A Preacher’s Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series

THEMATIC PLANS FOR YEARS A, B, AND C

Compiled by Jessica Miller Kelley

Order Now from Your Preferred Retailer

[Logos of various retailers]
Contents

xi  Foreword by Amy K. Butler

xv  Using This Resource

YEAR A

3  Advent/Christmas Series: A Geography of Salvation
   Six Parts: First Sunday of Advent through First Sunday of Christmas, including Christmas Eve
   *The path to Bethlehem with landmarks from the book of Isaiah.*
   KATHERINE WILLIS PERSHEY

12  Epiphany Series: New Year, Same Promises
    Six Parts: First Sunday after Epiphany through the Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
    *Our resolutions fade, but God’s promises last forever.*
    KATHERINE WILLIS PERSHEY

21  Lenten Series: Boot Camp for the Soul
    Six Parts: First Sunday in Lent through Palm Sunday
    *Lent as preparation for a greater challenge still to come.*
    WINNIE VARGHESE
30 Easter Series: Closer and Closer
Seven Parts: Easter Sunday through the Six Sundays of Easter
The resurrection means deeper relationships with God and one another.
WINNIE VARGHESE

40 Summer Series 1: God’s Creative Connection
Six Parts: Pentecost through Proper 9
The creative work of the Spirit on Pentecost began way back in Genesis.
JACQUELINE J. LEWIS

50 Summer Series 2: Broken—Good News for Tough Times
Six Parts: Proper 10 through Proper 15
Hope and encouragement in difficulty with Paul’s letter to the Romans.
JACQUELINE J. LEWIS

59 Fall Series 1: No Fair!
Three Parts: Proper 18 through Proper 20
God’s idea of fairness is fortunately very different from ours, the Gospel of Matthew shows.
BRIAN ERICKSON

65 Fall Series 2: The Enemies of Gratitude
Five Parts: Proper 21 through Proper 25
A stewardship series exploring the things that keep us from being content and grateful.
BRIAN ERICKSON

74 Fall Series 3: The Good News about Death
Four Parts: All Saints’, Proper 27 through Proper 29 (Reign of Christ)
Facing a difficult topic as people with resurrection hope.
BRIAN ERICKSON
YEAR B

83 Advent/Christmas Series: Coming Soon
Six Parts: First Sunday of Advent through First Sunday of Christmas, including Christmas Eve
The expectation and arrival of the Messiah is a grand, movie-like epic.
THERESA CHO

92 Epiphany Series: Jesus, Man of Mystery
Six Parts: First Sunday after Epiphany through Transfiguration Sunday
Who is this Jesus, who tries to keep his identity a secret?
THERESA CHO

101 Lenten Series: Covenant
Six Parts: First Sunday in Lent through Palm Sunday
Trusting in God’s everlasting covenant with us.
PAUL ROCK

112 Easter Series: Belong, Behave, Believe
Six Parts: Easter Sunday through the Sixth Sunday of Easter
Reversing the typical order of entry into faith—you belong even before you believe.
PAUL ROCK

123 Summer Series 1: God at Work
Six Parts: Proper 4 through Proper 9
God’s gracious actions as seen through the lives of Samuel and David.
MIHEE KIM-KORT

132 Summer Series 2: No Longer Strangers
Six Parts: Proper 10 through Proper 15
The keys to living as a community of faith, shown by the letter to the Ephesians.
MIHEE KIM-KORT
142  Fall Series 1: A Faith That Works
Five Parts: Proper 17 through Proper 21
The book of James shows us how to live our faith in action.
MAGREY R. DEVEGA

150  Fall Series 2: The Upside-Down Kingdom
Four Parts: Proper 22 through Proper 25
Shocking reversals lead to true discipleship, the Gospel of Mark tells us.
MAGREY R. DEVEGA

157  Fall Series 3: Gifts of Love
Four Parts: Proper 26 through Proper 29 (Reign of Christ)
A stewardship series on giving from the heart.
MAGREY R. DEVEGA

YEARM C

167  Advent/Christmas Series: Living “In Between”
Six Parts: First Sunday of Advent through First Sunday of Christmas, including Christmas Eve
We wait in the liminal state between Christ’s first and second comings.
ROBERT S. DANNALS

177  Epiphany Series: A Light to Enlighten the Nations
Nine Parts: Epiphany through Transfiguration Sunday
Christ shines as a light beyond Israel, to the whole world.
ROBERT S. DANNALS

192  Lenten Series: God on the Move
Seven Parts: First Sunday in Lent through Easter Sunday
Exploring God’s work through the travels and teachings of Jesus.
JESSICA LAGRONE

204  Easter Series: Surprise! The Unexpected Acts of God
Seven Parts: Second Sunday of Easter through Pentecost
JESSICA LAGRONE
216  Summer Series 1: Intervention

Four Parts: Proper 6 through Proper 9

*We serve a God who sees, cares, and—at times—intervenes in human affairs.*

CLEOPHUS J. LARUE

223  Summer Series 2: Action Required

Four Parts: Proper 10 through Proper 13


CLEOPHUS J. LARUE

230  Summer Series 3: Pillars of Faith

Four Parts: Proper 14 through Proper 17

*What does it mean to have faith, to trust in things not seen?*

CLEOPHUS J. LARUE

236  Fall Series: What Disciples Do

Twelve Parts: Proper 18 through Proper 29 (Reign of Christ)

*Christ’s followers are known not as much by what they believe as what they do.*

MARTIN THIELEN

253  Calendar of Sundays

260  Contributors
When I was engaged in discerning my first call to lead a congregation, I remember being consumed with thoughts about how to answer the committee's interview questions, reading bylaws and constitutions, researching appropriate compensation for a change in cost of living, and thinking about how my family would adjust to a new location and congregation.

What I do not recall—not at all—is thinking about preaching. Sermons. The activity I would engage in almost every single week of the year, the vehicle by which my new congregation would come to know my perspective and trust my leadership, the most effective vehicle for teaching and leading a congregation.

Why this was, I don’t really know, except to say that in my previous experience as an associate pastor, preaching was an occasional task, usually assigned for the weeks after Easter and Christmas and the least-attended Sunday of the year, most often sometime toward the beginning of August.

I also remember the feeling of panic—OK, dread—that settled over me about three weeks into that first pastorate. I said to a friend, “I just can't believe they expect me to get up there and say something every single week! I already said everything I learned in Sunday school, vacation Bible school, and seminary!”

She answered, “That’s what the text is for.”

What she meant, of course, was the Bible. Even most mediocre preachers know that the sermon every Sunday is not meant to showcase what you know; it’s meant to delve deeply into Holy Scripture, to engage a text that has guided people of faith for centuries, and to bring the deep and eternal truths of that text to bear on the realities of our lives and our world. But how?
I’m now engaged in round four of preaching the three-year cycle of texts assigned by the Revised Common Lectionary. This cycle of assigned texts is used by much of the Christian world to guide the rhythm of the church year and in planning worship. Naturally, the possibility for coherence, synergy, and unity is enhanced when the preacher jumps on the bandwagon too.

I chose to use the lectionary to guide my first few years of preaching for the reason I mentioned above: every week I found myself at a loss about where to even begin crafting a sermon. What I’ve discovered in the years since that initial decision are other, powerful reasons—both for myself as a preacher and for the congregations I’ve served—to continue this conversation with the passages of the Revised Common Lectionary.

The first is the truth effective preachers struggle to remember: preaching is not about me. Were I to choose topics reflecting my current interest or passages I randomly prefer, I’d soon veer from the challenging discipline of engaging an assigned text and discerning its resonance for the context I serve. Second, while some might find a tedium in the cycle back to the same texts every three years, this experience has taught me in practice a very real truth of our Holy Scripture: there are depths to be mined, the richness of which I will never fully explore in my lifetime.

Connection with colleagues in both practical and spiritual ways has been a third gift of lectionary preaching. Every year for the past twelve years I’ve gathered with the same five colleagues to plan preaching for the year ahead. Through our shared conversation and planning we develop the kind of deep relationship that can remind us each of our faith and our calling, and support us through the difficult work of leading God’s people.

Leading God’s people in the local church is not a task, as we know, for the faint of heart. Local congregations constantly face the challenge of moving beyond immediate conflict, concern, and maintenance to think about the work of the church in the world. The rhythm of the lectionary cycle broadens our understanding of ourselves to include the church universal, congregations of Christians all over the world who gather the same exact Sunday to read the same texts and to explore their relevance for the context in which they live.

I’ve heard colleagues explain why they prefer to avoid the lectionary: people respond better to thematic preaching, sermon series on a particular topic. Folks don’t want a homiletical study on the book of Job, friends will say. They want “Five Steps to a Happy Marriage.” They have to surrender the rich experience of preaching the lectionary, they argue, in order to give people what they want.
This reasoning is problematic for me, fundamentally because of the dangerous theological assumption that church is about giving people what they want. It’s not. But this argument also assumes that lectionary preaching and series preaching are incompatible. And that’s just not true, either.

In fact, though I am a dedicated lectionary preacher, I have experienced what my colleagues have told me to be true: people like series—in fact, more than like. People in the pews engage at a deeper level with a “handle” to hang onto. If the pastor can shape the common worship life of the people in ways that the congregation can engage, the corporate experience of worship and the larger life of the church are richer and more resonant.

Like most things in life, there’s no exclusive dichotomy between preaching the lectionary and building thematic arcs into the worshiping life of the congregation. A good preacher should do both. I have found that when we consider assigned texts with an eye toward the rhythm and life of the individual communities we serve, the pressing concerns of the world around us, and the deep, universal truths of Christian faith, themes begin to emerge with a clarity one might not have imagined possible.

At one congregation I served, the anticipation of these three- or four-week themes became a source of joy and community building for all of us. We’d work together to find a visual expression of the theme; we’d build discipleship and mission opportunities in conjunction with the theme; and at the end of the year we’d take our logos and themes and create a piece of art to reflect that year of life together.

Preaching the lectionary thematically may be a whole new way of homiletical expression, an outside-the-box invitation for a largely unchurched crowd to learn the rhythms and richness of the lectionary and explore the many ways the ancient text intersects our modern lives. With this innovative use of the lectionary in preaching, we’ve discovered once again new possibilities for engaging the ancient text in ways that build mature disciples and rich, transformational community.

Amy K. Butler
Senior Minister, The Riverside Church, New York
September 2015
Some church leaders love the Revised Common Lectionary for the consistency it brings to proclamation and education across congregations and denominations. Others consider lectionary preaching boring and limiting.

Some church leaders prefer to preach in topical series, crafting sermons that explore a book of the Bible, a meaty section of Scripture, or a significant theme in Christian living over a period of weeks or even months. Others say series preaching is hokey or contrived, and that choosing one’s own texts biases a preacher toward his or her favorite passages.

A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series is designed to offer the best of both worlds with this comprehensive manual of sermon series ideas designed to frame consecutive weeks of lectionary texts into seasonal and short-term series. Taking into consideration both the liturgical calendar and the secular calendar, this resource, using the Revised Common Lectionary, includes plans for twenty-six thematic sermon series that celebrate holy days and seasons and respond to typical patterns of church attendance, maximizing visitor retention and member engagement.

Twelve experienced preachers from five denominations—some dedicated lectionary preachers, others accustomed to topical series—accepted the creative challenge of developing these thematic series plans using the assigned readings of the lectionary. You will find here series studying specific books of the Bible and significant biblical figures, as well as lessons for discipleship from across the Bible’s sections and genres. You may wish to use these outlines as they are, adapt for your congregation’s needs, or get inspired to design your own thematic series from the lectionary.
What’s Included

Each of the twenty-six series plans includes:

- A series overview, introducing the overall message of the series
- A chart outlining the sermon title and focus Scripture for each week of the series, along with a very brief description of each sermon’s theme
- Tips and ideas for the series, with suggestions for worship elements, visuals, fellowship activities, and outreach efforts that enhance the congregation’s engagement with the series topic
- Sermon starters for each Sunday, to summarize the week’s message, prompt your research and writing process, and offer illustrations to enhance your preaching

In the back of this volume, you will find a calendar listing the Sundays for Years A, B, and C for three lectionary cycles, from the 2016–17 liturgical year (Year A) all the way to 2024–25 (Year C). This nine-year calendar enables you to plan your preaching schedule to make use of all the series plans this book has to offer, regardless of when you begin to use it.

You will also find that not every Sunday is included in a series. There are breaks between some series, allowing for quirks in the liturgical calendar (years when there are seven or more Sundays between Epiphany and Ash Wednesday, for example) and for weeks you may wish to have a guest preacher, special service, or other stand-alone sermon.

While this resource respects the liturgical calendar, and the lections designed to accompany them, a few exceptions are made for floating holy days like Trinity Sunday and special days that may fall on weekdays but be observed on a Sunday (Epiphany and All Saints’ Day, for example). In those cases, the assigned lections for the special day may be substituted for the regularly scheduled Proper lections, or vice versa.

Making the Most of a Series

Exploring a theme or book of the Bible across several weeks (as short as three weeks and as long as twelve, in this resource) gives congregants and visitors a memorable handle to latch onto from week to week. Knowing what is being preached on the following week keeps people engaged, coming back, and telling friends. Like a television show or miniseries, preaching in series can create a “don’t want to miss it” desire to be there for each week of worship.

To maximize the impact of each series:
• *Use consistent visuals.* Even without a dedicated graphic design person in your church, you can create one image or typographic treatment for the series that can be used on your printed materials (bulletins, flyers, etc.) and digital media (website, Facebook page, or worship screen if you use one). Some of the “tips and ideas” sections of series plans include ideas for altar displays and other visual elements to enhance the worship space.

• *Go beyond the sermon.* We all know that worship and spiritual growth do not hinge entirely on the sermon. Incorporate the theme when planning music and special moments in the service like testimonies or dramas. Plan special events at which congregation members can discuss or put into practice the ideas being preached on in the series. Many “tips and ideas” sections have suggestions for such events.

• *Spread the word.* Visitors may be more likely to give your church a try if they know an upcoming service will be addressing a topic or question they have wondered about. Promotion of the series can be done through church newsletters, posters, special mailings, and social media. The week before the series begins, send a special email about the series to all members, encouraging them to attend and asking them to forward the email to family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers.

Order Now from Your Preferred Retailer