

METANOIA

A Soul-Tending Resource for Character Formation

November 2018, Fourteenth Issue

CIRCLE *of* SEASONS

ENCOUNTERING GOD IN THE CHURCH YEAR

by Ann Starrette

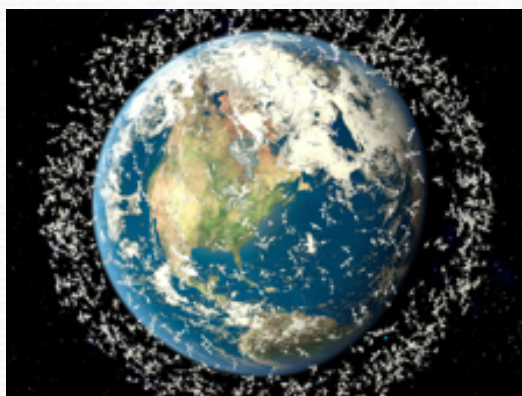
UNTIL 2003, EACH SEASON OF THE CHRISTIAN year stood alone in my mind with no real connective value.

However, that began to change when the Rev. Dr. Jody Seymour introduced me to the Christian lectionary, a three-year cycle of Scripture reading that follows the Christian calendar. This short, simple, systematic way of prayerfully encountering God through both Scripture and the seasons of the church year excited me. I felt like I had unearthed, better said *been given*, a great treasure.

LIVING IN RHYTHM

Before this introduction, at the threshold age of senior citizen status, I had no idea that across denominations and traditions, around the world and throughout history, the church has been using the Christian calendar as a guide through Scripture not only for corporate worship (for those who choose to use it) but for personal devotional practices as well. While the Jewish cycle revolves around the Exodus, the Christian calendar (which begins the first Sunday in Advent and ends on Christ the King Sunday in November) revolves around the life and ministry of Jesus. The beginning of the liturgical calendar dates back to the earliest centuries of the church.

The word lectionary means “schedule of readings.” The lectionary most used by Protestant churches is the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL). It has a three-year reading cycle (designated as Year A, Year B, Year C). Advent 2018 begins Year C.



The Sunday lectionary readings include an Old Testament reading, a Psalm, an Epistle, and a Gospel that share a common theme. On weekdays there are generally two readings per day. The RCL Daily Readings on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday are selected to *prepare for* the Sunday readings; the Daily Readings on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday are selected to *reflect on* the Sunday readings.

Using the lectionary allows us to engage the full range of Scripture and touch all the major themes and passages at least once every three years as a way of living in rhythm with the life of Jesus.

ENTERING THE CIRCLE

Being given an aerial view of this simple structure changed my whole perspective. This may sound silly, but it was like a welcome mat with balloons and all, beckoning my entry. The Host saying, “Come. Enter. Encounter me. Keep company with me. Learn from me through the seasons that have a story to tell—stories of essential truths.” I said yes to this sacred invitation to enter into a way of engaging in Scripture that could enhance and expand my morning devotional practice and allow me to follow the life of Jesus through Scripture throughout the year.

The Christian year comprises a sequence of seven seasons built around the holy days that correspond to the major events in the life of Jesus. In his book, *Living the Christian Year: Time to Inhabit the Story of God: an Introduction and Devotional Guide*, author

I'm interested in the experience of sacred time, in our ability to feel the intersection of time and eternity at special places in the year . . . Sacred time is what makes the Church Year a genuinely transformative practice.

— CHRISTOPHER HILL

Bobby Gross lays out the structure of the Christian calendar this way:

The Cycle of Light

ADVENT: *Enlarged in the Waiting*

CHRISTMAS: *Enriched in the Giving*

EPIPHANY: *Enlightened in the Telling*

The Cycle of Life

LENT: *Humbled in the Turning*

THE PASCHAL TRIDUUM: *Healed in the Dying*

EASTER: *Heartened in the Rising*

The Cycle of Love

ORDINARY TIME: *Empowered in the Pouring Out*

. . . *World and Church*

. . . *Neighbor and Self*

. . . *Work and Rest*

FULL CIRCLE ONCE AGAIN

Just to be clear, you can enter the Christian year at any point. Just like a new born enters the world when the time is right, regardless of the season, that's true for us. While the Christian calendar begins with the first Sunday in Advent we can enter into the circle of seasons at any point we choose.

USING THE LECTIONARY

Why was the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) and Daily Readings created?

And why use it as a genuinely transformative practice?

- The purpose of the RCL is not to teach the Bible, but rather to *illuminate the significance* of the Sunday readings.
- The purpose of the RCL is not to cover every verse, but to cover the *entire message* and the *interrelatedness* of biblical stories. It encourages a well-rounded reading of Scripture over the span of the church year.

- Following the lectionary is not about checking it off and moving on, but a practice of *submission to its teaching*—one in which we consistently and intentionally place ourselves before God to transform us by his Word. We ask, “What is God saying to me in this passage today? What am I to do in response to God’s Word today?” Since the lectionary readings follow the rhythms of the Christian year, we are also *surrendering* to and thus being shaped by the essential lessons contained in each season—each full of spiritual significance for living our lives today.
- The purpose of the RCL is not to read the Bible from start to finish; rather it attempts to *enhance and expand* the lectionary readings for each week that share a common theme. It intends to *enrich our knowledge* of biblical characters and vignettes that help us to have a broader understanding of biblical stories that may have become all too familiar.

On a larger scale, it is exciting to know that others all over the world are hearing messages preached and/or are reading the same set of texts that I’ve been reading during the week. The Christian lectionary literally connects us to the wider Church—acting as a thread that binds different denominations, different worship styles, different nationalities, and so on . . . together around the globe. It gives a whole new context when we say *The Church Universal*. That’s both refreshing and mind boggling to me!

CREATING A RHYTHM

While using the lectionary as a spiritual practice is simple, incorporating it into daily life can present challenges. What is realistic for you? Perhaps reading the RCL Daily Readings every day does not work for you. Perhaps your best plan is to focus on the Sunday Scriptures. Or you might use Saturdays to read all the Daily Readings in *preparation for Sunday’s* Scriptures and Wednesdays to read all those that *reflect on* them. The idea here is to create a rhythm that works for you.

Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.

MARY OLIVER

Little things that can help us anticipate spending private time with God using the lectionary could be to:

1. Create a holy space within your home as a “meeting place” with God.
 - Establish a set time. Make it a habit.
 - Pray a prayer of surrender.
 - Read (chew on) the lectionary readings of the day as you listen for *one word or phrase* that seems meant for you.
 - Journal, asking God how God is inviting you to live the word in your daily life?
 - Close with prayer.
 - Take your word or phrase into your day. Ask God to keep working into your heart, mind, and soul what is intended for you.
2. Another help in creating a rhythm could be to participate in a weekly group devoted to being shaped by the Word using the lectionary. Visit Davidson United Methodist’s Tuesday afternoon group (details below) or search for one in your area.
3. Research the various, what I consider essential, resources below to see what works for you. The main thing is to begin. Stay as faithful as your life allows and see where it takes you. As I write this, today’s lectionary reading assures us that God gives his Spirit without measure (John 3:34). That’s good news! Call on the power of the Holy Spirit when your spirit is weak.

Advent 2018 through Christ the King Sunday 2019 is Year C and begins Sunday, December 2, 2018. Happy Christian New Year!

I wish you grace and all good on your journey through the Christian New Year. Let me know if I can be of support as we travel together in heart and spirit. I

conclude this issue of Metanoia with a prayer by John Beverley Butcher, from his book *An Uncommon Lectionary: A Companion to Common Lectionaries*, which he adapted from one of his favorite prayers from the Book of Common Prayer:

Blessed Lord, who has caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Open our minds and hearts to hear them, read them, mark them, learn them, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and hold fast the eternal life available to us now through Jesus the Anointed by the power of Your Holy Spirit. Amen.



Ann

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Sources

- *Living the Christian Year: Time to Inhabit the Story of God* by Bobby Gross
- *The Revised Common Lectionary: The Consultation on Common Texts*, 1992, published by Abingdon Press.
- *Revised Common Lectionary Daily Readings: Proposed by the Consultation on Common Text*, 2005, published by Augsburg Fortress, Publishers.
- *The Circle of Seasons: Meeting God in the Church Year* by Kimberlee Conway Ireton
- *An Uncommon Lectionary: A Companion to Common Lectionaries* by John Beverley Butcher

Practice Resources follow

COME, LORD JESUS!

Practice Resources

- **GROUP:** *Shaped by the Word - Lectionary Group* meets at Davidson United Methodist Church, Room 211, Tuesdays from 4:30-5:45 p.m. This small, fun, and faithful inclusive group, under the leadership of Carol Prescott (prescottnc@yahoo.com or 704-258-5045) would make for a great entry point to the lectionary and the seasons of the church. This group exists to help fan the flames of authentic transformation and offers you an opportunity to learn and practice essential truths and key disciplines of the Christian journey together—in community.
- **BOOK:** *A Disciple's Journal: a Guide for Daily Prayer, Bible Reading, and Discipleship*. Many years ago I stumbled upon this jewel of a resource by Steven Manskar. It uses the semi-continuous strand which moves through stories and characters in the Old Testament more or less continuously, rather than the complementary track, where texts are tied more closely to the theme of the day's Gospel reading. You can view or download the lectionary from the web, but for some reason I like something in my hand with the option of scribbling a note to self in the margins.
- **WEB:** *The Revised Common Lectionary*: A service of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library <http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/daily.php?year=C> is a superb resource for further learning and practice. You can subscribe to the Daily Readings.
- **YEARLY PLANNER:** Academic Year Planner | Liturgical Years B - C, August 2018 - July 2019. This is a gem of a find referred to me by a spiritual direction client. The planner provides the Liturgical Wheel Calendar in the front and helps you cultivate a weekly rhythm around the Sunday Lectionary. It uses the semi-continuous strand of readings and offers short teachings about the various season of the year. I've just gotten into mine, but so far I love it. Check it out here: sacredordinarydays.com. It's on SALE now.

A FURTHER STEP

In a book:

- *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation* by M. Robert Mulholland, Jr. is an excellent resource offering a way to read Scripture that allows it to shape your spiritual life. You will learn to listen for the voice of God in the Bible, move from *informational* reading to *formational* reading of the Bible, and give up control over the text and let God lead your reading and understanding.
- *Wesley's Guidelines from Shaped by the Word*, Chapters 11 & 12 by Robert Mulholland.