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In the beginning was the Word: scriptures for the lectionary speaking choir, cycle C

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The Lectionary Series from the Revised Common Lectionary, Cycle C, NRSV

Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Company, Inc., 1994

145 pp.

Lectionary Tales for the Pulpit: 57 Stories for Cycle C

Richard A. Jensen

Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Company, Inc., 1994

126 pp.

In the Beginning Was the Word: Scriptures for the Lectionary Speaking Choir, Cycle C

Dallas A. Brauning

Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Company, Inc., 1994

150 pp.

Providing preaching and worship resources for use with lectionaries has been one of the strong marks of CSS Publishing Company. These three volumes are among the best, and are highly recommended to pastors and worship planners and leaders. Each is based on the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL).

The Lectionary Series is a large 8.5 x 11-inch, spiral bound print-up of the Cycle C lessons. Wherever possible, the three lessons and the Psalm are laid out on an even- and an odd-numbered page so that all are directly accessible to preacher or reader without having to turn a page. This is an excellent help for meditation and study. This is also a temptation to use it as the lectern edition, but I would discourage such a practice; in the liturgy the Word deserves to be read from a substantial and handsome "pulpit Bible".

Several editorial assumptions were made in assembling this version of the RCL, not all of them praiseworthy: (1) individual verses are not numbered: this is helpful for meditation and public reading, but not for study; (2) alternative readings from the Apocrypha are omitted; (3) in all cases where alternative readings are provided in the RCL, only the first alternative is printed (except if it is from the Apocrypha); thus, for example, there is no alternative to the long Gospel of Palm/Passion Sunday unless one consults the official listing of pericopes and marks off the imbedded short alternative—difficult because the verses are unnumbered; on Christmas Eve/Day, one is impoverished by having only one out of a total of three sets of pericopes. On the positive side, this practice puts before us the several canticle alternatives to appointed Psalms; (4) assumes that the Last Sunday after the Epiphany is The Transfiguration, whereas the RCL offers

a 9th Sunday after the Epiphany; (5) omits lections for Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Saturday of Holy Week, as well as for the Easter Vigil and Easter Evening; (6) provides, in the post-Pentecost season, only the *lectio continua* First Lessons (this is, of course, one of the great contributions of the RCL); (7) prints the readings for the "Liturgy of the Palms" *after* the readings for the "Liturgy of the Passion", contrary to RCL and actual usage.

As useful as this lectionary is—and it is very useful—we still await a truly handsome (or even a work-a-day) edition of the full RCL, with all of its alternatives.

Two typos I noted: in Proper 23, Jeremiah 19:1, 4–7 should be Jeremiah 29; in Proper 28, 2 Thessalonians 3:6:13 should be 3:6–13.

In *Lectionary Tales* Richard A. Jensen provides preachers and devotional leaders with 57 stories for use with Cycle C lectionary texts. Jensen, who began his career as a Lutheran systematic theologian, went on to become a media preacher and producer with the former American Lutheran Church and its successor, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and is presently teaching homiletics at Wartburg Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, and the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. His earlier work in narrative theory, *Telling the Story* (Augsburg, 1980), was a major force in North American homiletics; his recent *Thinking in Story* (CSS, 1993), the result of his extensive media work, advocates that the hermeneutic of an oral culture is to "think in story". These 57 "Tales" are offered to preachers to help them "think in story" as opposed to "thinking in ideas", and to begin a type of sermonizing which "stitches stories together" as is typical of a culture that once again has become oral.

Although each "Tale" is linked to a specific lection (he begins with Advent 1 and proceeds through the church year, including one Psalm, eight First Lessons, 13 Second Lessons, and 35 Gospels), he designates 22 tales as "narrative analogies" and cites additional scripture for them. Borrowed from Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, the term refers to the fact that stories set in a narrative setting are intricately connected with other stories in that larger narrative: "Stories comment upon other stories. The so-called meaning of a story is highlighted by another story or stories!" (p. 11). Thus the call of Peter (Luke 5:1–11, Epiphany 5) is intricately connected to Peter's confession (Luke 9:18–20), his experience of the Transfiguration (9:28–36), and his denial of Jesus (22:31–62). Not all of Jensen's "narrative analogies" are so clear, and one wishes he had said more about this literary factor. In part he is simply calling to us to be aware of the literary context of a pericope; in part he is suggesting to the preacher other related biblical stories which may be "stitched together" with the pericope in question; in part he is hinting at the narrative phenomenon that a story works analogically (or, better, metaphorically), i.e., "Peter is me! I am Peter!" In this latter case, not only other biblical stories but life stories as well are "narrative analogies".

These are excellent "tales", and the linking of them to specific pericopes gives them an accessibility that other collections of stories frustratingly lack.

Some derive from theatre and movies (*Les Miserable*), some from news stories (a woman in Sarajevo), some are stories of people whom Jensen seems to know personally (is the Tom Stone of New Year's Day the Tom Stone of Lent 1? And is either of them related to Sheila Stone of Christ the King?), some are his own creation, some are retellings of scripture. All are well-told. By design, these stories are not meant to be complete "story sermons" (although the story of Advent 1 could certainly be so used); they invite—and often force—the preacher to "stitch on" further stories or re-search the text to move on to a resolution.

With *Scriptures for the Lectionary Speaking Choir, Cycle C*, Dallas Brauninger has completed her trilogy of lectionary pericopes designed to be read by several voices. For each Sunday and festival of the church year, including the entire Holy Week and Thanksgiving, she has selected one of the readings (33 First Lessons, one Apocryphal, 20 Second Lessons, 17 Gospels) for multi-voice (ranging from three to nine voices per lection) presentation. Each set of readers is variously composed: two females, one male; a family; female youth, male youth, adult male; two women, one high school girl; four men; etc. Special uses for each reading, besides presentation in their usual slot, are also suggested for congregations which do not use the lectionary (e.g., use before the pastoral prayer; use as an anthem; use as a call to worship; use additionally for family worship).

Ten purposes for these multi-voice readings are listed, including "To hear the NRSV", "To attend more closely to the reading of scripture", "to enjoy the variety of voices", "to offer involvement and a blending of generations" (p. 9). A section of "tips for voice choir readers" gives practical suggestions for placement of readers and effective reading. A pronunciation guide, a scripture index, and a summation of the "cast of speakers" for each Sunday and festival helpfully round out the book.

I cannot recommend this trilogy highly enough to pastors, worship planners, and lay readers. Most congregations have not even begun to explore the potential excitement in scripture reading, and far too many pastors (not to mention lay readers) read the lessons as though they are announcing the itinerary of a departing bus. It is dismaying to find that few preachers, in spite of having discovered the power of story in preaching, have thereupon had the imagination to realize that same power in the presentation of lections. So find someone to head up a "lectionary speaking choir" (i.e., a cadre of good readers across the generations), and turn them loose with this book and its companions! You'll be amazed at how many people say, "I heard meanings I never knew were there!"

Dallas A. Brauninger is an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ. The NRSV is used in this as well as in the two companion volumes.

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