

“How to Preach from the Lectionary”

Leader’s Guide

A Few Ideas from Bob Sheldon

Combatting the tyranny of the “Blank Page.” One of the most intimidating things that we pastors face is that proverbial “blank page.” Every week, we sit down to begin another week’s worship—and that blank page just laughs at us! Some of us hunt around for some inspiration; others just think “I’ll get to it tomorrow.” One of my early mentors wisely advised me: “The earlier in the week you finish your sermon, the more you will enjoy being a pastor.” These resources are designed to provide a starting point, where we can build upon what others have begun. No more blank pages!

Plans will help greatly. Most people love a rhythm. Like in most of life, having a plan makes worship preparation more manageable and hopeful. These resources will hopefully provide you with a beginning point for your personal planning. Personally, I like to begin with the common lectionary for reasons I will mention below. But feel free to adjust and adapt the materials for your personal style and needs. Sometimes, I have used a summer series or some other special emphasis along the way, just to mix it up a little. But in forty years of preaching, I have found the common lectionary to be a tried-and-true friend.

The Common Lectionary is a great place to start your planning. The Common Lectionary is a three-year cycle of scripture readings that walks the congregation through much of the Bible, including all three synoptic gospels. The years are listed: A (Matthew); B (Mark); and C (Luke). The lectionary repeats each three-year cycle, and follows the church year (Advent, Lent, Pentecost, etc.). Each Sunday has four readings: Old Testament, Psalm, Epistle, and Gospel. This means you have plenty of options for worship readings and sermon subjects.

The lectionary begins with scripture. I like using the lectionary to guide my preaching because it helps me to begin with scripture, rather than some idea rattling around my brain in search for a proof text. Reading the scriptures for the week focuses my attention onto these holy words that may hopefully encourage me to think, write, and say things that are not already rattling around in my brain, and inspire me to take a leap of faith in new, uncharted sermons.

The lectionary inspires personal discipline. Another nice attribute of following the lectionary readings is that it also encourages me to move beyond my “favorite” subjects and explore ancient ideas in need of a modern application. The lectionary makes it necessary for clergy and congregations to deal with texts of all kinds in the Bible, even some that are not easy to preach. With four weekly readings, you have lots of options and opportunities to stretch and grow.

The lectionary opens up opportunities for collaborating with other pastors. There are countless sermon guides based on the common lectionary. My favorite is *Pulpit Resource* by Will Willimon (available online or in book form from *Cokesbury*), but there are many others. Because it is “common” among many denominations, I have enjoyed several lectionary groups of pastors who share their ideas—and sometimes their sermons—together. There are many

such groups online, but I personally prefer the ones that meet over coffee or lunch. If there's not one in your area, talk to your friends about making one!

The lectionary encourages congregations to read the Bible. Using the various readings for each week in creative ways (I like to use a portion of the Psalm for the Call to Worship, or to sing part of it between the other readings) exposes our congregants to more scripture and, over time, enlarges their appreciation/understanding of the scriptures. This has to be a good thing!

Making Your Own Lectionary Worship Plan

Letting the Resources Work for You

Start with your church planning calendar. I like to use the *Presbyterian Planning Calendar* (available online at <https://www.pcusastore.com/Products/9781732846746/20242025-presbyterian-planning-calendar.aspx>) because it has all of the information in one place: dates, day of church year, and all four scripture references.

Update your Worship Planning Guides. Included in this packet is a sample planning guide for each section of the three-year cycle. I have found it easier to make these plans three times each year (January-May, June-August, and September-December), so that's how they're organized. Because the cycle repeats every three years, you will want to update the dates on your worship planning guide each time. Easter moves every year, so some of the dates will change. If you discover that the scriptures don't line up with your Presbyterian Planning Calendar, simply update your guide with the scriptures on the planning calendar. There may be one or two changes per year, but most will fall into place pretty quickly.

Start making your own weekly worship planning guides. Once you have your Worship Planning Guide, you can actually plan your worship and sermons several weeks—and even months—ahead. You will enjoy being a pastor so much more! There are many ways to do this. I prefer to take a few days in a row to work on it, using some of the continuing education time I never seem to use up. It's really nice if you can get someone else to preach that week! Either way, I like to open up four Bibles, one for each reading because many of them continue from week to week, and simply read all four readings. On a separate sheet of paper for each week, I jot down anything that comes to mind and heart while I'm reading. Sometimes it's the subject of the reading; sometimes it's something I remember from another time; other times it's just the mindless ramblings that may very well end up in a sermon. Much of these ramblings end up on the cutting room floor, but they may inspire something else later. So, I write them all down. Now you have a few ideas on paper for each of the upcoming weeks of worship. No more blank pages!

Let your musicians pick the hymns. In forty years of ministry, I have never picked the hymns for worship. Therefore, there are no suggested hymns included in the draft liturgies. I realize that this is one of the responsibilities assigned to pastors in the *Book of Order* but I have found it to be more collegial and productive to collaborate with musicians and let them select appropriate music for each Sunday's theme. By all means, communicate your general preferences or a request for a specific hymn that connects well with your sermon on a given week, but such requests still allow your musician to express freedom to shape the musical life of the congregation. Some general requests may relate to the particular style for an opening,

middle or closing hymn; the frequency of using new hymns; and the “singability” of hymns. Personally, I ask musicians to reserve difficult to sing tunes for choir anthems rather than congregational singing. Of course, hymn selection works best if you are willing to make your worship plan ahead of time and share it with your musicians. You cannot work too far ahead for musicians! Then everyone feels like part of the team.

Epiphany, Pentecost, and Ordinary Time. There are two ways that the common lectionary denotes the various Sundays. One style is to refer to the “Sundays after Epiphany” and “Sundays after Pentecost,” which describes them exactly when they fall. Another style refers to “Ordinary Time,” which is not used in the sense of “routine,” but rather refers to the “ordinal numbers” (first, second, third, etc.) used to name and count the Sundays (from the Latin, *ordinalis*, meaning “numbered”). This can be confusing because different calendars use one or the other descriptions. Most of the draft liturgies provided are filed under the “ordinary” numbering. Fear not! If your calendar uses the other system, simply check the scripture readings. They will quickly line up and you will know right where you want to be!

Making Your Own Liturgy

Letting the Resources Work for You

1. **Create your bulletin template.** In this modern age, I find it’s most efficient and easier on everyone if each person inserts their own information in the bulletin. Most of us are competent on a keyboard, and a bulletin template allows everyone to adapt their materials for space and content. Once you establish and agree on who is responsible for which parts (pastor, music director, band leader, secretary, etc.), you will quickly develop a nice, comfortable weekly rhythm, which results in a ready-to-print bulletin every week.
2. **Translate the draft liturgy document locations.** Included in this resource are draft liturgies, also known as “Bulletin Bits,” for every Sunday of the three-year lectionary cycle. No more blank pages! Each liturgy is organized using a six-digit number to identify its date: “year,” “month,” and “day.” This means that January 2, 2024 would be “240102.” Making your template “000000” puts it at the beginning of your file, and easy to find each time you make a copy. I generally make several weeks of new bulletins at a time, because I find it easy to get into the “groove” instead of figuring it out each week. It will take a minute to get used to this method of dating. After using it almost thirty years, I like it so much that I use it on all my documents! Because the lectionary cycle lasts three years, it’s easy to update the draft liturgies by simply updating the date at the beginning. This also gives you a chance

to update and improve your own personal liturgies, which makes future years even easier!

3.

Transfer the liturgy and make it your own. Here's the easiest way to transfer these draft liturgies:

(1) open your bulletin template

(2) save as a document with Sunday's date (for example, 240715)

(3) open the draft liturgy for that Sunday

(4) copy-and-paste the draft liturgy into each section of your bulletin

(5) revise the draft liturgy as appropriate for your style and space.

There are extra liturgies for special events. In addition to the "regular" liturgies for each Sunday, there are some special events that usually occur, as well. You will find tucked into the draft liturgies, extra words for graduate Sunday, teacher appreciation, installation of Presbyterian Women officers, etc. The easiest way to find them is to open the file and search for them by name. If you do not find the one you need, let us know—or write one yourself and share it with the rest of us!

Sometimes it is easier to provide the whole bulletin. Special days like Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, Christmas Eve, etc., we often want to use a different order of service than a traditional Sunday morning. To make this easier, many of these special days have complete bulletins. As always, feel free to adjust, adapt, revise, or delete to your own delight.

Even years after creating this resource, I continually update it every year. Please use this as a beginning point, which you will improve over the years. There's more information included than you need, so just use the parts you want. Or consider adding more pieces to your bulletin? And all along the way, enjoy "no more blank pages!"

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