

tender provision of our Lord Jesus for His people, as He fed them with bread in the wilderness (John 6).

The fathers of the church, who were much wiser than we—and likely better topical preachers when the need arose—nevertheless chose to follow the constraints of the lectionary. They did not view the prescribed set of readings as a muzzle upon the Holy Spirit, but rather, as a means by which He accomplishes His work of bringing all the words of Jesus to our remembrance. The lectionary has served the Church as a hedge of protection against false teachers and their pet agendas even as it has helped to present us with the whole counsel of God. May this sound pattern of words continue to aid and strengthen the Church as we earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto all the saints.

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IS THE LECTIONARY ACTUALLY IMPORTANT?

BY REV. EVAN SCAMMAN

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I GREW UP IN A PENTECOSTAL SORT OF CHURCH

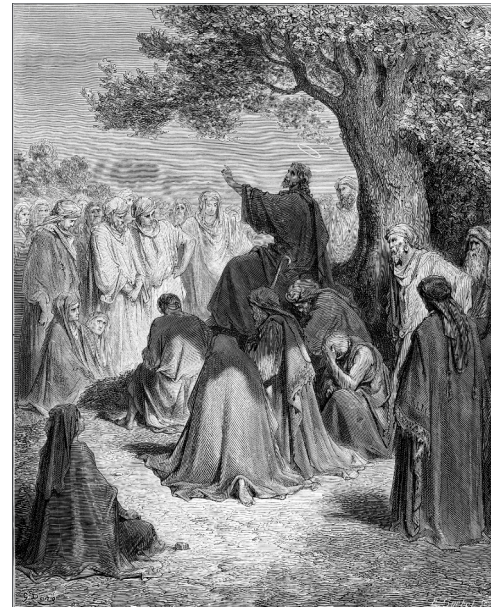
that had never used the lectionary. Why would we? Wasn't it better to be led by the Holy Spirit than to be tied down to any specific readings? Instead of preaching on a limited number of Biblical texts, our pastor preached from the whole Bible. Except that he didn't. That's the problem with "free-texting," as it is sometimes called. Although the pastor was free to preach on the entire Bible, his two-hour sermons generally fell back on one of his favorite passages. The story of Sanballat and Tobiah served to rebuke any members who were complaining against the work of "building up the walls of Jerusalem." When Elijah directed the starving widow of Zarephath to "bake me a cake," this meant that we were to put more in the offering plate, even when we had next to nothing to give. And the Road to Emmaus was a great opportunity to hear once again that we were "fools and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets had said." It's not that what

was said was inherently problematic, though some of it certainly was. The real problem lay in what was never said or taught. Before becoming a Lutheran, I had never heard, for example, a sermon about heaven. This fundamental Christian doctrine wasn't of interest to my former pastor, who was more focused on "building God's kingdom" here on earth. Only after becoming a Lutheran and being immersed within the yearly cycle of the lectionary, did I come to recognize my previous pastor's failure to preach "the whole counsel of God." It seems paradoxical that free-texting pastors would tend to preach less of the Bible than those who follow the lectionary, but this generally proves true. In fact, one of the great benefits of using the lectionary is that pastors are forced to preach on passages and topics they might otherwise avoid. The lectionary protects the flock of God from "hobby-horse" preaching, and it presents the whole counsel of God to His people, building them up in the faith, precept upon precept, line upon line.

A pastor is not free to speak as he pleases. He must speak as he is commanded. Therefore, every faithful pastor must contend with the world, the devil, and his own sinful nature, which all conspire to entice him into voicing his own thoughts and opinions from the pulpit. Free-texting, though not inherently sinful, tends to steer a pastor into the danger of prophesying of himself, that is, speaking his own words. Jesus said that not even the Holy Spirit will speak "of Himself, but whatsoever He shall hear, that shall He speak" (John 16:13). How much more must mortal pastors be careful to speak only what they hear from the Word of God.

Consider the difference in process between a pastor who uses the lectionary and one who free-texts based on a self-chosen topic. The first is more likely to approach the Scriptures asking, "What does God have to say to His people today?" while the latter,

having already decided what he wants to say, then searches the Bible for verses to support his chosen topic. This is not to say that a pastor cannot give a faithful and topical sermon—in fact, there may be times where this is necessary—but as a general rule, free-texting should be avoided, since it opens the door to many potential dangers: cherry-picking from the Word of God, avoiding uncomfortable truths, hobby-horse preaching, and even falling into serious doctrinal error.



Jesus Preaching to the Multitude. Doré, Gustave, 1832-1883.

Early in my seminary training, I wrongly assumed that it would sometimes be necessary to depart from the lectionary in order to address specific issues as they arose in my parish or in the surrounding culture. I have never once found this to be necessary. Instead, the appointed texts have consistently and miraculously proven to be far more applicable to the

situation at hand than anything I might have chosen myself. For example, during COVID, while many people were fearfully avoiding church, the appointed Psalm for the Fourth Sunday of Lent began with these words: "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord'" (Psalm 122). That same day, at the height of the toilet paper hoarding, Holy Scripture reminded us of how the fearful Israelites hoarded manna until it bred worms and stank (Exodus 16). But most importantly, we heard of the