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# The Narrative Lectionary

Rolf A. Jacobson

*Luther Seminary*, [rjacobso@luthersem.edu](mailto:rjacobso@luthersem.edu)

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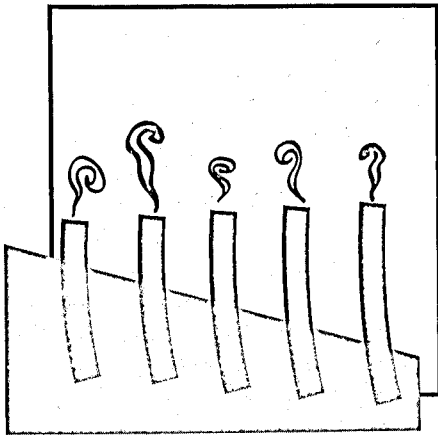
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## THE NARRATIVE LECTIONARY

Rolf A. Jacobson



*“If the [Christian] story will be told, it will have to be told by the church. All of the other cultural tellers are gone, or will be gone soon. We must tell the story.”*

—Daniel Aleshire<sup>1</sup>

“It is the whole mission of the church to speak the gospel. As to what sort of thing ‘the gospel’ may be, too many years ago I tried to explain that in a book with the title *Story and Promise*, and I still regard these two concepts as the best analytical characterization of the church’s message.” These words were the lead in Robert Jenson’s powerful article, “How the World Lost Its Story,” which first appeared in the 1993 issue of *First Things*. As the title of the article hints, Jenson argued that in the postmodern era the church has found itself facing a stunning new challenge: the people to whom the church is addressing its proclamation no longer live in a story. That is, the people no longer live in a world that had a beginning and that is moving toward an end. Jenson summed up the challenge:

Throughout modernity, the church has presumed that its mission was directed to persons who *already* understood themselves as inhabitants of a narratable world. Moreover, since the God of a narratable world is the God of Scripture, the church was also able to presume that the narrative sense people had antecedently tried to make of their lives had somehow to cohere with the particular story, “the gospel,” that the church had to communicate... But this is precisely what the postmodern church cannot presume. What then? The obvious answer is that if the church does not *find* her hearers antecedently inhabiting a narratable world, then the church must herself *be* that world.<sup>2</sup>

I have long experienced Jenson’s argument as breathtaking—both for the accuracy of the diagnosis as well as for the hopeful potential of its prescription.

I take it as true that the mission of the church is to speak the gospel. I also take it as true that the very nature of the gospel is *story and promise*—or perhaps, *a story that promises*. Furthermore, I take it as accurate that the culture around

and within the church neither lives in the Christian story nor even knows the Christian story. Therefore, the church must tell its story—and it must do so primarily and most clearly in worship.

But isn’t the church already doing that? Yes, to an extent. But its ability to tell the story is seriously hampered by use of the Revised Common Lectionary, which undermines people’s ability to grasp the biblical story. RCL-based preaching undermines the biblical narrative by chopping the narrative up into tiny episodes and ordering those episodes in a non-narrative sequence. The result is that the RCL destroys the narrative flow of the Bible. This is especially true of the narratives of Israel (Old Testament) and of the early church (most of the New Testament). But it is even true of the narrative of Jesus (the Gospels). As a random example, drop in anywhere in the Lutheran version of the RCL and consider any five consecutive Old Testament readings. Here are five lessons and their setting, for the five weeks following the writing of this essay:

- Genesis 1:1–5 (prehistory)
- 1 Samuel 3:1–10 (the judges)
- Jonah 3:1–5, 10 (divided monarchy)
- Deuteronomy 18:15–20 (wilderness)
- Isaiah 40:21–31 (exile)

How could anyone who doesn’t already have a master’s degree in Christian religion follow this disjointed set of readings? A person who doesn’t already know the Old Testament story—and know it very well—has no chance of learning the story from this reading strategy, and very little chance of even following the meaning of these readings.<sup>3</sup>

This is just one example. But I have lathered, rinsed, and repeated this exercise so many times with so many and various audiences that I can confidently state the following: the RCL undermines the ability of a congregation to gain a narrative grasp of the Old Testament story. But the same is true of the story of the early church. While various epistles are often read in a quasi-serial fashion, the narrative of the early church is not engaged. Even the story of Jesus bows to the church-year narrative. In the so-called “year of Matthew,” we get selections from chapters 24, 3, 11,

and 1 in Advent (in that order); we get chapters 2 and 4–7 in Epiphany; and then we go back to chapters 6 and 4, followed by three weeks from the Gospel of John.

Let's imagine that, as an educator, I was given the following pedagogical challenge. The challenger says, "Each week, a highly motivated group of interested learners will gather with you. You get to read to them out of your favorite story and then someone will speak based on what was just read. But there is one catch. You have to select the readings in such a way so that your audience can never actually follow or learn the whole story." "Easy," would be my reply. "I will use the Revised Common Lectionary."

But do not take my word (of criticism) for it! There is research that has confirmed these conclusions. Joy Moore, professor of Homiletics and Black Church at Duke Divinity School, has studied the impact of both lectionary and thematic preaching on longterm, active parishioners. Moore found that,

despite the increasing employment of narrative analysis in biblical and theological studies, homiletic consideration of narrative *has thus far not adequately enabled preachers to convey to listeners the overarching story depicted in Christian Scripture as narrated from Genesis through Revelation...* In other words, the narrative-critical considerations employed thus far have not been sufficient to enable preachers to proclaim a message congruent with the inherent story narrated in Christian Scripture.

The result is that the "varieties of approaches preachers employ to communicate with contemporary audiences have abandoned the particular story Christians have to tell."<sup>4</sup>

Still not convinced? Do your own research. Ask church folks to put the following two lists of alphabetically organized names in canonical order:

Abraham, David, Moses, Peter  
Esther, Mary, Ruth, Sarah

I suspect that you would find what one my students found when he asked a similar question of those he served. Parishioners who had completed a rigorous Bible study course—such as Crossways, Bethel, or Search—could do it easily. Almost nobody else could.

The RCL also has at least one other major failing: it is episodic. RCL-based preaching tends to hop from theme to theme, text to text, idea to idea, like a grasshopper moving hither and yon

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across a field. Each week is an isolated episode of grace or law, with little or no connection to what has gone before or will come after. Because of this, such preaching loses some of its power to form Christian faith.

One final comment on the RCL: "we didn't always do it this way." Or rather, "we haven't done it this way for very long." Seminary students are often surprised to learn that the RCL is a rather recent innovation. The three-year, four-text Common Lectionary came into being in 1974, as the response of Christendom to Vatican II and three-quarters of a century of ecumenism. Revisions were published in 1983 and 1994. Thus the criticisms of the RCL made here are

criticisms of a recent, Christendom-minded innovation. Indeed, perhaps the most important thing to notice about the RCL is how utterly Christendom it is. The governing assumption is that one set of readings fits all Christian congregations. The design was that everyone—all the workers at the factory, or teachers at the school, or parents in the neighborhood, or members of the Rotary club—could go to their disparate places of worship on Sunday, then show up on Monday having heard roughly the same set of texts the day before. When the culture was basically Christian (Christendom), this sort of worked. But even when this cultural model worked, the RCL model still had two huge flaws. First, it glossed over confessional particularities and portrayed every confession of the faith as essentially the same. I believe this was somewhat wrongheaded. Second, the model assumed that the preaching that was needed in all congregations was basically the same—or that the preaching that was needed in most contexts could be served by the same basic set of readings. I believe this assumption was completely wrongheaded. But more to the point, Christendom—a world in which the church should assume that basically everybody in the culture is in worship somewhere, and that therefore we should have a common set of readings—is dead. The sun set on that world around 1974, just when the three-year lectionary cycle was introduced.

Convinced that the church's mission is to speak the gospel, convinced that the gospel is a story that makes promises, and convinced that the present patterns for engaging the Scriptures in worship actually confound the capacity of the church to proclaim the story, my colleague Craig Koester and I propose a different lectionary, the Narrative Lectionary.<sup>5</sup> The NL started out in the fall of 2010 as an experimental partnership between Craig Koester, myself, and about forty congregations, organized by Dan Smith.

The NL runs on an annual cycle

from the start of September through early June to conform both to the rhythms of the liturgical year, especially its major festivals, as well as to the realities of the annual cycle of our culture. The American cultural cycle, like the Old Testament liturgical year, is autumnal—it starts each year in the fall when kids return to school, new TV shows and fashions and car models are launched, and the NFL kicks off.

The NL spans four years, one for each Gospel, and each year preaches its way rapidly through the Old Testament story, the story of Jesus, and the story of the early church. Sixteen weeks of the fall are devoted to the Old Testament story from Genesis through the return from exile. Special focus is given to the season of Advent as the time of awaiting the Messiah. Winter, spanning sixteen to twenty weeks, preaches through the story of Jesus in one Gospel, focusing on the unique stories and major themes of that Gospel. Then seven weeks in the spring are spent on the story of the early church, based mostly in Acts.

One concern pastors often bring to us is the long stretch of nothing but the Old Testament. We are often asked, is it possible to proclaim the good news based chiefly on the Old Testament? The answer is yes! As Christians we must. And it is important to bear in mind that these Old Testament readings take place in the midst of a Christian liturgy that mentions Jesus and the Trinity often.

We do not assume that the NL is for every congregation—in some it may work well, in some it may not. One size does not fit all. Nor is it meant as a permanent new lectionary in those congregations where it is adopted. We imagine a congregation may want to use it for three or four years, then go back to the RCL or try something else. Congregations that adopt the NL are free to tweak, tinker, try out their own ideas: in short, to use their evangelical freedom well and wisely. Flexibility is the key—the NL is all about flexibility. Some congregations have continued to read four lessons each week, simply

continuing the RCL readings but swapping out the Old Testament lection in the fall, the Gospel lection in the winter, and the Epistle lection in the spring. Other congregations just read the one appointed NL lection and then have longer sermons. Other congregations have read two lections, wanting always to include a Gospel reading, or perhaps a Psalm. Again, one size does not fit all. That is the world we are in.

We were not the first ones to have this idea. Once we started down this path, we were contacted by several pastors—especially those who had served as church planters—who basically said to us, “Glad to see you’re doing this. When I was a mission developer working with the unchurched, I found that I had to do something like this. And it worked.” If this is indeed a movement of the Spirit to address the storylessness of our American mission field, we will continue with the NL for as long as there is a demand or until somebody more important than us takes it over.

In the Gospel of John, the first words that Jesus says are, “Come and see” (1:39). That invitation, spoken long ago by the Lord to two of John’s disciples, fits this project, too. Everyone is welcome to join. We started out with about forty congregations in the fall of 2010. During that first year, it went so well that many congregations joined up during the year. Now we are somewhere between 150 and three hundred congregations (we don’t know exactly).

The feedback that we get is that this experiment is having powerful, positive results in the lives of God’s people. More than one congregation has reported to us that worship attendance is up. In one congregation where they use the RCL at one worship service and the NL at another, the pastor reports that attendance has shifted somewhat to the service that uses the NL, with parishioners reporting that the NL is the reason they have switched. One congregation researched whether the NL was making a difference in the faith lives of its members. The pastor asked after the fall preaching series, “Did

any of the stories change the way you think or act?” Two-thirds of the people said yes. One pastor has written to us that the experience of preaching the NL has “changed my entire ministry.”

James Limburg wrote some years ago, “Ours is a time ready for stories.”<sup>6</sup> And who has a better story to tell? What the church needs is a better way to tell its story. The Narrative Lectionary is, we hope, one way for the church to do just that. **LF**

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ROLF A. JACOBSON is Associate Professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota.

#### Notes

1. Lecture delivered to the faculty of Luther Seminary, April 6, 2011.

2. Robert W. Jenson, “How the World Lost its Story,” *First Things* (October 1993): 19. See also Jenson’s *Story and Promise: A Brief Theology of the Gospel about Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973).

3. Note that the Reformed version of the RCL follows a semi-continuous, canonical reading of the Old Testament narrative during the Pentecost season of the church year. Over the course of three years, the Old Testament story is rehearsed. While a tremendous improvement over the totally thematic versions of the RCL used by Roman Catholics, most Lutherans, Episcopalians, and Methodists, the Reformed lectionary remains a less than ideal reading strategy for conveying the broad arc of the biblical story.

4. Joy Moore, *Narrating a Canonical Witness: A Homiletic for the Twenty-First Century* (London: London School of Theology, 2007). My italics.

5. The title was not of our own devising, but was the invention of a group of pastors who first joined us in experimenting with this lectionary during the 2010–2011 year.

6. James Limburg, *Old Stories for a New Time* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1983), 4.

### The Narrative Lectionary

Learn more about the Narrative Lectionary, read the weekly commentary, or listen to the podcast: [workingpreacher.org/narrative-lectionary](http://workingpreacher.org/narrative-lectionary).