

To lectionary or not to lectionary

By [John Nash](#)

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In the church where I did my internship (and spent three years) we used the lectionary. In my last church, where I served for 4 years, we also used the lectionary. I like the lectionary and understand its strengths, of which there are many. I considered it a spiritual discipline to have to think about different texts that I might normally not use to preach on and think about what I would say.

Now I know that one of the arguments for why the lectionary should be used is that it forces us to have to cover texts we otherwise would not preach on. But, since there are always at least four selections, most of the time I could avoid some troublesome texts, and have found that most preachers do as well. As an example, in the three churches I have now preached to, I have used the Jacob stories found during the summer in year A. But, in all of those churches most people said they had never heard a sermon preached on Jacob, so I know other ministers are just skipping over those passages they would rather not cover.

In my newest church, I was told that past ministers have used the lectionary but the preference would be not to be glued to it, and so for the first time in my ministry I have gone "off lectionary." I have to say it is completely refreshing and reinvigorating for me, and the congregation seems to be liking it as well. I am now into my second sermon series and it's done a lot to allow me to sort of set down my own theology and thinking at the beginning of my ministry here.

In addition, I find that I am doing a lot more independent research and reading for each sermon than I ever did using the lectionary. As someone who loves to read and study, this has been a huge strength and can see the benefits in my own spiritual life and disciples. While I still use different commentaries they are coming at the very end just to make sure I didn't miss anything that might be important, rather than being what I sort of start my thinking around.

I also find that my sermons are longer (and then are cut down) as I have a lot more to say than I did with the lectionary readings. This is then generating ideas for new sermon series. For example, on September 11, I did use the lectionary readings for that day on forgiveness, and after sitting down to write that sermon came up with at least 4-5 different sermons that could be preached about forgiveness. Now I know you could also do this with the lectionary, but it would take you a long time to accomplish and would be a little disjointed because, unless you are using the Hebrew scripture or the epistle, the themes tend to change too often.

As I am building out ideas into the future I still reference the lectionary readings to see if they match, and will obviously keep themes matching the seasons of the church, in particular for Advent and Lent, but not using it all the time, for the moment, has made a huge difference in not only what I am preaching on and how I am preaching, but even how I am approaching my sermons, and I like the difference.

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