



Sermon Treks

Trailways to
Creative Preaching

R o n a l d J . A l l e n

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Nashville

**SERMON TREKS:
TRAILWAYS TO CREATIVE PREACHING**

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CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Chapter 1. Preaching from the Christian Year	9
Chapter 2. Preaching from the <i>Revised Common Lectionary</i> : Strengths.	33
Chapter 3. Preaching from the <i>Revised Common Lectionary</i> : Cautions.	49
Chapter 4. Preaching through a Book of the Bible (Continuous Lectionary).	63
Chapter 5. Preaching from the African American Lectionary and Other Cultural and Civic Calendars	77
Chapter 6. Preaching from the Chronology of the Bible and from Schools of Thought within the Bible	93
Chapter 7. Preaching a Series That Starts with the Bible	113
Chapter 8. Preaching from Doctrines, Practices, and Personal and Social Issues . .	127
Chapter 9. Preaching from a Free Selection of Biblical Texts or Themes	143
Notes	155



INTRODUCTION

Every preacher picking up this book has likely heard (or made) comments similar to the following.

- “I can’t believe how texts in the lectionary match up so well with the situation in our congregation right now.” (From a lectionary preacher)
- “I have sat in front of this blank screen for hours, but nothing is coming. The lectionary readings just don’t connect.” (From a lectionary preacher)
- “The lectionary is the only way I can imagine preaching.” (From a lectionary preacher)
- “I wanted to address a particular issue in our congregation, so I put together a sermon series and attendance increased every week.” (From a non-lectionary preacher)
- “I love the freedom to choose a biblical passage every week from which to preach. But the other day, someone asked, ‘Why do you preach so much from the book of Acts? The Bible is much bigger.’” (From a non-lectionary preacher)
- “I can’t imagine why any preacher would become prisoner of the lectionary.” (From a non-lectionary preacher)

These comments point to the strange situation of many preachers. On the one hand, I know preachers who are drawn to the Christian year and the *Revised Common Lectionary* as starting points for preaching, and for whom the Christian year and the lectionary often generate homiletical heat that bursts into flame in the sermon.¹ Still, some weeks the Christian

Introduction

year and the RCL leave these preachers in the cold without shoes or a sweater. On the other hand, I know preachers who, from Sunday to Sunday, prefer to choose their own texts and set up their own sermon series, but whose homiletical well becomes shallow and runs dry. They often wonder, “Where do I turn this week?”

This book seeks to provide practical help in these matters by mapping a wide range of trailways to the sermon and by helping the preacher identify the strengths and cautions of each. These evaluative remarks function like trail markers that help the hiker anticipate what kind of terrain is ahead and what kind of equipment is needed to navigate it.

Rather than try to persuade the reader that one pathway to the sermon fits all congregations and contexts, the book encourages the preacher to become familiar with a range of starting points for sermon preparation and to think critically about which pathways have good chances of helping the congregation come to life-shaping interpretations of God and God’s purposes at particular moments in the congregation’s life.

A Shift to the Christian Year and the Revised Common Lectionary

During the first seventy-five years of the twentieth century, many preachers in historic Protestant denominations begin their sermon preparation by freely selecting individual biblical texts, preaching continuously through books of the Bible, preaching topical sermons, and turning to sermon series. Such churches observed Christmas and Easter while also frequently lifting up Mother’s Day, Memorial Day, Fourth of July, Labor Day, Thanksgiving, and other days in the civic calendar. A part of the church’s calendar was thus determined by civic life. Indeed, this was the kind of preaching on which I grew up and which was commonplace in many congregations when I was ordained in 1974.

Through much of the twentieth century, the Roman Catholic Church observed the Christian year and read from a lectionary, but Roman Catholic preaching was often centered more in church teaching than in the Bible. Among long-established Protestant churches, the Christian year and lectionaries were largely the province of Episcopal and Lutheran bodies, with some Reformed churches taking a similar path.

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) in the Roman Catholic Church set in motion a pattern of liturgical reform that was soon taken up by many ministers and congregations in historic Protestant churches. This pattern, called the *ecumenical consensus in worship*, orders the worship life

Introduction

of a congregation around the seasons of the Christian year (Advent, Christmas, Epiphany Day, Lent, Easter, Pentecost Day, and Ordinary Time). Individual services follow a historic form of worship that begins with the community *gathering, confessing sin*, then *reading the Bible and hearing the sermon*. The congregation *responds*, often with an affirmation of faith, a time of prayer, or both. The community makes an *offering*, particularly of bread and cup, and the service reaches its climax in the *Sacred Meal*, after which the community *goes forth* to extend the service of word and table into service in the everyday world.²

Two developments are key for preaching. First, many Roman Catholic and Protestant leaders in preaching concluded that the sermon should begin with the interpretation of a biblical text.³ In the Roman Catholic Church, this turn meant that the sermon should no longer focus so much on church teaching but should originate in the exposition of the Bible. On the Protestant side, the biblical emphasis meant that topical sermons fell into disfavor. Moreover the preacher was expected to deal with the text exegetically and theologically and not simply to use the text as a springboard into what the preacher wanted to say.

Second, in 1969 the Roman Catholic Church published a table of Bible readings (a lectionary) coordinated with the major themes of the Christian year as the starting point for sermon preparation. Several Protestant churches took up this initiative. By 1978, the Consultation on Common Texts was under way, with both Catholics and Protestants involved, to establish a shared (common) body of readings. In 1983, this group published the *Common Lectionary*.⁴ In response to critical reflection on almost a decade of use, the Consultation published a follow-up version in 1993, the *Revised Common Lectionary* (RCL).⁵ Ever since, significant numbers of ministers, priests, and congregations in the historic churches (and some beyond) have used the RCL in the context of the Christian year.

Cheers for the Lectionary: Three, Two, One, None, and Boo

The venerable David Buttrick of Vanderbilt Divinity School says, “Two Cheers and Some Questions” for the RCL.⁶ In my view a preacher could sometimes give three cheers, sometimes two, sometimes one, and sometimes none. Indeed, occasionally a preacher should boo the lectionary.

On the one hand, as noted previously, I welcome aspects of the shift to lectionary preaching for many of the reasons given in chapter 2. Indeed, the RCL offers so much that I have coauthored a three-volume commentary

Introduction

on the lectionary, calling attention to the Jewishness of lectionary passages while imploring preachers to avoid anti-Judaism when dealing with negative pictures of Jewish people and institutions.⁷ I have recently joined two colleagues in editing a three-volume commentary on the RCL from the perspective of social justice.⁸ I was part of a team that urged congregations in our movement—the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)—toward the Christian year and the *Revised Common Lectionary*.⁹ For almost forty years I have written page after page of commentary on lectionary readings for various periodicals focused on lectionary preaching. My homiletical GPS has been set so that I follow the Christian year and the RCL.

Conversation with the theological themes of the Christian year and the biblical texts of the RCL is, indeed, sometimes a rich and deep path for helping a congregation come to a believable interpretation of the presence and mission of God in a particular context. In thinking critically about the Christian year and the *Revised Common Lectionary*, I do not take cheap shots from afar.

On the other hand, the Christian year and the RCL have never quite become a part of my ecclesial soul. The same is true for some other preachers and congregations familiar to me, including some who have followed this path for many years. I have tried and tried to socialize myself into the Christian year and the RCL. At certain moments and seasons, these approaches to preaching do feel like home. But at other times the Christian year and the RCL seem distant, disconnected, and even alienated from my world. Sometimes they get in the way of coming to a vital interpretation of God's aims. Indeed, aspects of the Christian year and the *Revised Common Lectionary* run against the grain of some of my deepest theological convictions. When I have voiced such ambiguities with other preachers, I have been surprised at how many share similar sentiments.

Other ways of launching sermon preparation sometimes seem more timely and potent in their promise to help the congregation toward life-giving interpretations of the presence and purposes of the living God. I think, for example, of preaching through books of the Bible, preaching from biblical themes, developing sermon series, freely selecting texts, and yes, preaching topical sermons. Preaching that begins from such places can help congregations interpret the presence and purposes of God in particular contexts. Of course, since human finitude is pervasive, preachers and congregations can lose their way while following these approaches.

Since I am a member of one of the long-established (but now declining) denominations, I am particularly concerned with the renewal of preaching in such congregations. However, I believe this book will be of interest to preachers in churches across the historical and theological spectra.

Different Equipment for Different Treks

I grew up on the edge of the Ozark Mountains, where a trek usually meant hiking, canoeing, or biking. I have since trekked in the Blue Ridge Mountains in Georgia, in the Rocky Mountains in New Mexico and Colorado, on Mount Hood in Oregon, in the rain forests of Jamaica and Belize, across part of the desert in Israel, and along the Zambezi River in Zambia. The treks are similar in that they all involve journeying toward significant destinations. Yet each trek is different. Some involve straining every muscle climbing steep inclines, and others lead to sweating like a water faucet opened wide while plodding through steamy fields. Others include shooting down rapids in a canoe at risk of careening out of control, and still others entail baking under the naked sun. Trekkers need different maps, clothing, equipment, and supplies for different treks. With the best gear chosen for each journey ahead, trekkers hope every adventure adds to their lives and brings them to a point where something good happens.

The trek life is a good way of speaking about preaching. Going from the starting point of sermon preparation to the sermon and its afterglow is a kind of theological and pastoral trek. Congregations are in places as different as the Ozarks, the Rockies, the rain forests, the desert, and the Zambezi. Indeed, the spiritual ecology of one congregation can be as different over time as those different kinds of geographies and treks. This means that preachers need different kinds of homiletical maps, theological equipment, and hermeneutical supplies. They pack what they need for the terrain. The canoe that was just right for the rapids on the Current River in the Ozarks would not have been so helpful trekking across the Sinai.

To use more traditional theological language, postmodern emphases on diversity, particularity, and otherness come into play. As noted earlier, a fundamental purpose of preaching is to help the congregation interpret and respond to the presence and purposes of the living God. A preacher needs to approach the sermon from a starting point that gives the preacher a good chance of generating a conversation with the congregation that will help the community move toward a theologically adequate interpretation of the situation in which the sermon comes to life. This is the heart of the distinctive and irreplaceable work of preachers who have critical pastoral insight into their congregations and contexts. Scholars in disparate places like Boston, New Haven, New York, Princeton, Durham, Chicago, Decatur, Dallas, Claremont, and Berkeley cannot make such decisions for the preacher in the congregation on Main Street.

While the preacher needs to select promising starting points from

Introduction

individual sermon to individual sermon, O. Wesley Allen Jr., a leading scholar of preaching, stresses that preaching can have optimum cumulative effects when the themes of sermons work together over a long arc of time.¹⁰ Not only from week to week but from season to season and from year to year, the preacher needs to select starting points that help nourish the congregation's theological perception and response.

The Social and Theological Location of the Writer

Contemporary theologians stress that the social location of preacher and congregation often contributes to what preacher and people see and seek in the Bible, in theology, in ecclesial life, and in ethical behavior.¹¹ Social location is the thick interweaving of the factors that make up a life: gender, sex, race, ethnicity, social experience, class, education, political commitments, geographical location, community setting, and philosophical and religious viewpoints. Individuals and groups often seek to interpret Christian tradition in ways that benefit their social locations. Preachers need to reflect critically on how our social locations affect what we would like to find in the Bible and Christian theology, in the life and witness of the church, in what we think the sermon should be, and in interpreting God's purposes for the larger world.

In keeping with this emphasis, it is only fair that the reader of this book have access to the author's social location. Raised in a small town on the edge of the Ozark Mountains in southern Missouri, I grew up in a large and vibrant congregation of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Our church was marked by the doctrine of justification by grace, seeking unity among Christians, impatience with creeds, rational preaching, baptism of believers by immersion, weekly gathering for the Sacred Meal, and freedom of theological interpretation. One of our slogans was, "In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, and in all things charity [love]." These elements continue to loom large in my consciousness. I try not to let them predetermine where my preaching and scholarship go, but the reader will see them in this book in both surface and hidden ways.

Beyond that, I am a middle-class, heterosexual male of Eurocentric origin, married for more than thirty-eight years to a clergywoman with whom I raised five children. My spouse serves as minister of the West Street Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Tipton, Indiana, where I am active. I have taught preaching and Gospels and Letters at Christian Theological Seminary for more than thirty years, and I can hardly believe the seminary pays me to do what I would want to do anyway.

Introduction

By way of theological orientation, I subscribe to process (relational) theology. I believe in a God of unconditional love, who seeks for all people to live together in love. While God has more power than any other entity, God does not have the unilateral power to interrupt and reshape situations. I believe divine power is exercised through lure. Many people find these views unsatisfactory, but they help me make sense of God, the world, and real-life experience.

I like to find things in the Bible and Christian tradition and theology that support my place in the world and my theological, social, and political views. I need to listen critically to others—to people and viewpoints that call into question my social location and theological perspectives.

I regard preaching as a conversation in which the preacher helps the congregation listen to how others interpret the presence and purposes of God while encouraging the congregation toward its own adequate understanding of these things.¹² The others to whom the preacher turns include the Bible, the history of the church, Christian theology, the congregation, individuals and communities outside the Christian house, the multiple forms of knowledge available in our time, and others in the purview of the sermon. While most preachers *assume* the authority of the Bible and Christian tradition, I am persuaded that other voices, and even those from outside the Bible and Christian community, can sometimes challenge not only particular interpretations of the Bible and Christian theology but aspects of the Bible and doctrine themselves.

New Names for the Old Book: Torah, Prophets, Writings, Gospels, Letters

I have long been on a journey with others seeking more satisfactory terms for the parts of the Bible than Old Testament and New Testament. While the notion of *old* in antiquity often invoked respect for things of the past, the word *old* today frequently bespeaks things that are worn out. Contemporary North American culture is addicted to the new, often in replacement of the old. Whether intended or not, this language contributes to Christians sometimes diminishing the Old Testament, regarding it as second class, worn out, or even in need of replacement. The New Testament, by contrast, is perceived to be the new and improved part of the Bible.

Having considered other terms, such as Hebrew Bible, Greek Scriptures, Christian Scriptures, and First and Second Testaments, I am now exploring Torah, Prophets, Writings, Gospels, and Letters as names for parts of the Bible.¹³ This nomenclature builds on a Jewish pattern suggested in the acronym Tanakh, a name the Jewish community sometimes uses for their Bible: Torah

Introduction

(Torah), *Nevi'im* (prophets), and *Ketuvim* (writings). The Gospels and Letters continue the story that began in the Torah, Prophets, and Writings.

Chapters Highlight Different Treks for Preaching

This book begins with a survey of the Christian year as a context for preaching (chapter 1). The next chapters describe the Revised Common Lectionary and identify strengths and cautions of following that trailway to sermon (chapters 2 and 3). Chapter 4 deals with preaching through a book of the Bible. Chapter 5 lifts up the African American Lectionary and other cultural and civic lectionary impulses. Chapter 6 turns to the chronology of major biblical events as well as schools of thought within the Bible as trailheads for preaching. Chapter 7 looks at sermon series that start with biblical texts or themes. Chapter 8 adds preaching from doctrines, practices, and personal and social issues to the preacher's homiletical backpack. Chapter 9 ends the book by considering sermons that come from the free selection of biblical texts from week to week.

I intend to show respect and fairness for all viewpoints discussed in this book. As long as we are this side of the full and final manifestation of the realm of God, we are finite and our perception is relative. In such a state, we can at least be civil and fair.

Sermon Treks Lead to Life-Giving Vistas

A recent trek comes to mind as an analogy of what can happen on the railway to the pulpit. Our family—two sixty-something parents, five young adult children, and two young adult spouses—camped in an eco-setting in the Caribbean. One morning, to see the sunrise over the sea, we got up at 4:00 a.m. and hiked through the rain forest up a mountain, negotiating bushes, boulders, ravines, briars, logs, and ruins, not to mention the dark. For this trek we needed thick hats, strong lights, steel-toed shoes, a compass, and a son-in-law with an unerring sense of direction.

When we reached the top, the surrounding ocean and forest were wrapped in fog. But as the sun rose, the fog rolled up like a scroll, and we were bathed in as pure a moment as I can remember. We saw each other and the world in new ways.

Every sermon will not reach such a height. But if the preacher has negotiated the trek in a way that is appropriate to God, time, and place, the preacher and the congregation alike will see more clearly through the fog of life.



Introduction

1. The Christian year is sometimes known as *the church year* or *the liturgical year*. Although churches have had multiple lectionaries over the years, the *Revised Common Lectionary* seems to be the most widely used today. The abbreviation RCL in this book refers to that lectionary. See The Consultation on Common Texts, *The Revised Common Lectionary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992).

2. The most widely accepted foundational document of the ecumenical expression of this approach is *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982).

3. Toward this end, the Bishops' Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops developed a pivotal document: *Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1982).

4. The Consultation on Common Texts, *Common Lectionary* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1983).

5. The Consultation on Common Texts, *The Revised Common Lectionary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992).

6. David G. Buttrick, "Preaching the Lectionary: Two Cheers and Some Questions," *Call to Worship* 37, no. 1 (2002–2003): 52–60.

7. Ronald J. Allen and Clark M. Williamson, *Preaching the Gospels without Blaming the Jews: A Lectionary Commentary*; *Preaching the Letters without Dismissing the Law: A Lectionary Commentary*; and *Preaching the Old Testament: A Lectionary Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, 2006, 2007).

8. Ronald J. Allen, Dale P. Andrews, and Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, *Preaching God's Transforming Justice: A Lectionary Commentary, Year B, Featuring 22 New Holy Days for Justice* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011); Dale P. Andrews, Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, and Ronald J. Allen, *Preaching God's Transforming Justice: A Lectionary Commentary, Year C, Featuring 22 New Holy Days for Justice* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012); Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, Dale P. Andrews, and Ronald J. Allen, *Preaching God's Transforming Justice: A Lectionary*

Notes to Pages 4-11

Commentary, Year A, Featuring 22 New Holy Days for Justice (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013).

9. Keith Watkins, Ronald J. Allen, Michael K. Kinnamon, Linda McKiernan-Allen, Katherine N. Kinnamon, *Thankful Praise: A Resource for Christian Worship* (St. Louis: CBP Press, 1987).

10. O. Wesley Allen Jr., *The Homiletic of All Believers: A Conversational Approach* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 58–85; idem., *Preaching and Reading the Lectionary: A Three-Dimensional Approach to the Liturgical Year* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2007).

11. For easy-to-read introductions to social location, see Ronald J. Allen, *Preaching and the Other: Studies of Postmodern Insights* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2009), 5–94; and Ronald D. Sisk, *Preaching Ethically: Being True to the Gospel, Your Congregation and Yourself* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2008): 1–12.

12. See Ronald J. Allen, *Interpreting the Gospel: An Introduction to Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1998), 63–96; idem., “Preaching as Mutual Critical Correlation,” in Jana Childers, ed., *Purposes of Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 1–22. For a similar but more developed approach, see O. Wesley Allen, Jr., *The Homiletic of All Believers: A Conversational Approach to Proclamation and Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005). I am also influenced by John S. McClure, *Other-wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001) and Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Round Table Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997).

13. Ronald J. Allen, “Torah, Prophets, Writings, Gospels, Letters: A New Name for the Old Book,” *Encounter* 68 (2007): 53–62.

1. Preaching from the Christian Year

1. Adolf Adam, *The Liturgical Year: Its History and Its Meaning after the Reform of the Liturgy* (New York: Pueblo, 1981), offers a traditional scholarly consensus on the origins of the Christian year. Thomas Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*, 2nd ed. (New York: Pueblo, 1991), offers revised views. A recent discussion in the spirit of Talley is Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Origins of Feasts and Seasons in Early Christianity* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011).

2. Scholars often use the word *deuteronomic* to refer to material found in the book of Deuteronomy, especially chapters 5–28, and the word *Deuteronomistic* to refer to the point of view of the deuteronomic theology that shapes the present forms of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, the Samuels, the Kings, and some other writings.

3. The Johannine writings are based less on the notion that history is divided into two ages and more on the notion that existence is divided into two spheres: the heavenly sphere of light, truth, sight, freedom, abundance, and life, where God dwells; and the worldly sphere of darkness, lying, blindness, slavery, scarcity, and death, where human beings dwell. For John, God sent Jesus to reveal the possibility of living as a colony of heaven in the midst of the world. The resurrection is the definitive revelation of the truth of that promise. On these different worldviews,