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The Fourth Gospel in a Three-Year Lectionary

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The Gospel of John does not march in step with the other gospels. Perhaps this is why the framers of the three-year lectionary now used by many Christian churches found it so difficult to domesticate John. The readings from Matthew, Mark, and Luke proceed in measured pace, one gospel per year, while the Fourth Gospel appears sporadically throughout the lectionary, claiming a premier role on festival days, dominating the Easter season, and making occasional guest appearances. Yet since there is no “Year of John,” those who preach from the lectionary face the formidable task of capturing this “maverick” gospel¹ without the opportunity for an extended pursuit over a twelve-month period. This interpretive challenge is the focus of our work here.

I. TEXT AND LITERARY CONTEXT

Contemporary exposition of Scripture is a dynamic enterprise, involving the interplay between a text and several contexts. Johannine lectionary texts sometimes encompass a natural block of material (like the Cana miracle—John 2:1-11; Epiphany 2, Series C) and occasionally abbreviate a longer narrative. A number of the appointed lessons, however, attempt discreetly to avoid seemingly harsh or unedifying verses, including some that are quite significant theologically.² For example, the story of the temple cleansing in the Lutheran and Episcopal lectionaries (2:13-22; Lent 3, Series B) ends with a statement about the disciples’ belief. But vv. 23-25, which speak of Jesus’ mistrust of faith based on signs, are not found anywhere in these lectionaries even though they introduce one of John’s major themes. The text appointed for two weeks later (12:20-33; Lent 5, Series B) also avoids the theme, culminating with the announcement that Jesus, when lifted up from the earth, would draw all people to himself. The remainder of the passage shows that people so thoroughly misunderstood Jesus that he concluded his public

¹The expression is Robert Kysar’s: *John: The Maverick Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1976).

²On the principles used to select texts see *The Church Year: Calendar and Lectionary* (Contemporary Worship 6; Minneapolis: Augsburg; Philadelphia: Fortress; St. Louis: Concordia, 1973) 16-17.

ministry by hiding, for despite the signs they did not believe (12:31-43).

Balanced interpretation of a text requires attention to its literary context. A good example is the Good Shepherd discourse (John 10) which seems to lead a life of its own, independent of its literary context. The lectionary inserts the Good Shepherd material on the fourth Sunday of Easter, between accounts of the resurrection appearances, which are appointed for the previous Sundays, and assuring words from the farewell discourses (John 13-17), which are read on

subsequent Sundays. But the gospel itself presents the Good Shepherd discourse in a context of heated public debate, after a man healed by Jesus is expelled from the synagogue (9:1-41) and before a mob attempts to pelt Jesus with stones (10:31-39). The hostile responses to Jesus' words (10:19-21, 31-39) are omitted in the lectionary, but an interpreter who notes the highly charged setting of the discourse will sense more profoundly that Jesus cares for the flock not only by the green pastures and still waters of Psalm 23, but also in the midst of a world rent by conflict. The "abundant life" that Jesus promises was secured by his own death and is given *despite* the continuing presence of "thieves and robbers" who threaten the flock.

Another example is John 3:14-21, found in the Lutheran and Roman Catholic lectionaries for Lent 4, Series B. The text states that "the light has come into the world and men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil." When isolated from their context, the sharp distinctions between light and darkness, love and hate, God and evil seem to encourage quick and easy judgments in the realm of human experience—where things are often gray rather than black or white. But within the larger context, the images provide commentary on the enigmatic Nicodemus, who came to Jesus "by night" (3:2). Nicodemus addressed Jesus in a cordial way, became baffled by talk of new birth, then silently faded from the scene after 3:9. Did he "love darkness" and "hate the light," or had he come out of the darkness to the light? Were his actions really evil? The Nicodemus episode provides an unsettling reminder of the limits of our own ability to discern the ways of God or even the true character of other persons (cf. 7:50-51; 19:39). When the light enters the world, it comes to expose even those who are highly respected by human standards (3:1) and, by exposing them, to save them.

II. TEXT AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

John's nomadic role in the lectionary can make it difficult to recall that the gospel originated in a specific historical setting. The problem is compounded because the gospel is replete with statements that have acquired an almost timeless character, like "I am the light of the world" (8:12) and "the truth will make you free" (8:32). Yet recent investigations into the evangelist's historical context enable us to see how this timeless gospel offered a very timely message to the Christians in the late first century and how, in turn, it can speak a timely word in our own context.

The gospel of John took shape during a formative and often turbulent period in Christian history. Members of the Christian community were coming into sharp conflict with Jewish authorities, and some (like the man born blind, John 9) were expelled from the synagogue because of their Christian faith (12:42; 16:2). The trauma of this experience is reflected in the pervasive use of courtroom terms (such as "confess," "deny," "judge," "witness," and "testimony": e.g., 1:7-8, 15, 19-20, 31-36; 5:30-31), by the ominous portrayal of Jewish leaders, and by the scenes in

which Jesus and others seem to be on trial (1:19-28; 5:16-47; 8:12-20; 9:13-34). At the same time, the community was coming to include people from diverse backgrounds: Jews (1:40-41), Samaritans (4:39-42), and Greeks (12:20-21); the poor (9:8-11), the wealthy (4:46-54), and those in between (12:1-2). These people did not share the same ethnic background or social status, but they were bound together by a common Christian confession.

The historical context can help interpreters discern added depth and urgency in texts like the farewell discourses (John 13-17) which appear to float free of history. These texts are set during the Last Supper, but the Christ who speaks seems to transcend space and time when he solemnly declares, “I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to thee” (17:11). Jesus defies normal temporal categories as what appear to be promises of his resurrection appearances (14:19) and parousia (14:2-3) merge into a present indwelling of Father and Son in the believer through the Spirit (14:11, 17, 23). The lectionary accents the transcendent character of these pericopes by placing them after, rather than before, Easter.

These apparently timeless discourses assumed such a prominent position in the gospel precisely because they spoke so pointedly to Christians in the late first century. The gospel probably reached its present form about 90 A.D., two generations after the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry. Jesus’ resurrection belonged to an increasingly distant past, with few eyewitnesses left alive; the parousia had not happened and seemed to belong to an increasingly distant future. In the meantime the community had been cut off from its parent body, the synagogue, and felt orphaned in an unbelieving world. The farewell discourses assured such Christians with the promise, “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you” (14:18 NIV). Jesus’ ministry on earth had ended, but he would continue to be present with his followers through the Spirit.

Contemporary proclaimers of the promise can identify ways in which Christians today might feel “orphaned.” Collectively, we all are separated from Jesus’ resurrection by two thousand years of history and look ahead to an uncertain future; in darker moments we may feel abandoned on a dying planet, hurtling alone through infinite, empty space. Individually, we may feel abandoned in other ways (e.g., an elderly person placed in a nursing home, whose friends and siblings have passed away, whose children are gone, and who must now live in unfamiliar surroundings). Yet the promise remains. Jesus has risen; he will return; he is present through the Holy Spirit. We have not been abandoned.

III. TEXT AND SEASONAL CONTEXT

The lectionary cycle affixes texts to seasons and festivals of the church year which set a tone and a direction for preaching. At its best, lectionary preaching lets a text speak out of its literary and historical contexts in ways appropriate to the season, without letting the season overshadow the message of the text.

The prologue to John’s gospel (1:1-18), which is read during the Christmas season each year, presents one such challenge. The prologue does not mention Bethlehem, the shepherds, or even the infant Jesus. Instead, its soaring poetry sweeps us into the middle of an intense debate by declaring, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (1:1). Throughout the gospel everyone, friend and foe alike, agreed that Jesus was human. The

disputed point was, “Is he really from God, or is he a blasphemer trying to make himself God?” Jesus’ opponents denied precisely what the prologue affirmed (5:18; 10:33), while his followers finally confessed Jesus as “My Lord and my God!” (20:28).

In our own time too Jesus’ humanity is generally accepted. During the Christmas season both Christians and non-Christians warm to the sight of the infant Jesus cradled in the straw. At

the same time the season often awakens a restless longing for the presence of God, even in some who have been alienated from the faith or are skeptical about its claims. The Fourth Gospel takes the questions and challenges to the faith seriously, responding with a declaration that will be borne out by the rest of the gospel narrative: one can indeed encounter God, precisely in the person of Jesus.

The Johannine passion narrative (John 18:1-19:42), which is assigned for Good Friday each year, poses a different problem. The text is lengthy, recounting the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus. The length of the text, together with the Good Friday context, means that many may choose to read only the portion which recounts the crucifixion or to limit preaching solely to that portion of the text. Congregations in which the tradition of using the seven last words of Jesus is strong will read excerpts from the crucifixion accounts of all four gospels rather than the Johannine passion narrative in its entirety.

John's account of Jesus' arrest and trial is one of the finest, most intricately written pieces in the entire New Testament and deserves to be heard in its own right.³ The text could be called "The World on Trial," for in it Jesus' innocence is made clear as the world's sin is exposed. First, we see Peter, who appears to be a faithful follower of Jesus, entering the court of the high priest only to deny his Lord (18:15-18, 25-27). Second, the Jewish authorities try to convict Jesus on the grounds that he is guilty of rebellion against God (19:7) and against Rome (19:12), but end up condemning themselves of these same charges: they rebel against God by claiming that Caesar, not God, is their only king (19:15), while actually supporting rebellion against Rome by requesting the release of an insurrectionist (*Istes*, 18:40; cf. Mark 15:7). Third, Pilate and the Roman soldiers who helped to arrest Jesus appeared to possess supreme power and authority; but their pretensions are exposed, for they are powerless to act of their own accord (18:6; 19:10-11). Thus representatives of the entire world—Jews, Romans, and Christians—are convicted in this scene, which prepares readers for the death of Jesus, "the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29, 30).⁴

IV. LECTIONARY, HISTORY, AND THEOLOGY

A lectionary obviously has a significant impact on the way we understand John's gospel as a whole. The three-year cycle suggests that the framework of Jesus' life and ministry can best be established by the synoptics and then supplemented by John.⁵ This has been the predominant view since the second century when

³For a stimulating treatment of John's trial narrative see Paul D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985) 126-137.

⁴The passion narrative and some of the longer Johannine texts are presented for dramatic reading in *Lectionary for the Christian People* (3 vols.; New York: Pueblo; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986-88).

⁵See Arland J. Hultgren, "Hermeneutical Tendencies in the Three-Year Lectionary," *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics*, ed. John Reumann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 146-148.

Clement of Alexandria identified John as the "spiritual gospel," which was written to augment the information about the "physical" aspects of Jesus' ministry contained in the other gospels.⁶ Modern biblical criticism often has followed suit, trying to distill the earliest evidence for the "historical Jesus" from the synoptics—especially Mark and Q—while relegating John to the

periphery of the discussion. What interpreters found in John was a profound, if sometimes disturbing presentation of the faith of the early church.

In recent decades, however, scholars have stressed that the synoptics, like John, are theological presentations of the story of Jesus, which were crafted to nurture Christian faith. The renewed emphasis on the theology of each evangelist has opened up fresh possibilities for contemporary exposition of the texts. At the same time, the use of a lectionary based on the synoptics can leave the impression that we find more history in the synoptics and more theology in John, an impression that does not do justice to any of the gospels.

Mark is the earliest of the four gospels, offering a haunting portrayal of Jesus as suffering Messiah. But the author apparently did not recount the ministry of Jesus in a chronological sequence; Papias (ca. 125 A.D.) said that Mark became Peter's interpreter and "wrote accurately, *but not in order*, the things said or done by the Lord, as much as he remembered."⁷ Matthew modified the structure of the gospel story again, giving special prominence to collections of teaching material like the sermon on the mount. Luke also formulated the story in a distinctive way, presenting most of Jesus' public ministry as part of a lengthy journey to his destiny in Jerusalem (Luke 9:51-19:46).

John recounts much of Jesus' public ministry in terms of the Jewish festival calendar: sabbath (ch. 5), Passover (ch. 6), Tabernacles (7:1-10:21), Hanukkah (10:22-39). Theologically, the structure presents Jesus as the fulfillment and replacement of Jewish tradition. Historically, it indicates that Jesus' ministry spanned two to three years, encompassing three Passover celebrations (2:13; 6:4; 19:14). This view is certainly as credible as that of the synoptics which give the impression that the ministry lasted perhaps a few months to a year. Many interpreters do maintain that chronologically the cleansing of the temple belongs near the end of Jesus' ministry as the synoptics have it, rather than at the beginning as in John 2:13-22. Yet many also acknowledge that John probably was correct when he said that the Last Supper was eaten on the day before Passover (13:1; 18:28; 19:14), rather than on Passover itself as in the synoptics (Mark 14:12).⁸ Like the synoptics, John structured his gospel theologically, while maintaining a connection to the events of the life of Jesus and the testimony of the eyewitnesses (21:24).

V. THE LIMITS OF THE LECTIONARY

A lectionary provides a structure for disciplined study of texts on a week by week basis, challenging an interpreter to consider a wide variety of passages

⁶Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.14.7.

⁷*Ibid.*, 3.39.15.

⁸On the dates of the temple cleansing and the Last Supper see, e.g., Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1970) 232, 294-295; Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (2 vols.; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966-70) 1.117-118, 2.555-556. Brown has more extended discussion of the historical issue on pp. XLI-XLIII.

(including some which he or she otherwise might prefer to overlook). The three-year cycle was not designed to limit the number of texts used in worship, but to make *more* texts available than is possible in a one-year system.⁹ In this respect the three-year cycle has been a boon to the church. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the lectionary does not exhaust our scriptural

resources, and pastors follow its spirit by periodically reaching beyond it to include texts not found in the cycle.

Pastors ought to consider some of these Johannine texts which do not appear in the lectionary. The story of the Galilean official (4:46-54) involves issues of faith and experience. A man was driven to seek Jesus because of his son's illness; he believed Jesus' word of promise without having seen a miracle, and his faith was deepened by the experience of his son's healing. The invalid at Bethesda (5:1-16) was just the opposite: Jesus healed him, with no evidence of faith on the man's part before or after he was healed, and the man subsequently reported Jesus to the authorities. The story is invaluable because it shows that faith is not a precondition for gracious actions on Jesus' part. The remainder of chapter 5 is an example of Christian apologetics, that is, it presents a reasoned defense of Jesus' unity with the Father in response to challenges from critics. Like a stirring courtroom drama, the charges are stated (5:17-18), Jesus argues his case (5:19-30), presents his witnesses (5:31-40), and finally prosecutes a case against his opponents (5:41-47). Chapters 7-8 present a series of debates concerning Jesus' messiahship in the context of festival worship (7:2), showing how Jesus used water and light, which were the major symbols of the feast, to declare his identity.¹⁰

The lectionary can be a valuable tool for the study and proclamation of Scripture. It leads pastor and congregation to many of the key sites on the biblical landscape and establishes a basis for weekly text studies among pastors. Nevertheless, like the Fourth Evangelist, pastors must sometimes take an independent path to vistas often bypassed. The lectionary is intended to expand, not restrict, the number of texts for preaching. Pastors can and sometimes should include texts not found in the cycle; they can use the texts prescribed for festivals on non-festival Sundays and create sermon series that run independently of the assigned texts. The gospel of John makes a bold and compelling witness to Christ which commands a full hearing in our time.

⁹*The Church Year*, 14.

¹⁰On the festival see J. Coert Rylaarsdam, "Booths, Feast of," *Interpreters' Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George A. Buttrick (4 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1962) 1.456. The Lutheran lectionary includes 7:37-39 for Pentecost, Series B and 8:31-36 for Reformation; the Roman Catholic cycle uses 8:1-11 on Lent 5, Series C.