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PREFACE

As we, the two authors, have talked during the writing of this book, it seemed to us that although we actually disagreed about very little, when we came to read lectionary texts, our points of view were different. As we discussed this, it became clear that these differences were not the result of our distinct fields (New Testament and liturgical history) nor our teaching experience (Both of us have taught homiletics for a good many years). Nor was it in our educations (Both of us hold the bachelor's degree and the doctoral degree from the same universities!). Rather it is, we think, because we are grounded in different theological traditions. Gail R. O'Day comes from a predominantly Reformed background (United Church of Christ), whereas Charles D. Hackett is an Anglican. This difference has produced some rich conversation between us and has led us to understand that rather than being in competition, each tradition has a good deal to offer the other.

With this in mind it seemed good to us to share some of the particular angles of vision in which these different traditions have formed us and informed our understandings of lectionary preaching.

When I come to a set of lessons, my initial reading always imagines them as being read at the Eucharist for the particular Sunday or Holy Day to which they are appointed. My imagination automatically envisions a certain "place" in the liturgical year. Is this the next to last Sunday in Ordinary Time (which is the Second Sunday before Advent)? Or perhaps it is the First Sunday after Epiphany (a traditional time for baptisms). Or perhaps it is the First Sunday of Lent. That is to say, I read these lessons with a sense of location in liturgical time. Where have we just been and where are we headed in this year's

pilgrimage through the church year? Part of my imagination is a quite palpable sense of the aura of the day: the liturgical colors, the church decorations, the music's tone and texts, and all the rest, which will be part of that particular day in the liturgical year.

These readings and the sermon that immediately follows them will be part of a community experience in which a group of Christians will come together to become (whether they think of it this way or not) a bit more the holy and loving people of God. In so doing they will listen and look for God, they will seek to pray, and they will relate to each other. They will hear the word read and proclaimed in the context of a certain day or season and will proceed to offer and share the Eucharist.

And so, I find myself aware of the lives of these people in whose midst these readings will be proclaimed. What is happening in the world, in the nation, in the community, in the parish, in their lives? The church year functions to contextualize our lives in terms of the church's experience of our Lord, but it also is meant to open our everyday lives with their pains, anxieties, and joys to the light of the Gospels. What might Luke's account of Jesus' baptism by John (Year C, the First Sunday after Epiphany) mean to a middle Georgia congregation whose only major industry, a textile factory, has just announced it will close its doors? How do fearful events comport with the promises of new life and the healing power of God in Christ that the lessons for this day proclaim?

As I consider this way of beginning to read, which seems by now like second nature to me, it strikes me that it is consistent with the way I understand Scripture. The Bible we have is a combination of Hebrew Scripture (received by the early church primarily in its Greek translation) and those early Christian writings that the church came to define as the "rule" (canon) of the faith. Though there was quite general agreement about the kernel of the New Testament canon by the middle of the second century, the New Testament as we know it was not finalized until the latter part of the fourth century. This nearly miraculous process of consensual agreement took place without the guidance of any central authority and was only ratified by a council in 382 after they had arrived at unanimity. When the church in all its diversity makes a decision like that, even over a period of three and a half centuries, one must attribute it to the Holy Spirit.[1] But the Spirit worked through the church. The Bible as we have it, then, is a product of the thought, the discussion, and, yes, the argument of the church. Perhaps above all, it is linked with the worship of the church, since it was in the gatherings of Christians for

Eucharist and for prayer that the various Gospel accounts, the letters of Paul, and the other writings came to be known. Paul wrote to various churches. He meant for these letters to be read to them assembled. The Gospels almost certainly were intended for public reading at worship, and the argument can be made that any number of portions of New Testament writings were intended for or were parts of such liturgical events as baptismal homilies and instruction. As important as individual reading and pondering and praying with the Bible may be, it always derives from the church's public reading, pondering, and praying. The church year is a primary way of structuring that public engagement, and the *Revised Common Lectionary* is our contemporary attempt at that ancient way of linking worship and Holy Scripture.

But the process of canonizing the Bible was made with constant reference to the experience of Christians. Various, often quite popular, Gnostic writings, for instance, were excluded because they did not represent the earthy and thoroughly physical way that Christians knew they lived. Christ saved precisely because he lived in human flesh and because he suffered and died as each of us suffers and dies. Thus the ancient dictum: "What is not assumed (by Christ) is not redeemed." The Jesus of the Bible is always fully human. So any reading of the Bible that does not acknowledge the full, physical, and mortal humanity of every person is deficient. In this sense, as we come to each Sunday's lessons, we come to an inherited tradition based in the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, a tradition that is constantly being formed and reformed by the Church's living experience. We read, we interpret, and we preach in worship to a particular people at a particular liturgical time and a particular time in history. In this biblical reading, worshiping, and preaching, we continually and necessarily modify, if only so slightly, that living tradition that is our Christian inheritance.

And here we come upon another, typically Anglican point of view. Our salvation is rooted in the Incarnation. That means that salvation comes in and through our physical, particular, and historical living. It also means that as we find ourselves in new situations we are bound to discover new ways in which Christ is present and offering life. Christ does not change, but we do. And those changes find him already present in ways and forms unthought by us before.

But these discoveries must be ratified by our brothers and sisters in Christ. None of us alone is free enough from self-centered sin simply to reinterpret the faith by ourselves. Interpretation is ultimately a

communal enterprise. As readers and preachers we are called to interpret for our time and our situation, but always with the awareness of our place in the stream of witnesses, past, present and future, which is the church.

Hackett

The liturgical year is not deeply rooted in my imagination in the same way that it is for Charles Hackett. The preached word stood at the center of the worship service in the church in which I was raised and in which I am ordained. For much of my early life, congregations that I attended celebrated the Eucharist ("Communion") monthly, or perhaps quarterly, not weekly, and the liturgical year consisted of marking Christmas Eve, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday. The liturgical rhythms that Professor Hackett notes as the foundation of his pastoral imagination were not a formative part of much of my earliest experience of Christian worship. Instead, the rhythm that formed my pastoral imagination was the exposition of the biblical text. Sunday after Sunday, the sermon was the centerpiece of my worship experience. My sense of worship was that I went to hear the biblical story and to learn what it meant for my life. Reformed traditions have taken as their starting point the Word of God as revealed in Scripture. The biblical texts tell the story of the presence and work of God in and through history, in and through specific communities of faith, and one of the responsibilities of preaching is to create a living conversation between those stories of the past and the present moment of a faith community's life.

In interesting ways, my personal liturgical development reflects the liturgical developments outlined in the opening chapters of this book and that gave rise to the *Revised Common Lectionary*. All of my worship formation occurred after Vatican II and the liturgical renewal that this Council sparked for Protestants and Catholics alike (see chapter 1). In my early adulthood and in the years when I was being formed as a New Testament scholar and homiletician, Protestant churches in the United States went through an amazing liturgical awakening. The sense of the movement of the church year, of the seasons of a worshiping community's life became a regular part of my worship life. The centrality of the sermon in worship did not change, but the context in which that sermon was preached changed dramatically. At first my worship life was only punctuated by a new sense of liturgical time—celebrations of Ash Wednesday, Lent, Advent—but soon my worship life became more regularly shaped

by liturgical time. The selection of scripture for worship shared in this new formation. More and more Protestant churches began to use first the *Common Lectionary*, and then the *Revised Common Lectionary*, as the guide in selecting scripture for worship. As a result, my experience of preaching and the role of scripture in worship changed. When the biblical text was read in worship, two stories were now simultaneously in play—the biblical story and the Christian story into which the church year invites the worshiper.

When I read the lectionary texts assigned for a particular Sunday, both of these stories inform my approach. In distinction from Professor Hackett, however, my Reformed orientation and understanding of the centrality of the biblical story lead me to start with the specifics of the biblical text. My initial reading always begins with the lessons as biblical texts and then moves to locate them in the church year. For each of the four lessons provided by the lectionary, I will read the lesson in its entirety and look carefully at its setting in scripture—the biblical book or genre in which it is located (e.g., prophecy, wisdom, narrative, exhortation), the texts which precede and follow it, its contribution and function in the biblical book of which it is a part, its place in the larger biblical story. For me, as someone formed in the Reformed tradition and as a biblical scholar, such questions and investigations are the beginning point of my decision-making about how to appropriate the lectionary texts. The biblical story is the context in which the liturgical story takes place.

I read the liturgical year through the lens of the specific biblical texts assigned for a Sunday or season; Hackett reads the biblical texts through the lens of the liturgical year. I have had to learn, in a way that Hackett did not, what it means to read and worship in the communion of saints through and across time. When the biblical text and the sermon stand at the center of worship, apart from attention to liturgical time, the worship experience is primarily shaped by the content of the sermon—how the preacher uses the biblical text to make sense of the contemporary situation. The lectionary and the liturgical year have helped me experience preaching as more than the exposition of the biblical text and its relevance for today and worshiping as more than a sequence of independent Sundays and sermons. By joining the biblical story with the liturgical year, a preaching ministry can create new ways for a congregation to enter into the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

Each reader of this book will have his or her own way of achieving the balance and integration of biblical text and liturgical year depending on

theological formation and tradition. One of the wonderful gifts of the lectionary to ecumenism (see chapter 4) is that it enables such cross-tradition conversations to take place about something other than doctrine or theological orthodoxy. The lectionary and the engagement of multiple traditions with the liturgical year enable ecumenical conversations about religious practice and spiritual formation, about how we experience the places and times where the Christian story touches our many stories.

O'Day