

First Lectionary Message:

Introduction: “Dropping In”

Well, friends. I’m excited about this morning. We’re starting a new preaching series, one that will run through February.

And what we’re going to do on Sunday morning for the next pile of weeks is really, really weird. For us, at least. Our Sundays through March are going to be focused on something called the Lectionary, which is sort of a prescribed set of biblical passages that are meant to be read on any given Sunday. And to talk about the lectionary, we have to talk about something called the liturgy. We’ll do both today.

And I’m calling the series “Dropping In,” because we’re simply going to drop into this Lectionary rhythm that many, many other Christians hold and keep and cherish. There are Brethren Churches that rely on the Lectionary to determine what Scripture will shape their Sunday worship gatherings.

For those of us who have any Evangelical background, it’s weird to consider the Lectionary, because honestly,

Evangelicalism has basically rejected the Lectionary. And there are real social reasons for that: Evangelicalism has become marked by a deep individualism, and its congregations marked by a deep desire to do what they want, rather than do the same things as others are doing. That means that choosing to read the same texts that a bunch of other congregations are reading, too, is a non-starter, when something feels more relevant or important or personal.

But we're only dropping in. We won't stay here long. What I hope is that we'll get a flavor of what can happen when we are forced to look at certain texts, because we've chosen to submit ourselves to a wider faith community, rather than just do as we see fit. I hope, too, that we'll be able to discover creative ways to make sense of passages that don't always feel like they fit together well. So we'll have opportunities to exercise our Spirit-driven creativity. It should be good! Let's pray this morning is, at least. And we need it, because, honestly...the rest of this morning is not "Jesus loves you, and this is how you can lose weight or be more patient or save the world." It's, like, important background information that only curious people will find interesting at all. So let's pray for

curiosity and I'll pray you all can have extra grace and attention during what is a relevance-light, info-heavy message.

Prayer:

For Curiosity.

On Liturgy

We'll start here.

Have you heard the word liturgy before?

It's a Greek word that we just sound out in English, transliterate, like "baptism" or "Christ." And it's a compound word, made up of the words for "people" and "work." Liturgy means "the people's work." It's a religious word, but wasn't always a religious word. It was just a generic word for work people did, especially like civic, public work. Park clean up days, you know, or whatever their equivalent was? The Greek version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, used the word to talk about the service that the Israelites had to give to the Temple. The early church took it on as a word with two meanings:

First, as a label for whatever the Church does when we

come together. The stuff we do together. The stuff that happens in our worship services. This is a contrast to the private stuff we do. So there's liturgy, the stuff we do together, and all the stuff I hope we all do: pray, read, meditate, serve and bless on our own. Liturgy is the work of the people, when we gather together in worship. Liturgy is the work of the people when we gather together in worship. So that's the first way this word is used.

But within that, in some circles--especially Catholic and Orthodox circles--liturgy is especially used of the Eucharist, of that bread-and-cup rehearsing we do of Jesus' last Passover meal with his followers before he died. "Mass," as we've heard Catholics call it or called it ourselves in some past season of life.

On Liturgy: The Work of The People:

So liturgy, the "work of the people" has two main uses: to talk about our worship services generally, and to talk about the eucharist particularly. And because all Christian worship services have had a beginning, a middle, an end. Have started and finished, liturgy has become a way to talk about the things people do and say at each moment during the service. Every "service order" that we've ever seen has been a liturgy in a

technical sense: It outlines the “people’s work” that we do when we gather together to worship God. Certain super famous or super ancient worship services are called “the liturgy of so-and-so or of this-and-that.” I have a dense book in my office, which would make anchor or weapon called “Liturgies of the Western Church.” It’s just piles of worship services. If there is a “Liturgies of the Eastern Church” you could build a garage with a set of those.

Every congregation is liturgical, that is, uses liturgies, it just depends on whether they use ancient liturgies, or ones that are made up the night before. More or less every Christian congregation takes part in a Eucharist service with some sort of rhythm; a few tossed the baby out with the bathwater when everyone was fighting about the right way to worship in the 1800s. And this speaks to something that most of us would find weird, but people have died for liturgies, been killed because other Christians thought their liturgy was “wrong.” Was too--informal, or formal, had too much theology or not enough theology or the wrong theology, was blasphemous or insensitive or dangerous.

Churches have been created because of backlash to a

change in their accepted, normal liturgy. American Catholics have only been doing the liturgy in English for less than fifty years.

Annie Dillard, a formative author in my life, talked about the traditional, accepted, even-ancient liturgies as things that people have successfully said to God without getting blown up, and so they just, you know, keep saying them, because better safe than sorry. It's a crazy view of God, but...I love the description anyway.

So this is liturgy. The work of the People, when we gather for worship, and many, many, many congregations have prescribed liturgies that happen every single Sunday. Certain things take place, the same words are said, each and every Sunday.

The Liturgical Year:

Or more or less each Sunday. They might shift and move a bit. They may change depending on this or that major Christian holiday.

Here's the thing. There's more than just a liturgy for every Sunday that certain churches have practiced for hundreds of years. There's also something called the

liturgical year. Or Church year or Ecclesiastical Year, if you're fancy.

The liturgical year is a yearly rhythm of important Christian events, Christian high holidays, even Christian seasons, and all the prayers, and remembrances that take the form of special "feasts," which aren't, you know, buffets, but rather special holidays with Eucharist services that focus on a special someone or something. The liturgical year has special services, even special colors related to each season, special clothing, special activities, all sorts of related things that come with this annual worship cycle. The Liturgical Year is a culture, does this make sense? If you live your life with a certain rhythm, one that has all sorts of expectations in it, with special music and holidays and dress and activities, you've got a culture. It's what culture is.

We celebrate the holidays--Holy Days--of Easter and Christmas, we give a nod to Epiphany when there's a child dedication. We actively practice Advent when we gather together. And we've heard of Lent, in part because it's a sort of cultural, American thing, now that fasting and temperance are in vogue. But, seriously, People of God, this is the tiniest surface of

what the Liturgical Year is to many, many Christians, if not most Christians.

The Liturgical Year: A Subtle Unity

Typically, Christianity talks about the Eastern and the Western Churches, The Eastern Churches were primarily Greek and other languages, the Western Churches Latin, and deeply influenced by Roman Catholicism. We're a part of Western Church history. But we, as Smoky Row, as Brethren, are not a part of the culture that the Liturgical Year gives those who follow it. In the Western Church, the Liturgical Year is still driven by Catholicism. Lutherans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, some of what we call high-Church--meaning, basically, liturgy-heavy church--Methodists, they all follow, to greater or lesser extents, a Catholic-derived Liturgical Year. It's called the Roman Rite--no "w," just r-i-t-e, rite-as-in-ceremony--it's called the "Roman Rite" by, well, no one really except those who are writing about this stuff. There is no Roman Left or Roman Independent. But no one uses this language, really: If you pull aside your Lutheran neighbor and ask what they think of the Roman Rite, I don't know what they'll say. Do it now, before the Iowa caucus, and they'll identify with the Roman Left or the Roman Independent.

If you ask a Lutheran, “Are you Catholic?” They’ll say “No way.” If you ask a Catholic, “Are you a high-church Methodist?” They’ll say, “No. I’m a Catholic. I just told you that. Were you even listening?” Because, of course, from the inside, “our group” is always way different from “that group over there” even though most of the things that make up our sub-culture are shared with other sub-cultures.

Did you hear the one about the Catholic, the Lutheran, and the Episcopalian who walk into a bar? Me neither. I’ve made it up. But if the bartender isn’t a Christian, that person thinks they all look the same. We people are great at lumping other people together into the same group, even when they do believe very different things, if their cultures are even a little bit similar to each other. And the churches that follow the Roman Rite are more than a little similar to each other.

And So, The Lectionary:

In 1969, the Catholic Church did something Cray-Cray. They adjusted the cycle of Scripture passages that were meant to be read in their liturgy every Sunday. They set up a three-year cycle of readings, which included a Psalm, a couple of other things, and a

passage from a Gospel. A list like this is creatively called a lectionary, which comes from the Latin word, "to read."

Every three years, the Catholic Church would read through much of the Bible. Every two years, if you went to Mass every day, you'd read through almost all of the Bible, that on a two year cycle.

Anglicans and Lutherans loved this; they took it on. Other denominations that had started out as groups of righteously indignant Anglicans and Lutherans took it on, too. It went through a pile of ecumenical adaptations. This Common Lectionary was formalized, and published in 1994 as the Revised Common Lectionary, and honestly: Almost every church building you pass up and down Smoky Row except for, you know, Smoky Row, is a member of a denomination that uses the Revised Common Lectionary. Almost everyone of the congregations that send cash or volunteers to make the Food Pantry happen are reading the same passages every single Sunday. The Catholic Lectionary is, honestly, just the tiniest, tiniest bit different, and the Episcopalian Lectionary is, too, but 99.99% of the time, these congregations around us, they've heard or recited the exact same Scripture

passages as each other that morning.

Lectionary:

Every Three Years the Lectionary moves through almost all of the Bible. The passages that are read are connected to those Holidays and Seasons we talked about, and many, many more that we won't ever talk about, because: time. Year A, Year B, and Year C. The Lectionary Year starts on the first Sunday of Advent, because that's when the Church Year starts, because the Liturgical Year follows Jesus' life. We're in Year A this year. And so now through March 1, which in nearly all the other congregations we'll drive past will be celebrated as Transfiguration Sunday, the Sunday where we remember Jesus' transfiguration in front of Peter, James, and John. Now through March 1 we're going to join with other congregations in hearing and reading and thinking about the connection between the lectionary texts that are set before us.

Lectionary: Haters gonna hate, Lovers gonna love

Some people love the lectionary. Some people hate it.

I don't know. I don't know.

There's a part of me that longs to be a part of a holy culture, if this makes sense? I admire and idealize those whose lives are totally given over to the Liturgical Year, who know what colors the decorations are supposed to be, and can complain about a Lenten song being sung during Epiphany. Which, you know: So gauche!

I sort of love the idea of being so immersed in Christianity that it is my native culture. Does this make sense? I idealize it. Because, like many Americans, I long for cultural roots.

But it's a small step from idealizing something to idolizing it. And some people do idolize the Lectionary, at least, if not the Liturgical Year, too. There is something unifying and powerful about knowing that other Christians who are strangers to you are doing the same "work of the people" that you did this morning. That's powerful. It's inspiring and can bear witness to a God who longs to bring the world together around God's love. Those who are for the Lectionary are often really, really for it. And they cite this unifying aspect of the Lectionary as its most important benefit.

Others will say that to practice the Lectionary is

knuckle-headed at best, if not anti-Christian, because it does allow those who practice it to avoid talking about certain passages of Scripture, all of which is meant to be useful for God's People. They might say that to practice the Lectionary is to put the Holy Spirit in shackles, lock God down. It's to disallow us as a community to respond to the situations that we're facing, because we're forced to respond to passages that don't connect with our moment. It makes us submit to an authority that we don't know and has no personal investment in us.

Some people are, probably, just tired, and as someone who has been preaching for 12-and-a-half years, the idea of someone else deciding what Scripture I should explore on any given Sunday sounds fantastic. Some people are just easy-going, and have no deep opinion on the Lectionary at all, but are content to gather with others on Sunday and look at whatever it is we look at, do whatever it is we do, because what matters is the God who has gathered these People together for the time they are gathered together.

Challenges & Benefits:

Here's what I think our time following the Lectionary can give us.

I think it can remind us of the sacrifice that comes of fellowship. We always give something up when we join with others. We give up some of our preferences, our autonomy, our freedom. To work with people is to, well, not work against them. It's to give up some of what we want personally because what we do together is worth it.

Over the next pile of weeks we'll be giving up our right to talk about what we want to talk about, hear the passages of Scripture that are most immediately relevant for us.

I think this is important, because it's important for us to remember that we aren't alone in the world, that we're part of a wider community of strangers, people who we don't know, but who share with us in Jesus' blessings and God's church.

I can't force us to value this connection the Lectionary will give us with others, especially if we don't value the simple fact that we're all connected in Christ's mercy to us. But I hope we can feel it, and discover value in it.

I also think that relying on the Lectionary will force us to depend on the Spirit, although I might just be projecting here. How will we figure out the thread that ties these passages together? How can we make sense of the Psalm and the Gospel, the other two passages in a way that isn't so forced it's embarrassing?

Often, if you're a part of a liturgical, lectionary-reading congregation, you'll hear the person preaching say something along the lines of "Today we're going to focus on the Psalm that was read to us...or the passage of "whatever" that was read to us." And they'll just ignore the other stuff. I might do that. I'm not sure. I don't want to. I want the Spirit to guide us to a connection between these passages that makes sense of where we are in the world and what we face. So we'll see if that's the case.

Conclusion:

So, we're left with this, today:

There is a deep and wide Christian culture that is shaped and formed by a calendar that we barely follow, a year shaped by the Liturgy, with all sorts of culture-making aspects that we neglect. That's okay. God loves us anyway. And what we lose by not having

those roots we gain in being free to respond quickly to the situations our congregation faces.

When we take up the Christian task of leaving our personal devotion behind and gathering together, we do work. It's the work of worship, of ascribing worth to God, and we do it together, this liturgy. Until Transfiguration Sunday, a holiday none of us celebrate, we'll partner with other congregations by exploring the same Scripture passages that hundreds of thousands of congregations are thinking about at the same time.

I'm praying it will be worth God's while, and I honestly cannot believe it won't be. I hope that we ourselves will discover congregational and personal value in the Lectionary, too. I'm praying for it, and I'd invite us to pray for it, too.