

The lectionary: What is it? Where is it?!?! Why is it?!?!

- A lectionary is a regular rotation of Scripture readings, featuring portions of the Old Testament, including a Psalm; the non-Gospel portions of the New Testament; and the Gospels. The word “lectionary” comes from the Latin word “lectio,” which means “to read.”
- Why use a lectionary, instead of allowing the Holy Spirit to guide the choice of readings on a given day?
 - Similar to the reason we plan worship! It provides a structure, pattern, and repetition that helps build “scriptural muscle memory.”
 - Sadly, most people don’t read the Bible regularly or in a disciplined, orderly fashion. They pop in and out. Or they get brief snippets in devotions. Or they rely on what they learned in Sunday School: The Bible’s Greatest Hits! The lectionary exposes us to a much wider range of readings. It often lingers in one book, so we hear “the rest of the story.”
 - Using a lectionary helps lay leaders, especially during a vacancy, to plan ahead. They know what sort of hymns might fit best on a given day. They can alert lay readers, supply pastors, etc. regarding the lessons. It simplifies the secretary’s job, too!
 - This of course doesn’t forbid or prevent pastors from choosing to preach a sermon series on Grace, Prayer, the Book of Deuteronomy, etc. But if your church has a vacancy and you are relying on supply preachers, possibly an interim, and/or lay preachers, a lectionary takes the pressure off them to come up with Bible readings and reflections “on their own,” much less to map out a multi-week series!
- A complication: there isn’t just ONE lectionary. There are several. Some of them overlap. It can get messy. Keep listening!
- Many years ago, a one-year cycles of readings was very common. Some churches still use it – or have gone back to it.
 - Upside:
 - It greatly simplifies worship planning!
 - People get a deeper, if not broader, exposure to Scripture.
 - Downside:
 - It can be more difficult to find supporting resources. For example, I don’t provide hymn suggestions and intercessory prayers for a one-year lectionary.

- It is heavy on “The Bible’s Greatest Hits.” You get a lot from Genesis, Isaiah, Matthew, and Paul’s epistles. You get much less of, say, Peter’s Epistles, the Gospel of Mark, or Nehemiah.
- Most churches that use a lectionary have gone to a three-year cycle.
 - Upside:
 - This exposes people to a much larger portion of the Bible.
 - It allows for some “continuous reading” – either built-in or as an option in the “green seasons” – so you *can* build a sermon series around, say, 2 Corinthians, 1 Samuel, etc.
 - Catholics, mainline Protestants, and some community and/or evangelical churches follow a lectionary. So on many Sundays, lots of Christians are hearing the same passages from God’s Word, which is pretty cool.
 - It also means there are many supporting resources from publishing houses, online Bible or worship planning sites, and the stuff many of you get from me.
 - Downside:
 - There’s more than one 3-year lectionary out there. Sometimes most or all of the lessons are identical, sometimes they’re slightly different, sometimes one or more are totally different from another widely used lectionary.
 - That means you better know *which* lectionary you’re using when you invite a visiting pastor to preach!
 - It is more complex: you have to remember what “year” you’re in, and there are different ways of determining what the readings are for the “green Sundays” in the Epiphany and Pentecost seasons.
 - That, in turn, makes it trickier to go back in your files to see what you did three or six years previously.
- Each year of any three-year lectionary focuses on one of the “synoptic” (seeing from the same eyes) Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Especially in the year of Mark (it’s the shortest Gospel by 5 or more chapters!), there are also selections from the Gospel of John.
- Often, the Old Testament reading echoes something in the Gospel. During Advent, Christmastide, Lent, Eastertide, and on festival Sundays, all the readings may touch on related themes. During the “green seasons,” it’s

common to trek through, say, one of Paul's epistles, or First Kings, to give people a more comprehensive exposure to those books.

- There are differences in lectionaries, though!
 - The LBW lectionary is outdated. It represents the original "common lectionary" drawn up by multiple denominations about 50 years ago. You can still use it, but there aren't any supporting resources anymore, and I don't follow it when I compile my hymn suggestions. I'm already using the two most common lectionaries in Lutheran churches!
 - ELW and Sundays and Seasons features the "Revised Common Lectionary (RCL)." Sola Publishing and the Missouri Synod use a *variation* of the RCL that doesn't shy away from some tougher Scriptural passages. The Revised Common Lectionary emphasizes themes of grace, joy, praise, and inclusion, and sometimes skirts themes of law, obedience, sin, and judgment.
 - Sometimes the lectionaries simply divide up the Gospel differently, so one may be off a week from the other. Or they may choose different Old Testament or Psalm passages even if they use the same Gospel reading! It gets confusing for me, as I try to present hymn suggestions knowing that different lectionaries *and* hymnals are being used.

On to some hands-on stuff!

- Many hymnals put the Sunday lectionary (and often one for daily reading) in the front of the book, even before the different orders of worship. I'll show you some examples. The church year calendar from Sola also lists the readings for that church year. The bulletin inserts that have the prayer of the day and the Bible passages are following the lectionary used by whoever has published it.
- We'll walk through some examples, so please get out a copy of ELW, LSB, or the Sola church calendar to refer to as we continue. (Reminder: the lectionary in the front of the LBW is the older Common Lectionary, not the REVISED Common lectionary in widespread use!)
- The hymnal example I'll use is from ELW. Turn to page 18. This section is called "Propers: Sundays and Principal Festivals." Propers refers to the

readings and supporting texts that are “proper” to that day in the church calendar.

- The Propers are divided by seasons of the church year (aren’t you glad you know them?!), then by reference to which year (A-Matthew; B-Mark; C-Luke) you’re in. Not sure? Simple, you can Google it!
- The Biblical texts – and sometimes, an alternate for one or more – are listed, as is the appropriate Prayer of the Day that comes near the beginning of the service. Pretty straightforward! The Christmastide readings are, as well.
- Now turn to ELW p.22, “Time After Epiphany.” You’ll note in small print that such-and-such Sunday after Epiphany falls between certain dates on the secular calendar, which makes your life a little easier. You’ll also see that those Sundays are designated “Lectionary 1 (Baptism of Our Lord” through “Lectionary 8”. It simply designates those Sundays – and the designation will continue after Holy Trinity Sunday when the long green Pentecost season begins.
- If you have a Sola calendar or LSB handy, you’ll see that the Sundays after Epiphany are just... the Sundays after Epiphany. However, in how things dovetail with the green season of Pentecost, you could rightly begin with the first “Green Sunday” after Epiphany – the 2nd Sunday after the Epiphany – and call it “PROPER 1.”
- The LSB and Sola will enumerate all the green Sundays within the Epiphany and Pentecost season that way. LSB/Sola’s PROPER 1 is the same as ELW/RCL’s LECTIONARY 2, but the enumeration in the Pentecost season diverges somehow, because when you get to Christ the King Sunday, it’s PROPER 29 in Sola/LSB but LECTIONARY 34 in RCL/ELW! There are some things that just have to be accepted as a mystery. Stick with one lectionary, note the designations, and say Amen!
 - In ELW for the season after Pentecost, it tells you what “LECTIONARY” lessons to use, based on 1-week “windows”. If the first few offerings are for dates that come before Holy Trinity, ignore them and use the stuff for the appropriate Easter season Sunday, or Pentecost, or Trinity Sunday. **After** Holy Trinity, pick up with the appropriate “week window” in the Pentecost season. Got that?

- Why does all this happen – or matter? Well, in the original Common Lectionary (used in LBW), there were lessons used ONLY during the Epiphany season, and if Easter was early, too bad, you missed the last few that year. Ditto for the Pentecost season. There was no overlap or continuation. The RCL and the revision of it used by LSB and Sola have one “common pool” of readings for “green Sundays.” If you don’t finish them in the Epiphany season, no worries, you’ll pick them up in the Pentecost season. You’ll do ALL of the “pool of readings” during the year, every year – but some years a lesson you heard in late Epiphany won’t be heard until early Pentecost season a few years later!
 - **WARNING:** What was once the 13th Sunday after Pentecost is now simply a Sunday in ordinary time. **AND** the lessons for THIS year’s 13th Sunday after Pentecost may, in 3 years, be different, because *this* year it may be Proper 16/Lectionary 21, but in 3 years, or 3 years ago, it might have been Proper 14/Lectionary 18 because of when Easter landed.
 - That makes it harder to flip back in the files to a particular Sunday in the church year – who knows if the lessons were the same – as you pick out hymns, etc.!
 - Which is why getting resources from trusted sources that consistently use and properly designate the different dates is important; they’ve done that work for you.
- **ON THE PLUS SIDE:** Apart from that confusion surrounding late Epiphany and the early part of Pentecost, all you have to do as you plan a season of worship is to look for those “Week Windows” – say, on p. 45 of ELW, you know you need to send the Scriptures out to the musicians, secretary, and preacher for Sunday, Aug. 23, 2026. You see the heading, “Sunday, August 21-27,” and you’re good to go. You look at stuff I send out, and you’ll see the Aug. 23/Pentecost 13/Proper 16/Lectionary 21 heading. Bingo.
- Why do I bother explaining all of this to you?
 - It allows you to be proactive as you plan worship. You KNOW what Sundays you’re mapping out; you KNOW what the dates and lectionary designations are. You feel confident about selecting hymn,

- choir anthem, children's message, Bible study of the Sunday readings, etc. You can clarify questions from supply pastors, lay leaders, etc.
- You can more easily use online resources, as well as the material I send out in batches.
 - If you need to "look back" to what hymns, anthems, sermons, etc., were used in the past, you have the tools to do so without getting too bogged down or confused.
 - If you aren't using bulletin insert services, you need to feel confident "going it alone". Especially if you're a very small church with a tight budget, you need to lighten the secretary's burden of sussing these things out, cutting and pasting the correct Scriptures for the lectors (and the bulletin or power point slides), and sending correct info to a preacher.
- Okay, we've covered topics like: Why worship; the shape and flow of the liturgy; non-communion worship options; the church year; and the lectionary. Next time we'll talk about hymn selection. We'll look at the fine print at the bottom of hymns in the hymnals – and at those obscure indexes in the back. We'll discuss how to introduce new hymns, how to substitute more familiar tunes, and how to teach unfamiliar ones. All without too much drama or complaining... well... maybe!