



Lectionary vs. Sermon Series: DOES IT HAVE TO BE ONE OR THE OTHER?

By Bill Barnes

For a minute I thought I would have to run for the portable defibrillator! LeeAnn Inman, who had just recently joined our staff as the Minister of Spiritual Formation, looked like she was going to go into cardiac arrest when we told her what the Advent sermon series was going to be. It was July, and the clergy staff and I were bringing her up to speed about our plans for worship in the fall.

Our projected Advent theme was “It’s a Wonderful Life,” and the four Sundays and Christmas Eve each had a specific focus: “It’s a Wonderful Life: Endure It, Hope in It, Believe It, Trust It, Treasure It.” Each week of worship would feature a brief film clip from the classic movie starring Jimmy Stewart, and then an actor would come out depicting a character we had just seen in black and white. That actor would expand upon the theme for the day and light the corresponding Advent candle.

Now before *you* go running for the defibrillator yourself, you need to know the context of our ministry at St. Luke’s. We are located within the I-4 theme park corridor adjacent to Disney World, Sea

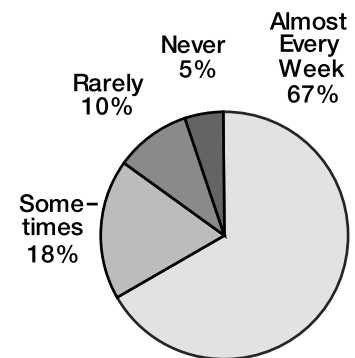
World, and Universal Orlando, to name just a few local attractions. Our constituency is heavily influenced by the entertainment industry and contemporary culture. For all of us who dare to preach, our unique contexts for ministry have implications for worship that we dare not ignore, no matter where we are.

LeeAnn had come from a large church in the Jacksonville, Florida area, where she had been the senior pastor, and the one responsible for sermon planning. She said (almost incredulously) “We are going to base Advent worship on a *movie*?” I passed her a paper bag to breathe into as we shared with her that the scripture lessons were actually the ones from the Revised Common Lectionary. As it turned out, the approach we used was especially effective as we related ancient texts to contemporary settings using classic film.

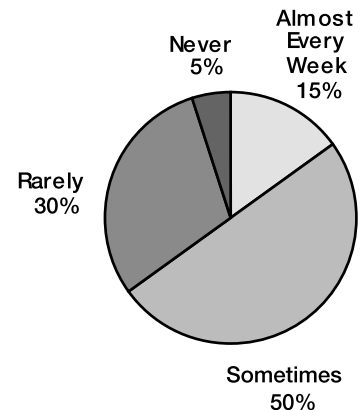
At St. Luke’s, we have found a very positive balance between lectionary preaching and thematic preaching. I have personally never understood why we preachers have to align ourselves with one style over and against the other. My seminary exalted the discipline of the lectionary as a way to guard against lopsided preaching, and we

Circuit Rider asked United Methodist pastors...

How often do you preach
using the lectionary?



How often do you preach
a thematic sermon series?



* Charts represent only the respondents saying they preach “almost every Sunday.”

Cokesbury Research, April 2008, n=336

were taught to look disapprovingly at those persons who ignored the three-year cycle of scripture. On the other hand, topical or thematic preachers regarded the lectionary crowd as slaves to an outdated method, instead of relating the scripture to “where people really are.” My personal experience of listening to Dr. J. Wallace Hamilton, who was my home church pastor, introduced me to the power of the spoken word. J. Wallace served for nearly four decades at Pasadena Community Church, United Methodist in St. Petersburg, Fla., and was widely regarded as one of the great preachers of the 20th century. He was a thematic preacher who brought the scripture alive for me and whose influence profoundly affected my openness to a call to ministry.

Throughout the years, I have used both methods of sermon planning. One of the added benefits of the lectionary is that persons will come to me almost amazed that their Sunday school lesson was “exactly the same as the sermon today!” Since most United Methodist curriculum is lectionary based, that is no surprise to me, but it always seems to delight others. On the other hand, the benefit of thematic preaching is that we are able to focus on particular subjects that strengthen a congregation: the vision and mission of the church, contemporary social or cultural issues that demand theological reflection and perspective, and issues of interpersonal relationships. That method, of course, means that any attempt at consistency in teaching and spiritual formation related to the sermon themes must be given plenty of lead time for appropriate planning and curriculum development by other members of the staff and laity.

The thing I am discovering in sermon planning is that it doesn't need to be exclusively one or the other. It can be both at the same time. Far from betraying scriptural integrity, thematic sermon series using the lectionary can be very rich, timely, and faithful to the scripture.

For Lent this year we used the lectionary to build a theme we titled: “Earth Tones: The Landscape of Lent.” Each week we chose one elemental concept to illustrate the theme:

Ashes: Ash Wednesday

Wilderness: The temptation of Jesus

Wind: Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus about the Spirit

Water: The Samaritan woman at the well

Mud: The healing of the blind man

Cave: The raising of Lazarus

Palms: The palms of praise and the palms that held the coins of betrayal

Stones: The stone rolled from the tomb and the stone that the builders rejected

Our Director of Emerging Arts worked with the themes to create amazing visual images in our worship spaces, the preachers were challenged to connect the traditional scripture lessons with contemporary issues facing God's people, and in the end, the congregation expressed their appreciation for what was perhaps the most effective and meaningful Lenten journey they had ever taken.

The biggest challenge to this kind of planning and preaching is to resist the temptation to eisegete the lectionary to fit the theme. Hermeneutical integrity demands that the first work be the exegesis of the texts. Only after that can the preacher begin to listen thoughtfully and prayerfully for a theme to express itself. A common mistake many of us make is deciding on the theme *first*, then looking for it in the texts. It is this practice that gives thematic preaching a bad name in the eyes of many lectionary-loyalists.

My approach is to assume that I will be preaching on each of the lectionary texts *without* a theme. As I do my initial exegesis of the lessons for a season, common threads or connections emerge, indicating the possibility for a unified theme. One must be careful not to force a theme upon the texts just for the sake of a theme. But when the hint of a theme is there, it's amazing what the creative process can produce!

In the end, LeeAnn was pleasantly surprised by the Advent outcome. She said, “It wasn't as bad as I thought it might be! In fact, it was actually quite rich.” And how could it help be anything but rich? It is, after all, the word of God. We just have to be careful how it is proclaimed.



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