

What about the Lectionary?

An Eco-Justice Critique

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In many congregations and denominations, a lectionary provides a framework of scripture readings that shape the weekly liturgy and preaching. The [Revised Common Lectionary](#) is widely used in Protestant congregations, and a vast range of lectionary-based resources are available to support pastors. I acknowledge that the Revised Common Lectionary can expose preachers and congregations to a diverse set of Bible texts, and that Christian unity can be enhanced by the study of shared worship themes.

However, there are elements of the Revised Common Lectionary's structure and purpose which can make it difficult for lectionary preachers to consistently and intentionally address this time of great change and crisis in the context of worship. A worship planner committed to an eco-justice religious perspective will be operating from a set of assumptions and goals that are different from the Revised Common Lectionary (and the Roman Catholic lectionary of 1968, which is the basis for the RCL).

An eco-justice worship perspective is built on theological and pastoral convictions that are different from those of the Revised Common Lectionary.

- **We must come to worship with questions formed by our contemporary experience.**
While there are core parts of the human and spiritual experience that are universal and consistent, our modern context is profoundly different than that of the biblical world. The realities of current human numbers and technological power, our alienation from the natural world, and the ways in which our culture overwhelm God's creation force us to raise new questions. If worship and preaching *always* begin with texts selected to tell the biblical story in traditional terms, it will be difficult for churches to consider questions of faith that would have been unimaginable thousands of years ago – or even a few decades ago. Also, we must bring to the worship experience insights and questions that tap into a full range of revelation and insight. Scripture is a normative and important source for the church, but not the only one. (The Wesleyan heritage speaks of the "quadrilateral" of four theological sources: scripture, tradition, reason and experience.) If a lectionary's selection of scripture texts always defines worship themes, then we are not able to raise fresh questions, or be informed by a full range of sources.
- **We must look to a complete, Trinitarian, experience of God.**
Trinitarian theology celebrates the three "persons" of God: the creator and sustainer, Christ the redeemer, and the Spirit of life and revelation. We must be open to all of these aspects of God as we seek to find hope and guidance in these times. (The Trinity, of course, does not exhaust the ways in which we experience God. "Wisdom" is a rich biblical expression of divine will and activity. Other faith traditions in our religiously pluralistic world also have valuable teachings and practices that can inform and enhance Christian belief.) The Revised Common Lectionary is more Christological than Trinitarian. (William Willimon wrote that the lectionary's "primary hermeneutical criterion is heavily, relentlessly Christological.") The lectionary is structured around the church year, a sequence of seasons related to the person of Jesus. The gospel readings are the "controlling texts" that define what other passages are read, and those gospel readings define how themes from other passages will be lifted up. The creator God who cherishes and sustains all things, and the Spirit that enlivens all flesh, are

not prominent in the lectionary's selections. An eco-justice approach will be more richly Trinitarian.

- **We must draw richly and deeply from the *entire* Biblical witness.**

As we seek to find meaning for these times, and as we seek to meet God with genuine worship, we will need to look to all parts of the biblical record to see if there is fresh and relevant witness. An eco-justice preacher will lift up sections of the Bible that are not well represented in the Revised Common Lectionary. The prophetic biblical witness – bringing the word of God into a situation where the community has turned from God and the covenant – is minimized by the RCL's strong emphasis on a Christocentric promise of hope and newness. An eco-justice lens will explore prophetic texts that speak of alienation and consequences.

In the Lectionary's design, the Psalms are *never* used for preaching. The Lectionary places these beautiful and challenging poems in a secondary role, where they are read or sung as a congregational response to the first reading of the day (usually the reading from Hebrew scripture). The Psalms' celebration of nature, their diverse voices about God in creation and history, and their passionate expressions of joy, love, hope and anger are edited down into short snippets which are never developed in sermons. Respect for the whole Bible will look to the Psalms as legitimate scripture that can shape preaching and theological reflection.

The Bible has many passages affirming and celebrating the natural world, and describing the "integrity of creation" beyond any human use. These passages, especially in Hebrew scripture, are often ignored or minimized in the Revised Common Lectionary, and deserve much more attention.

- **Hearing transformational Good News that is sufficient for these times requires that we wrestle with challenges that will be difficult and painful.**

Christian faith and worship always brings us to hope and joy. Getting there is not always easy, though. Lament about the state of our lives and the world, confession and repentance, transformation and rebirth are difficult and painful. Worship, at times, will require us to enter into emotions and thoughts that we would rather avoid. An eco-justice preacher will – with care and pastoral sensitivity – present challenges that cut to the heart of these extraordinary times. Several commentators on the Revised Common Lectionary have noted that it is so eager to get to "good news" that it often skips past the challenges and critiques that make the news of an alternative "good." In order to read four lessons every Sunday, the Lectionary keeps each of those passages very short, often cutting out sections that are difficult to hear or understand.

The Revised Common Lectionary has, in many ways, been a helpful and meaningful gift to the Christian church. It is, however, better suited to "ordinary times" without exceptional new circumstances. An eco-justice theological perspective sees contemporary issues of social justice and ecological disruption as essential matters for the church to address in and through worship. It sees humanity as a part of the interconnected Earth community, and sees the saving work of God in Christ as encompassing the whole of creation. To bring this perspective into worship, a faithful preacher will need to, at least on occasion, step away from the Lectionary to use other texts and other narratives.