

*A Preacher's Guide to
Lectionary Sermon Series*

THEMATIC PLANS FOR
YEARS A, B, AND C

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Foreword

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 show-case 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
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Using This Resource

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 congregants 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.

Year A

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

Series Overview We approach the Lenten season with an emphasis on interiority, personal investigation, and contrition—the intentional work of seeking a change of heart or actions. Reflection and change take work, hard work. Lent can be like a boot camp for the soul, a restart in a focused area. We walk this season together, demanding the best of ourselves, ready to support one another, and prepared to see truths that shatter our self-understanding.

The range of the readings in this season is the full breadth of lived human experience from creation to death and new life. The preacher

| | Sermon Title | Focus Scripture | Theme |
|-------------|---------------------|--------------------------------------|---|
| Lent 1 | The Need for Change | Ps. 32; Matt. 4:1–11 | We face temptation as we discern what God really wants for us. |
| Lent 2 | Reset | Gen. 12:1–4a; John 3:1–17 | Spiritual rebirth means a new start. |
| Lent 3 | Hydrate | Exod. 17:1–7; John 4:5–42 | Living water sustains us on our journey. |
| Lent 4 | Redefined | 1 Sam. 16:1–13; John 9:1–41 | We are more than we appear to be. |
| Lent 5 | Dead End | Ezek. 37:1–14; John 11:1–45 | When all hope seems lost, God revives. |
| Palm Sunday | Celebrate and Wait | Ps. 118:1–2, 19–29; Matt. 21:1–11 | Rejoice at the end of the journey, but know challenges lie ahead. |

has the opportunity to place the foundational Christian narrative on the significant life events of the community in this season, paralleling the false choices of temptation with the conditions of suffering in the world today.

Tips and Ideas for This Series

We get the term “boot camp” from the military, but one encounters boot camps in various areas of life: a particularly rigorous exercise regimen, a period of training before a new job, or even an intensive retreat for personal or marital transformation. Consider featuring testimonies in worship from individuals who have experienced these various kinds of intense training. Connect such experiences to the way Lenten disciplines we adopt are intended to make the season “hard” in the way a boot camp can be, pushing us beyond what we think our limits are in ways that strengthen us.

Lent 1: The Need for Change

Psalm 32; Matthew 4:1–11

*Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,”
and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah
Therefore let all who are faithful
offer prayer to you;
at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters
shall not reach them.
You are a hiding place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. Selah
(Psalm 32:5–7)*

Boot camp is all about making necessary changes through hard work. In Lent, the church invites people to a similar season of introspection, a time of discernment of sin and all that separates us from the knowledge of the love of God for us, and a time for repentance and renewal of life in preparation for Easter.

We begin the season with a reminder of the power of temptation, that which leads us to sin. These days “temptation” is a word we use primarily with regard to personal choices, many of them susceptible to outside influences. We are vulnerable to choices, offered often

through media, that cause us to desire things or experiences that are not essential and might even be harmful. We feel tempted by the choice to be different than we are and the difference between what is healthy or harmful varies greatly depending on our context. Personally, how do you discern which choice is a temptation and which is encouragement? What draws us closer to the knowledge of God's love for us?

We could busy ourselves in endless reflection on where we draw the line in our personal lives, but that might be a temptation in itself. Can we enter this demanding season faithfully and yet not become ultimately self-absorbed, losing sight of the big picture in light of our daily efforts to resist gossip or gluttony? If Lent is like a boot camp for the soul, what is the hard work that can be done in this limited, intensive time?

One helpful framework is to consider the larger context in which we live. What are our temptations as a people, in this nation, or in our community? Where do we act collectively in ways that deny the goodness of those whose daily lives are defined by exclusion or suffering? Social context is a powerful framing of our personal struggles.

In the Gospel, the devil offers Jesus power over others, and he denies it for a kingdom greater than this world. What power are we tempted to seek, and how might we instead work for a kingdom-level justice that might seem impossible in this world? What social norms are we called to defy in favor of God's vision for us?

Let us consider these temptations that Jesus faced—how we acquire our daily bread, how we understand what it means to live, and how we impact the world around us. As we begin the journey of Lent, let us consider these very essentials of living, freed from the tempter and the bondage of sin; for, as the psalmist reminds us, we are forgiven.

END OF EXCERPT