins in Genesis with spiritual warfare: “He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Gen. 3:15). And the Letter to the Ephesians discusses principals and powers opposed to the gospel: “Our struggle is . . . against spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places” (Eph. 6:10–12). The book of Psalms, too, has a longstanding connection to spiritual warfare, and many psalms reference principalities and powers, and their earthly agents, as opposed to God (Ps. 2:1–3; Ps. 24:7–10). Meanwhile throughout the Psalms, as agents of evil conspire, the worshiping community is encouraged to practice their praise and power (Ps. 13; 18; 35; 37; 70; 71; 91; 107:20; 109; 149:6–9). Jesus' wilderness encounter with Satan in Matthew also shows the role of worship in this conflict when Satan takes Jesus to the highest point of the second temple (Ps. 91:11–12; Matt. 4:5). Jesus' second temptation for personal glory was also in a worship context. Spirituality is contextual and deeply rooted in local worship practices, which are one of the visible forms of witness and belief within a culture.<sup>36</sup>

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Power encounters have always been part of proclamation, and, the traditional Western mission-sending structure in particular must address this reality.

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Power encounters have always been part of proclamation, and the traditional Western mission-sending structure in particular must address this reality. In an interfaith context, power encounters have been and will continue to be a part of gospel proclamation and worship practice.

I will next turn to the case study of Psalms and interfaith engagement with Sikhism.

## **Psalms and Sikhism: Shared Musical Heritage**

During Ramadan 2021, the Artesia City Church, an Indian and Pakistani congregation, hosted an “Interfaith Response to Post-Pandemic Society” event.<sup>37</sup> The program was intentionally designed to understand how faith traditions have responded to the pandemic in Southern California. The interfaith

event was attended by Muslim (from the Council General of Pakistan in Los Angeles), Christian, Hindu, and Sikh community leaders. The event started with the reading and singing of Punjabi Psalm 139:7–11 composed in raga *bhairvi*, with a moderately slow tempo of eight beats, *bhajan kehrwa* style. *Bhairvi* raga is known for its devotional impact, and the simple melodic structure helps the congregation to sing in unison in a call-and-response style. A Sikh community leader and a Gurbani Sangeet Kertan singer

(Sikh religious songster) from the Sikh Gurudwara in Hollywood, California, attended the event with his family. The Sikh leader reflected on the text and tune of Psalm 139 and confessed that he listened to the Punjabi Psalm for the first time, which touched his heart. He quoted the text repeatedly and pointed to the melodic structure, which was close to the Sikh religious music repertoire. The event was featured in national news in the United States and Pakistan. Our interfaith engagement with Sikh leaders in California opened new doors for the witness in Pakistan and built bridges between faiths.

Later, we invited Sikh leaders to participate and play cultural instruments at the Annual Psalms Festival in Southern California. The Singh's son and daughter played *sarangi*, *saranda*, and other string instruments at the Psalms festival. This gathered the interest of other Sikh *tabla* players, who started attending and playing *tablas* at our worship services and house gatherings regularly. Moreover, a few weeks later, I received a call from the same Sikh community leader to visit the Hollywood Gurdwara, and surprisingly, not only did he introduce me to the Sikh congregation, he invited me to speak there. Our shared heritage of Punjabi Psalms in local raga-based music developed an interfaith friendship that extended to more significant community engagement. That friendship motivated us to visit the birthplace of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism in Pakistan.

During the spring of 2023, a mission trip to Pakistan with the stated clerk and a delegate from the Martin Pur Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church of Pakistan gave us an opportunity to visit the most sacred place of Sikhism in Pakistan.<sup>38</sup>

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Whether the global church engages with Hindu *Om*, Hebrew *Shalom*, Muslim *Salam*, or Sikh *Sat Siri Akal*, rediscovering the heritage of psalm singing builds bridges through shared musical heritage that expresses unity and vision for heavenly and earthly peace.

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The guide gave us a tour of the whole gurudwara without any hesitation. We met with the Gurbani Sangeet singer during our visit and discussed our shared musical heritage with the Punjabi Psalms and Guru Granth Sahib (the holy poetic book of Sikhism). We shared a musical heritage of ragas and rhythms from the same Indic music system, a language that connects us emotionally and spiritually. However, the relationship between Sikh Gurbani Sangeet and Punjabi Psalms is still waiting to be explored. Time and

space limitations barred us from sharing in more depth the stories of Psalms and Sufis in Pakistan and the Roman Catholic Cardinal Coutts, who has conversed with Muslim clerics around praying and singing the Psalms together.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, we weren't able to share the story of how a prison in the United Arab Emirates preventing a chaplain, Rev. Javed Masih, from bringing a one-page copy of Psalm 86 to an inmate, led to a friendship with a guard that opened the gates for six Bibles translated into five languages to be allowed into the prison.<sup>40</sup>

Whether the global church engages with Hindu *Om*, Hebrew *Shalom*, Muslim *Salam*, or Sikh *Sat Siri Akal*, rediscovering the heritage of psalm singing builds bridges through shared musical heritage that expresses unity and vision for heavenly and earthly peace. Concerning Christian worship as a witness to those of other faiths, scholars find parallels between the Psalms and the Hindu Bhajans, Muslim Qur'an, Gurbani Sangeet of Sikhism, and Sufi Sama, which manifest through practice and performance.<sup>41</sup> In the twenty-first century, various scholars have proposed that interfaith dialogue is "a meeting of hearts rather than of minds." New artistic and cultural avenues for reaching out through music forms a "Creative Interreligious Dialogue," a "dialogue of souls," and singing psalms demonstrates that "far from being a utopia, union and harmony are a reality that is attainable."<sup>42</sup>

The cultural force of sonic sounds is unstoppable in a Muslim context, and the nexus of *missio-musico*<sup>43</sup> is applicable in the backdrop of Muslim music culture. The book of Psalms contains various common themes with Qur'anic doctrines that could

be explored in cultural music for proclamation. Collaborative and creative approaches to singing Zabor (psalms) suggest translating Psalms into cultural texts,<sup>44</sup> a practice that fosters faithful friendship among Muslims. The emotive power of psalms in text and tune holds a magnetic pull for spirituality, personal piety, and missional practice. In a plural context, psalm singing can play a critical yet creative role in interfaith engagement. Christ commissioned the church to communicate the Christian message. He sent followers with his power, presence, and proclamation, which involved dislodging and dispossessing the power strongholds and led them to the Way, Truth, and Life.

I will conclude with a story of a villager in Pakistan. One day a landlord of a poor, illiterate, Christian worker asked him a heavy and deep theological question: “Why do you Christians call Essa [Jesus] a Son of God?” Fearfully, but faithfully, the man responded, “I don’t know about it, but one thing I do know,” and he sang a simple, popular psalm, “May his [Christ’s] name endure forever” (Ps. 72:17).

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# The Work of Our Hands: Drawn Together

*Rachel H. Vogado*



*Do This in Remembrance*  
First Presbyterian Church, Concord, NC  
Congregational Retreat at Kanuga Conference Center  
Watercolor on Muslin

Rachel H. Vogado is a pastor and artist living in Salem, Virginia, who seeks to inspire communities for faith formation and meaning making through visual arts, storytelling, and spiritual practices.



*Woven Together*

First Presbyterian Church, Concord, NC

Congregational Retreat at Camp Cheerio, 2016

Prayers written on fabric and woven on a loom built by the community

**T**here is a special kind of buzz in the air when a community creates together. Each individual act of creativity reflects its own distinctive process, but something altogether different occurs when a worshiping community takes time to respond and make something together as a body. The images shared here show examples of community art projects I have led in congregational retreat settings. They are visual and tangible signs of a community's time together, time set apart to worship, learn, and explore their faith beyond the walls of their sanctuary. These works were created gathered around Scripture, with an invitation to participants to offer a response to God through the work of their hands. What participants created

together extends far beyond the canvases and materials with which we worked.

As a pastor and artist, I seek to empower congregants to engage with creative expression as a means of reflection and connection. Specifically, I have found that mutual and communal making has opened up new avenues for listening, authentic and vulnerable sharing, and building trust. I have found that work created in retreat contexts, times and places set apart, forges deep bonds for people of all ages within a congregation. When planning projects for these congregational retreats, it is important to me to begin with collaboration, working with other clergy and church leaders to create an approachable and engaging framework for the project. Scripture

*I Am the Vine, You Are the Branches*

First Presbyterian Church, Concord, NC

Congregational Retreat at Kanuga Conference Center, 2018

Wooden leaves with oil pastels, metal and found wood



serves as the guide to develop an image or concept, and we select materials that also connect with the theme for the retreat. Usually, following a time of worship and deep engagement with Scripture, I set up an intentional space for retreat participants to engage with the project at their own pace. In many instances, I have incorporated prayer and reflection into the time for making, giving verbal prompts to guide the listener through the time with the materials. In every instance, I choose materials that all ages and experience levels can safely and effectively engage without anxiety, but materials that also give opportunities for experimentation, media they might never have had the opportunity to use.

When a community comes together to create, I have witnessed profound, authentic, intergenerational connections built. Gathered around the table working with our hands seems to foster self-reflection as well as deep listening as conversations come and go, overheard and shared out of the vulnerability and trust that is a natural part of healthy artistic expression. Even with the simplest of mediums, the act of making invites one

to bring a piece of themselves to the creation, and that is reflected in the conversations shared. Often I wonder if the permission to look down and focus on the work of our hands provides a sense of both comfort and freedom that is essential to dialogue, creating lines of communication among creative partners alongside the art object. In this way, the act of making together weaves dialogue into the creation that is just as important as the media that is used to produce the image or form. Dialogue becomes material.

One helpful approach when planning communal art projects is to use a framework that gives both an overall plan and places for congregants to work independently within that framework. For the projects you see shared here, each participant worked on a small part of a larger whole, which required trust during the process that what they created would become part of something larger. For those who have a hard time “trusting the process” or seeing the small part of the big picture, it is helpful to offer a way for the work to feel conclusive even in the midst of the process, bringing a maker to a resolution of sorts even before the larger framework is revealed. For example, in *I Am the Vine, You Are the Branches*, I guided participants to reflect on two prompts during their working time, using both sides of a wooden leaf-shaped object I gave them and responding through word or image. These leaf objects were woven together to become a larger sculpture that resembled leaves on a vine. When they were working on their leaves, participants did not know that what they were creating would become part of a larger sculpture. This element of surprise gave the work great personal impact in worship. The heartfelt and hopeful prayers, reflections, and visions for the world offered on individual leaves, realized and experienced together as parts within the whole, brought a new level of depth and meaning. The process of reflection and revelation shows what is possible through communal expressions of faith in material form.

Making art together in this way creates liturgical opportunities as well as meaningful formation and education. In a retreat setting, I have often

incorporated the final communal art piece into the closing worship service, and I have marveled at the moment of reveal, when all those involved feel a sense of awe and wonder at what was created. Seeing the parts within a whole becomes a visual metaphor and reveals new possibilities for expressions of collaboration in mission, service, and care when the community recognizes what they are capable of creating together as a body. In almost every instance, I have witnessed people lingering with joy and a sense of togetherness after worship, amazed at what they have made.

Following these communal art experiences, participants often return home carrying a piece of artwork with them. The larger framework becomes a momentary vision as part of worship, and participants are invited to deconstruct the work as a retreat ends, taking a piece of the work that reminds them what has happened in its making. Congregants carry with them the dialogues that the act of making opened up—dialogues with Scripture and text, dialogues with their inward and outward



*Broken and Whole*  
First Presbyterian Church, Gastonia, NC  
Lenten Art Walk, 2022



self, and dialogues with their collaborators around the table. The invitation to make something together provides way of connecting, listening, risk-taking, and hopeful visioning. At any age, I think we are hungry to create, and often it takes a community to draw us together to do so as we respond to God's creative work in the world. Engaging in community art projects can be vital to a worshipping body. If done thoughtfully, the process of making can open us up to new interpretations of Scripture and foster faithful and intentional moments of meaning-making. Making art can invite participants to explore new dialogues and catch new visions of what is possible when we collaborate with one another and with our Creator.

*Do This in Remembrance*  
First Presbyterian Church, Concord, NC  
Congregational Retreat  
at Kanuga Conference Center, 2017  
Watercolor on Muslin

# Meg Hitchcock: Illuminations



Meg Hitchcock  
*The Face of Faces Was Turned Everywhere and in All Directions,*  
text cut from the *Bhagavad Gita*, acrylic on paper, 16 x 14 in., 2023



When the Bodhisattva had thus attained perfect knowledge,  
all the different universes were illumined by a great light.

Meg Hitchcock  
*Illumined by a Great Light*, text cut from  
the *Buddha-Karita* of Asvaghosha,  
paint, graphite, embroidery floss on paper,  
14 x 11 in., 2023







Meg Hitchcock  
*The Illusory Bodhisattva Ascended and Was Seen  
by the Whole Assembly,*  
text cut from the Vimalakirti Nirdeśa Sutra,  
acrylic paint, graphite on paper, 14 x 11 in., 2022

# Call to Worship

Ideas

# Contemplative Communion

Kenneth L. Cuthbertson

*In this very simple form, the prayer can be more silent than spoken. This works well in conjunction with other forms of contemplative worship, such as lectio divina.*

## Invitation to the Table

We come at Christ's invitation to the table of grace.

*(A brief preparatory chant may be sung.)*

Blessed are you, Holy One, God, Creator of the universe. You bring forth bread from the earth, and create the fruit of the vine, to sustain our lives and gladden our hearts. They shall be for us today the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation, offered in grateful remembrance of Christ. *(silence)*

Let us give thanks to God the Creator, our Father and Mother, the Holy One whom we worship and serve. *(silence)*

We remember and give thanks, O God, for your beloved child, Jesus our Savior, our teacher and guide, our healer, our friend and brother, who loved us and gave himself for us. *(silence)*

O God, give your Holy Spirit in the breaking of the bread, that in this sharing of the bread and cup we may be united with you, with Christ, and with one another. *(silence)*

## The Prayer of Jesus

*(Alternative versions work well in this format, such as the following.)*

**Holy One, Father and Mother of all,  
you are the one who holds and guides  
the cosmos.**

**May your Name be sanctified in our words  
and lives.**

**May your realm of peace and well-being  
come among us.**

**May your intentions and desires come to  
pass on earth as in the highest heavens.**

**May there be bread sufficient for all this day.**

**Free us from the debt of our misdeeds  
and failings**

**even as we respond in forgiveness and  
compassion to one another.**

**Do not bring us into the time of trial,  
but deliver us from the power of evil.**

**For you reign in the power and glory of life,  
light, and love, now and forever. Amen.**

## The Breaking of the Bread and the Pouring of the Cup

*(Brief words of institution are followed by actions in silence.)*

## The Elements Are Shared

*(After all are served, invite the people to look at one another and to behold the body of Christ in one another. A piece of bread may also be offered for the earth.)*

## A Brief Prayer and/or Chant of Thanksgiving

*(The service can conclude with the benediction and the sharing of the peace.)*

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# Call to Worship

Columns

# On Liturgy: The Written Word to Be Spoken, to Be Heard

Derrick McQueen



One of the earliest folios of selected letters of Paul

Sacred texts are a foundation of most faith traditions. In them discernible wisdom can be found that instructs the tenets of belief, faith, and even hope itself. Communities pride themselves in learning from and reading these resources in corporate settings. Let us for a moment personify these texts. It is worth noting that they carry a heavy responsibility on their shoulders. When a text enters a room in a community, the text can only hope that by being in the room it can be effectual in its purpose to create an “authentic encounter with the divine.”<sup>1</sup> Many faith traditions hold fast to the belief that the only sacred texts in the community are those passed down from ancestors through the generations. Even beyond the written word, sacred texts are touchstones for living life according to faith and belief and tools for discerning an ongoing and closer relationship with the divine source.

What, then, are the prayers and structures of liturgy if we ascribe the term *sacred* only to

historically agreed-upon texts? What is the relationship between written sacred texts and written liturgies in a worship service? For the purposes of this piece, might we consider written liturgical elements as consecrated? Considering that the word *sacred* connotes *holiness*, and that the word *consecrated* can be considered in context as something set aside and used in the performance of ritual, I suggest that both sacred texts and written liturgies hold holiness in common, expanding the application and purpose of the term. Sacred text, in this understanding, really does serve as the common written bond upon which communities agree. The consecrated words and actions of liturgy and liturgical writings bring communities through the worship ritual and an experience of holiness.

There are two specific similarities that both the sacred and consecrated words of reading and proclamation have in common, which need to be embraced—oral presentation and care for

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aural reception. These two elements are deeply connected to the senses and therefore present a significant opportunity for depth of engagement and understanding. Both the speaking and the hearing of the sacred and consecrated word can be deeply considered for each performance. Please do not be alarmed by the term *performance*, as it is not meant to imply play-acting for a desired audience entertainment. The term *performance* is used here in keeping with the work of performance studies, performance partially defined by Diana Taylor “in the broadest possible sense—as a process, praxis, and episteme, a mode of transmission, an accomplishment, and a means of intervening in the world.”<sup>2</sup>

Liturgical expressions are modes that attempt to intervene, disrupt, comfort, and even shift how people emerge from a worship experience. One of the most basic forms of liturgical expression is the spoken word; thus, we must be highly aware of both the oral presentation and the aural reception of words. How one speaks the words when reading and proclaiming texts matters. The nuances and shifts of ancient texts come to life in a new way with this focus. However, it is not just the speaker’s role to read or speak the words. It is also their responsibility to hear the words coming out of their mouth, to see how it lands on the ears of hearers, as it were, thereby effecting an almost improvisational freedom of creativity in the moment.

When attention is paid to oral and aural aspects of physically speaking essential texts to the community, a new understanding of meaning and power can come to both the reader and the listener. All sacred and consecrated texts deserve to be read aloud so that they can breathe and stretch into consciousness. One of the best examples of the way texts breathe when spoken is in the use of the notational term *Selah*, found in many psalms. There are several understandings of this term. It can be understood as a musical or tonal shift in the original presentation or an invitation to focus on the Hebrew letters of the words and what mysteries they might reveal, among others. One practical, modern way to use *Selah* in the reading and proclaiming of a text is to ask the question, “What is the shift in the tone of the psalm when *Selah* appears?”

Psalms 3, an eight-verse psalm, has three *Selah* notations within it. Without saying the word *Selah*,

a reader can simply pause to ask the question about the shift in prayer. Verses 1–2 clearly state the hopeless danger the psalmist finds themselves in. After a moment of silence, contemplate the next portion of the psalm. Indeed, the next piece of the psalm, verses 3–4, shifts to a sense of calm knowledge that although things are hopeless, God is still there and will protect them. And then there is the second *Selah*. Verses 5–7 assure the reader of God’s sustaining readiness to go after all enemies; and verse 8, a declaration of blessings, is followed by a final *Selah*, which completes the journey of the emotional prayer that ultimately delivers the promise of God’s blessing. Pausing in place of the *Selah* helps to draw the congregation into each of the shifts or pericopes, enabling space for a connection to form along these guideposts on a journey from despair to faithful conviction.

While the idea of including deep consideration for the oral presentation and aural reception of sacred and consecrated texts might read as a bit technical, it evokes great power within the worship ritual. The reading of the word becomes a proclamation itself, an invitation into holy contemplation about the mystery of the Holy Spirit and the ability of language to speak varied messages with the exact same words. Upon such contemplation, hearers often hear according to the needs that bring them to worship. For the reader who listens intently to what they are reading, a text can intervene into everyday life with profound holy movement as well.

At the top of page 62 is an image of an early folio of selected writings of Paul. Please notice the lack of punctuation and even the separation of words, indicating the way the text was read aloud. The ancient readers of these texts had to make rhetorical choices as they shared the purpose of these writings in their communities, thereby shaping the experience of Paul’s ministry for their hearers. This ancient practice of dramatic presentation of these letters to exhort, encourage, and even challenge is the same for the modern reader in worship today.

## Notes

1. “An authentic encounter with the divine” is how I describe the opportunity that carefully constructed liturgy and ritual can offer to a community.
2. Diana Taylor, *Performance* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 202.

# On Music: Musical Literacy and Faith Formation

Amy Cerniglia

An integral part of our faith formation, musical discipleship takes many forms. Just as general literacy empowers Christians to navigate the Word, musical literacy strengthens our worship. Without notation, worship can only include improvised or memorized music. While that offers great accessibility and flexibility in some settings, notation increases our independence, collaborative skills, and understanding of church music history. As daunting as this task may sound to worship arts directors and leaders pressed for time, our labor bears fruit for our church's next generation.

Before the advent of notation, music existed in every civilization, but the absence of a standardized system hindered its preservation and dissemination. In the Middle Ages, notation revolutionized the teaching and learning of music. John Calvin emphasized the importance of understanding music sung in worship to the triune God. As he wrote in the preface to the *Genevan Psalter, 1543*, “. . . it is necessary to remember that which St. Paul hath said, the spiritual songs cannot be well sung save from the heart. But the heart requires intelligence.” Calvin's desire for a greater understanding of music in worship led him to replace singing in Latin with hymns in the vernacular language.

Just as a person can learn new language skills at any age, Christians of all ages can grow in worship skills and musical arts. As Paul Hill wrote, “With surprisingly little effort, it is possible for the present-day church musicians to begin reclaiming the church's role as ‘patron of the arts’ simply by reasserting ourselves as church music educators, providing more comprehensive music education to our choir members.”<sup>1</sup> For people without access to music lessons or schools with funding for musical education programs, the church can step in the gap.

Reading skills help us to “play better” with one another as we glorify God together. Notation offers a common ground, a universal language connecting us with our siblings in Christ across nations and generations. Although some global music lends itself well to aural learning, such as a call-and-response pattern, much global hymnody is too complex for rote learning. And just as ensembles rely on sheet music to simplify the rehearsal process, music literacy provides pastors with more tools for collaborative and sensitive worship planning. While seminaries often help teaching elders discern appropriate hymn texts, seminaries generally don't address notation beyond the text. The ability to identify a range of notes can help pastors identify hymns that fit more easily into most vocal ranges. Time signatures and basic rhythmic values don't require a mastery of musical notation, but they can certainly guide pastors in the selection of accessible hymns that congregations can more easily sing.

Of course, no two people enter a church with the same background knowledge, experiences, or learning styles. A flexible approach can adjust to diverse backgrounds. The Royal School of Church Music in America offers musical education to children and adults with high-quality choral music, a structured vocal curriculum, and summer music courses. Other music directors may prefer the Kodály method, which begins to name musical elements as soon as musicians can internalize pitch and rhythmic pulse. *All Hands In: Drumming the Biblical Narrative* by Brian Hehn incorporates biblical stories with easy introductions to rhythmic patterns. Such a resource can serve as a valuable stepping stone by requiring only an understanding of rhythmic values, not reading pitches. Those who self-describe as lacking in natural rhythm, unable to “feel” the beat,

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may benefit from seeing the beat with the visual aid of note values.

While the majority in our congregations would not self-identify as musicians, all of us have an important voice in the body of Christ. In 1 Chronicles 25:5-7, Scripture reminds us of the church's role in training musicians for worship. Christians possess a valuable resource for such formation: our hymnals. In hymnals, robust theological texts are often paired with American folk tunes, allowing the ear to assist the eye in following notation. In many cases, the *Glory to God* hymnal also prints chord names above the staves. These chords provide a middle ground for musicians adjusting to the use of a hymnal or musical notation in general. For example, an instrumentalist relying on chord names to accompany a hymn can advance to reading the bass notes, knowing that the chords are still available as guard rails.

Most directors are already struggling with time limitations in rehearsal settings. Other opportunities for instruction, such as the Sunday hour after worship, might relieve directors of midweek stress and widen the welcome to newcomers that can't rehearse midweek. Regardless of timing, a class can build musical confidence without the pressure of

a rehearsal. After all, most of our church's music groups are rehearsing for regular music leadership in worship. The quietest worshipers with no ambitions of leading the congregation stand to gain the most by engaging in worship with new tools and growing trust in their own voices.

When we worship, we proclaim our faith in greater depth by more fully understanding the services we offer to God. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "The more we sing, the more joy will we derive from it, but, above all, the more devotion and discipline and joy we put into our singing, the richer will be the blessing that will come to the whole life of the fellowship from singing together."<sup>2</sup> More education in musical literacy can encourage congregations to learn independently, collaborate more fluidly, and worship the triune God with even greater joy.

#### Notes

1. Paul G. Hill, "Music Literacy Among Adults in Church Choirs," *The Choral Journal* 50, no. 5 (December 2009): 10.
2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (London: SCM Press, 1988).

# On Preaching: Fresh Readings of Ancient Texts

Lis Valle-Ruiz

When preachers have read and proclaimed the same texts over and over, preaching the same lectionary for several cycles over the years, we reach a point in which we yearn to find new messages in the same ancient texts. Some preachers choose to switch from the Revised Common Lectionary to another one, such as the Narrative Lectionary or a women's lectionary. These are important options, given that the RCL does not cover all the texts in the Bible, tends to avoid texts of terror and texts that empower women, and leads the preacher to certain predetermined interpretations in the way that the texts are clustered for each Sunday. There are more ways to find fresh messages from the Divine in the same ancient texts of whichever lectionary you are using.

There are many ways to rekindle your relationship with sacred texts that you have read and proclaimed many times before. Rigorous exegesis and thorough use of social, historical, and literary analysis of a sacred text are always important; and responsible use of cultural criticism, post-colonial lenses, and a wide range of other methods for biblical interpretation are vital as a preacher prepares to proclaim a text. I'll consider two additional methods for gathering new insight from familiar or often-preached texts: (1) using trauma theory as a lens, and (2) interviewing characters as sacred imagination. These additional methods of biblical interpretation for preaching are not substitutes for exegesis and textual analysis. Rather, these approaches expand the preacher's perception by inviting careful re-reading and re-examination of the text. The story of Thomas

in John 20:24-31 serves as example to demonstrate how these two approaches can work.

Trauma theory provides different lenses through which to interpret Scriptures. Books such as *The Body Keeps the Score* by Bessel van der Kolk, M.D., and *Trauma and Recovery* by Judith Hermann can serve as good points of entry to trauma theory to expand preachers' perspectives. For example, in looking at the Gospel reading for the second Sunday of Easter, the story of Thomas, using trauma theory as a lens means considering the trauma of the disciples, who have just witnessed their leader tortured and killed. Preachers may understand their behavior in light of this vicarious trauma: The disciples locked the doors. They were in "flight" mode, scared and hypervigilant, displaying some of the many possible responses to trauma. Meanwhile, Thomas had a reaction shared by many survivors: disbelief. Out of love, Jesus invites Thomas to put his finger into the wounds, an invitation that may cause Jesus to re-live the traumatic event or activate a traumatic memory. Jesus made himself vulnerable. Thomas was, like all other characters in the story, also dealing with his own trauma. Wounded himself, Thomas may have wounded his friends and his leader by denying them his belief and jeopardizing Jesus' bodily autonomy, thus interfering with the healing process of the others. Through the lenses of trauma theory, preachers may find more than a Jesus who scolded Thomas for not believing. Preachers may perceive a Jesus who is healing from the trauma of capital punishment and needs the gift of belief without having to

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re-live the traumatic event on his body, and who needs to reestablish his own safety through bodily autonomy. This different perception may lead to a sermon about trauma-informed care between the congregation to those who can identify best with Jesus because they are survivors of horrors. Indeed, it can lead to the exchange of trauma-informed care between members of congregations who are also survivors. The body of Christ, the church, can provide trauma-informed care beginning with believing survivors' accounts of their pain and extending freedom for people to make their own decisions about their bodies. For more information on how to be a trauma-informed congregation, you may visit the website of The Chicagoland Trauma Informed Congregations Network, or others like it.

Drawing on contemplative practices, dream work, and improvisational theater, another approach to interpret biblical texts is to cultivate sacred imagination through a method of interviewing characters. For example, looking again at the story of Thomas, preachers may choose to interview Jesus, Thomas, one or more of the disciples in the room, or all of them in rounds. To engage in this imaginative spiritual exercise, find a safe place, sit down (avoid crossing your legs or arms) and re-read the story. Then close your eyes, if you feel comfortable, and take a few deep breaths. Feel the air going deep down into your lungs, pushing your diaphragm to about two inches below your belly button. Do this slowly a few times and imagine that you travel in time to that first day of the week, one week after Jesus' resurrection, the day Jesus showed his wounds to Thomas. You may choose to hold the conversation

in your imagination, or you may choose to have the conversation through writing. If you choose writing, use your dominant hand to write your questions and use your nondominant hand to write the character's responses. Use the characters' responses to develop a sermon that includes your study of the text and your imaginative practice.

For example, in my imaginative practice, I saw Mary Magdalene, Peter, and John. Mary told me, "Peter should have understood Thomas better because Peter, too, wanted to see to believe. Peter and the other disciple did not believe me when I told them that I had seen the Lord. They went into the tomb to see for themselves. Today, I am just happy to see Christ again." Mary Magdalene's words in my sacred imagination led me to conclude that I see Christ in every vulnerable person who embraces even more vulnerability to meet the need of others. I see Christ putting other people's needs first with compassion, but also holding them accountable. One thing does not take away from the other. With this in mind, I could preach about noticing the needs of others and paying attention to where Christ self-manifests today. What did you see or hear in your imaginative practice?

There are many other ways to find fresh messages from the Divine in the same ancient texts found in any lectionary. Trauma theory as lens and interviewing characters using your sacred imagination can help you find new messages in sacred texts that you have read and proclaimed so many times before. Combined with exegesis, these and other approaches multiply preachers' insights as they read and proclaim texts again and again.

# On the Arts: Reflections on Art-Based Workshops for Pastors

Maria Fee

*I'm feeling the limits of words alone. I'm feeling the limits of a verbal tradition.*

—A Presbyterian pastor and workshop participant

In Protestant traditions, text and proclamation—spoken, sung, or silently read—are paramount to Christian formation. Broadening the phrase to include physical pronouncements involves the senses, thus why artistic processes help enlarge the incarnational dimensions of proclamation. This is one reason why I, a trained artist and theologian, decided to establish and facilitate a series of art-based, leadership-development workshops for pastors. Initially, I was interested in the ways creative tasks could benefit ministerial work. Inspired by research literature listing benefits of art-based training in managerial and educational sectors, I asked, why not extend such studies to the religious arena? Thanks to a Teacher-Scholar Grant from the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship,<sup>1</sup> the project expanded to profit worshipping communities. Eight volunteer pastors agreed to participate in workshops and implement a creative strategy within their church context.

Four workshops provided tangible models for life together. My intent was to pattern a safe space for church leaders to *experience* the ways art mediates connection to God, self, others, and the world and to empower them to use their experiences in their own contexts. While there is much to relate about the project—assignments, pedagogies, hypotheses, and findings—I keep to the topic of text and proclamation by sharing some of the art-based projects carried out by workshop participants in

their contexts. Their testimonies confirm the ways the visible profoundly communicates the invisible.

To commence junior high church camp, the pastor of a United Methodist congregation led a study of the Genesis creation accounts that incorporated a painting activity. Amazed by the process, one teen asked if they could continue studying the Bible this way! Artmaking, for this pastor, became a way to focus the attention of the youth she led, invite them to a broader understanding of God and self, and provide a visual vocabulary to reference in social interactions throughout the week.

The worship and creative director of a large, multilingual church spoke of the communication challenges when planning word-based, churchwide functions. For her, the art training illuminated art's capacity to "surpass any type of linguistic barriers." Consequently, during Advent her team displayed illustrated posters from Scott Erikson's *Honest Advent* series throughout the church campus with corresponding interactive stations for all to theologically reflect on the incarnation.

One of the workshop assignments was the construction of a self-portrait. A Presbyterian pastor decided to present his self-portrait as part of a sermon in which he noted the importance of the painted blue background in his work. The color represented waves, visually unifying collaged elements that signified various parts of his life. In a revelatory moment, he shared that the color blue epitomized God's grace for him. "No matter what I did in life or didn't do, I believe myself to be held in grace," he shared. While he showed his own work, the pastor noticed folks leaning in. "Their eyes were

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just on it," he said. The collage served as a sermon illustration, deepening the message for hearers, but it also tied the congregation to their spiritual leader. This connection is the reason why the rest of the church staff also created and shared their self-portraits at a retreat. "There is an immediate sort of vulnerability, and that is the space where trust is built," explained the pastor, who led the process noting "it really was an exercise in helping people open up."

The associate pastor of a Congregational church led a small group Bible study through engaging in a collage activity with participants. The materiality of the responses in the form of collage offered rich insights concerning the text *and* the members of the group. Suffused with a "sense of camaraderie and understanding," the depth of response surprised and pleased the church leader. One person realized she was a visual learner and shared, "To immerse myself in Scripture in a visual way was much more meaningful."

These art ventures are declarations. They exhibit faith in the material to mediate what is immaterial. Just as Jesus tutors by holding up bread and wine with the invitation to eat and drink, art calls us to be participants. No longer bystanders, we are invited through art to experience empathy and give material meaning to feelings of shame, forgiveness, dismay, lament, hope, joy, and gratitude. A workshop participant who was an Episcopal priest commented that the workshops helped reframe liturgical gestures as a way "to reinforce another reality." Just as the Lord's Supper places Christ at our tables, art hosts the Spirit of the living God. "The Holy Spirit moves through art and moves us spiritually," reflected one pastor, while another spoke of encountering layers of divine revelation through the workshop's collaborative endeavors.

Many find limited opportunities to exercise such holistic declarations of divine love using more than words. As one participant put it, "The only way you are allowed to be incarnational with your faith is either through evangelism, whatever that means

to you, or to volunteer somewhere." Theologian Willie Jennings argues that the church's "deepest life calling, our truth vocation," is helping folks "enter into the revolutionary power of creativity as its birthright." Jennings discusses creativity as a way of securing truth about the human condition while also hosting "the Holy Spirit in the expressive impulse of God."<sup>2</sup>

The church leaders who attended these art workshops stated various reasons for participating in the program, and their take-aways were just as wide-ranging. Yet all agreed that at the start, they felt intimidated by having to make and share their art. But despite this initial dismay, all felt they had gained a creative voice and expressed gratitude. They experienced congenial interactions and developed relationships that bound the group together to safely negotiate vulnerabilities. The aesthetic exercises became pathways to learn more about God, self, and others. "There is an element of trust necessary," mused a pastor who later facilitated a safe space for their church's youth group to make art as well.

To conclude, I quote the wise words of a participating chaplain, "We can only lead as far as we are willing to go." The workshops guided an intrepid group of pastors in a creative process to discover their vocations as artists in ministry. Validated as creative agents, they obtained the confidence to engage and develop the creativity of others. Together, they recovered their creative birthright, discovered avenues to God's abundant love, and further found ways to express and proclaim that good news through original activities.

#### Notes

1. The research was employed under the aegis of a Vital Worship Grant from the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, Grand Rapids, Michigan, with funds provided by Lilly Endowment Inc.
2. Willie James Jennings, "The Aesthetic Struggle and Ecclesial Vision," in *Black Practical Theology*, ed. Dale B. Andrews and Robert London Smith Jr. (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2015), 182.

# Call to Worship

Book Review

# *Preaching the Word: Contemporary Approaches to the Bible for the Pulpit*

Karoline Lewis

(Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2023)

*Reviewed by Nadine Ellsworth-Moran*

**P***reaching the Word* begins and ends as invitation. Here, you will find a hand extended for the journey through Karoline Lewis's chapters that promise not tips or gimmicks, but rather a call to conversation with "new dialogue companions in our homiletical journey." I can often tell how effective and engaging a book is for me by the amount of highlighter I use, and Lewis's book has, at this point, been heavily marked. Throughout the chapters, Lewis attempts to lift our eyes to the possible perspectives present in our Scripture. Quoting Justo González in her introduction, she writes, "Precisely because perspective cannot be avoided, when it is not explicitly acknowledged the result is that a particular perspective takes on an aura of universality."

In an effort to introduce homiletical perspectives that are still largely relegated to the fringes of biblical interpretation, this book not only brings fresh interpretations, new questions, and diverse conversation partners to a preacher's preparation, but it also affords the congregation an opportunity to receive and consider the "significant homiletical impact" these approaches may offer.

As a resource for preachers, Lewis invites readers to turn a gemstone of homiletical approaches toward the light to reveal nine facets for reflection: literary/narrative approaches; postcolonial biblical interpretation; feminist interpretation; African American interpretation; Latinx and Asian American interpretation; queer interpretation; ecological interpretation; the Bible and disability; and lastly, the Bible and trauma theory.

One of the strengths of this book is the deliberate and consistent layout of each chapter following the formula: introduction, summary of approach, sample text(s) (all of which come from the Gospel of John), homiletical implications, and further reading/resources. As an aside, Lewis is also the author of several other books, including a 2014 preaching commentary on the Gospel of John. She employs her extensive knowledge of this Gospel as she engages John's viewpoint, looking deeply into the narrative and its context from various perspectives.

Lewis's research and sourcing is transparent, and each new chapter invites further exploration, dialogue, and an embrace of vibrant, sometimes challenging, perspectives that will hopefully allow the preacher to develop a "generous homiletic." This is particularly beneficial for those pastors who, like me, may have consciously or unconsciously established well-worn patterns and perspectives that might just need shaking up from time to time.

Lewis's book is an excellent resource for those desiring to grow and expand their homiletic with an awareness of perspectives from the margins, with care and caution to avoid the danger of slipping into performative allyship or to speak from perspectives that are not one's own. Thinking critically about a text by taking a genuine and thoughtful look from a different perspective does not give license to presume you personally know what that lived experience may be if it is not your own. Lewis cautions about avoiding assumptions about the experience of another, as well, allowing for what she calls the "not knowing-ness" of those preaching from

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the outside. Lewis calls for readers and preachers/teachers receiving her work to examine their own fears, biases, and limited awareness as they approach texts from another's homiletic perspective. This does not mean we should avoid preaching that incorporates these homiletical perspectives, but it does call us to authentic and intentional reading that honors the perspective we are attempting to embrace as a community of faith and names it with respect and honesty.

If there is a weakness, it is found in the chapter on Latinx and Asian American interpretation. While there is a thematic thread of displacement and in-betweenness in both Latinx and Asian American hermeneutics, these categories are also distinctly different and include many distinct perspectives and identities within each of them. Experiences of displacement and otherness diverge as much or more as they converge among these perspectives. I appreciated the connection between these perspectives, but they deserved their own chapters in order to prevent them from being viewed as monolithic or interchangeable.

This critique aside, there is something important to be gleaned from each chapter. Chapters I found particularly engaging were "Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation" ("Jesus spoke, Jesus preached, as a colonized person and as a citizen of a colonized community"); "Queer Interpretation" (an embodied hermeneutic, drawing on incarnation, relationship, identity, and "unbinding"); "Ecological Interpretation" (questions of stewardship, understanding of *kosmos*, re-ordering of our relationship with a living planet); and "The Bible and Disability" (considerations on historical context in regard to sin; healing/cure; resurrection).

Lewis opened my eyes, mind, and heart to a variety of considerations and interpretations I had heretofore not explored. Having this opportunity to investigate my own biases and theological tendencies for interpretation will undoubtedly help me become a more well-rounded, homiletically inclusive, and thoughtful preacher. I hope that others called to ministry will seek out *Preaching the Word: Contemporary Approaches to the Bible for the Pulpit* and accept its invitation into conversation with these perspectives for their own benefit and for their congregations.



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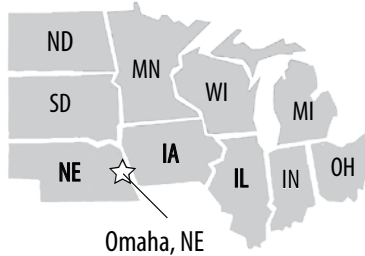
# 2024 ACDA Regional Conferences

## Northwestern



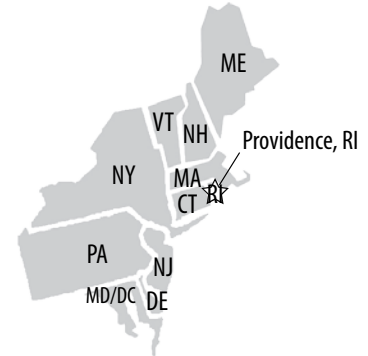
January 24 - 27, 2024  
Spokane, WA

## Midwestern



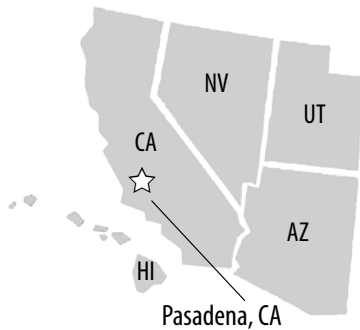
February 7-10, 2024  
Omaha, NE

## Eastern



February 28 - March 2, 2024  
Providence, RI

## Western



March 6 - 9, 2024  
Pasadena, CA

## Southwestern



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## Southern



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