

EMORY UNIVERSITY
CANDLER SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

A NARRATIVE BLACK PULPIT: THE NARRATIVE LECTIONARY AS A
TOOL FOR CHRISTIAN TRANSFORMATION

A DOCTORAL PROJECT SUBMITTED
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THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY
IN THE FIELD OF
BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AND PROCLAMATION

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Introduction

I am a son of the Black Church, and I love the Black Church. I love it both as the historical by-product of an oppressed people's striving, and that of a uniquely American religious tradition that is constantly being negotiated and renegotiated in its many settings. The Black Church I grew up in was not a large church, but a small, family-centered Baptist church just south of Richmond, in the Commonwealth of Virginia. It was a relatively vibrant church where preaching maintained a prized place in the worship service. Worship at First Baptist Church of Bermuda Hundred was a lot like climbing a mountain, reaching the apex with a stirring sermon and then descending from that mountain-top experience having known the transformative power and presence of the Lord.

In my childhood church there was rarely a Sunday that my pastor did not preach. He was a thoughtful preacher, always taking care to handle the Word with accuracy and precision; ensuring that his words were punctuated with power from on high. Sermons almost always ended in sweaty excitement, with a finely tuned melodic whoop that rose and fell amid a flurry of "Amen," "Yes, Lawds" and "Thank You Jesus" from those who made up the small Black Church on the shores of the Appomattox River. The pulpit in the Black Church, whether it is situated upon the sandy shores of San Diego, or in the sometimes frigid fields of Ferguson, is known to be a place where the "persistent calls for justice, church reforms, moral and ethical

responsibility, and spiritual redemption” can almost always be heard on a Sunday morning.¹

I love the Black Church and I cherish being part of a uniquely American tradition layered with rich religious, social, and cultural textures. I love worship in the Black Church, whether it is in a highly liturgical Episcopal congregation or a two-stepping, fire-baptized Church of God in Christ. I love Black preaching and hold in high regard the task and the sacred responsibility that comes with its work. I love the Black Church, but in recent years I have developed a bit of a lover’s quarrel with its relatively newfound comfort with biblical illiteracy and lack of Christian transformation, especially as it rubs against its historic identity as a center for Black justice and liberation. I have developed a deep frustration, in the last decade of my professional ministry, with the low levels of biblical literacy within the Black Church—by this I mean a parishioner’s intimacy with, and broad understanding of the stories of God as revealed in the Christian Scriptures. More recently, my frustration has led me to fear that the staggeringly low levels of biblical literacy are fundamentally hindering the Black Church from being the place of prophetic transformation God desires, and the world needs, it to be. My experience has borne witness to the fact, at least in the settings where I served largely African American Protestant communities, that the majority of those in pews are largely unacquainted with the stories of God, especially the stories of God in the Hebrew Bible.² What I

¹ Kenyatta R. Gilbert, *The Journey and Promise of African American Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 19.

² See Brent Strawn, *The Old Testament Is Dying: A Diagnosis and Recommended Treatment* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), chapter 1 and especially chapter

believe has been borne out over time is that those who lack biblical intimacy, knowing, and understanding the ways of God in Scripture, are lacking Christian transformation. If the Black Church is going to live transformationally in the world, the Black Church must become more biblically literate.

The Black Church must reclaim biblical teaching in the pulpit and biblical imagination in the pews. The Black Church, specifically the Black pulpit, must once again become the place where the long, broad narratives of God’s activity are proclaimed in worship for the transformation of the world. If the Black Church is to maintain its place as a source of empowerment for the broken, a Black Narrative Pulpit is needed. A Black Narrative Pulpit offers imaginative biblical preaching in the Black Church, addressing the issue of biblical literacy, and inciting Christian transformation among those in the pews. If the Black Church is to maintain its source of hope for those without hope, a Black Narrative Pulpit is needed. If the Black Church is to have any promise of relevancy beyond its often manufactured emotionalism, health, wealth, name-it-and-claim-it theological suppositions, a Black Narrative Pulpit with content-rich preaching is needed. To this end Cleophus LaRue contends that Black preachers must “think more deeply about the aims and ends of their preaching—namely, to stop putting so much emphasis on celebratory endings” and “focus more on the substantive content” in the sermon.³

A Black Narrative Pulpit offers transformative preaching in the Black Church when it utilizes the power of story telling as a tool for shaping belief patterns and

2 where “hard data” is presented that tracks the trends of biblical literacy in the Protestant Church, specifically the broad lack of fluency of the Hebrew Bible.

³ Cleophus J. LaRue, *Rethinking Celebration: From Rhetoric to Praise in African American Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), xi.

behaviors, recognizing that since the earliest periods of time, across cultures and across disciplines, humans have used the power of story to change lives. A Black Narrative Pulpit offers soul-stirring preaching in the Black Church when it promotes the use of story and narrative, particularly the story of God as revealed in Scripture, as a starting point for answering humanity's deep questions of meaning and value. A Black Narrative Pulpit offers prophetic Black preaching, preaching that calls into being God's new reality—the new world that God longs for us to embody in the world.⁴ A Black Narrative Pulpit presents preaching in the Black Church when it addresses the concerns of biblical illiteracy by preaching the major stories of God, sequentially moving through our present canon. A Black Narrative Pulpit offers systematized preaching in the Black Church when it employs the Narrative Lectionary, a lectionary designed to address broad concerns of biblical illiteracy in the mainline church, to establish communities where empowered and transformed disciples of Jesus Christ learn how to live transformed in the world, and also transform the world in which they live toward God's aims.

The Narrative Lectionary was developed in 2010 by two professors at Luther Theological Seminary, Rolf Jacobson and Craig Koester, who designed the lectionary to address concerns of biblical illiteracy they were finding within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). The lectionary they created, the Narrative Lectionary, was designed to address their concern through preaching and worship.

⁴ For more on prophetic preaching see Lenora Tubbs Tinsdale, *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), and especially Marvin A. McMickle, *Where Have All the Prophets Gone: Reclaiming Prophetic Preaching in America* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2006) for specificity on prophetic preaching in the Black Church.

Jacobson and Koester developed this lectionary because they felt that the Revised Common Lectionary failed people of faith in its inability to “foster a sense of movement” within the larger biblical story.⁵ They felt the Revised Common Lectionary, and its many attempted corrections, was too sporadic, choppy, and disjointed, so they built, from the ground up, a new lectionary that would move sequentially through the biblical story, highlighting major stories from Genesis to Acts.⁶ Using a four-year sequence, Koester and Jacobson created the Narrative Lectionary believing that people of faith would more easily grasp the overarching story of faith, and become biblically literate, if lengthy, orderly, lections of scriptures were faithfully read and preached in worship.

This doctoral project seeks to examine the use of the Narrative Lectionary in a Black Church, Christian Fellowship Congregational Church of San Diego (United Church of Christ), to determine if its consistent use contributes to greater biblical literacy and supports Christian transformation. The use of the Narrative Lectionary has grown significantly over the years to include many different denominational traditions and congregations throughout the world—but has yet to be significantly embraced by the Black Church. This project seeks to broaden the reach of the Narrative Lectionary by examining a specific Black Church as it employs this new lectionary tool.

⁵ Steve Thorngate, “What’s the Text: Alternatives to Common Lectionary,” *Christian Century* 130, no. 22, 22.

⁶ See Timothy Andrew Letzeke’s article “Lectionaries and Little Narratives: Children of the Revised Common Lectionary” in *Liturgy* 29, no. 4 (2014) for further commentary and debate on the recent attempts to fix the Revised Common Lectionary.

The project first presents a cultural and theological analysis of the congregation in which the doctoral project was set; an African American congregation of the United Church of Christ located in San Diego, California. This section explores the storied history of the congregation, which dates back to 1886, its cultural background, and the denominational heritage that is treasured by so many of the congregants. As part of the analysis of the congregation, this section closely examines the congregation's theological perspectives and positions.

The project's second section presents a brief scholarly analysis of modern lectionaries, their formation, and the growth of their use in Protestant congregations. The examination of lectionaries will make apparent the opportunities that lectionaries offer congregations who consistently employ them: above all, lectionaries are beneficial tools for Christian formation and education. Much that is written in this section seeks to build a strong case for the benefits of using a lectionary. Whether it be sequential lectionaries that move a congregation from creation accounts in Genesis to invitations to bear liberating "witness" in Revelation, or thematic lectionaries like the African American Lectionary, which takes into account the cultural calendar of the Black Church, I argue that the benefits of using a lectionary far outweigh any resistance to it, even the kind of resistance to Black powerlessness and oppression that gave birth to what E. Franklin Frazier has called the *Invisible Institution*, where enslaved preachers were free to preach without the constraints of White oppressors telling them what texts to preach, and

what text not to preach.⁷ While there are many lectionaries, many of which have had to be omitted for the sake of brevity, my fundamental argument which leans upon the work of Samuel DeWitt Proctor, contends that Black Churches who regularly use a lectionary are far better equipped to provide a well-balanced biblical diet for those in the pews than Black Churches who find lectionaries to be too confining.⁸

The third section then turns to a critical exploration of the Narrative Lectionary, closely examining its formation and history, its goals, and its claims. The fourth section of the project, then, is a reflection on the use of the Narrative Lectionary in Christian Fellowship Congregational Church (UCC) as a tool to contribute to greater biblical literacy, spark “biblical imagination”, and move the congregation toward Christian transformation, specifically as evidenced in social witness.⁹ The way in which transformation is approached in this section is through biblical narrative acquisition and practical application—the goal being to establish a community of faith “transformed by the power of the living God...[and] empowered to transform neighborhoods and communities, cities, and culture.”¹⁰

Major Terms and Research Methodology

⁷ Brian Blount, *Can I Get a Witness? Reading Revelation through African American Culture*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 40.

⁸ See Appendix 2 for a Timeline of Modern Lectionary Development.

⁹ Joy Moore writes of using biblical imagination in preaching as “a reality rather than to explain an experience” (“Preaching the Story in a Sound-Bite Culture” in *Generation Rising* [Andrew C Thompson; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001], 31).

¹⁰ Kenneth C. Ulmer, “Transformational Worship in the Life of a Church,” in *Worship That Changes Lives: Multidisciplinary and Congregational Perspectives on Spiritual Transformation*, ed. Alexis D. Abernethy (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2008), 196.

Throughout the paper I reference two major terms, Black Church and biblical literacy. The term Black Church¹¹ denotes any Black Christian congregation in the United States and especially, but exclusively, those associated with the historic Black denominations: the African Methodist Episcopal Church; the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church; the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church; the National Baptist Convention, USA; the National Baptist Convention of America; the Progressive National Baptist Convention; and the Church of God in Christ. The term also denotes Black Christian congregations in the United States that are not apart of the above mentioned denominations, such as the United Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church USA, to name a few. The term biblical literacy I define as both a fluency of and intimacy with the biblical text. It is a broad understanding of the stories of God as revealed in the Christian Scriptures. I define biblical literacy as movement along a spectrum with a goal of greater literacy. Understanding literacy as movement along a spectrum is not about an illiterate community suddenly becoming literate, particularly through the use of the Narrative Lectionary preaching tool, but it is movement, over time, towards a greater understanding of the entire biblical text and God's message in it.

The primary research methods uses throughout this project were ethnographic.¹² I studied the people of who make up the congregation of Christian

¹¹ See C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience: African American Christian Spirituality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 1.

¹² See Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2008). In this text Moschella details the process of becoming an ethnographic researcher and raised questions that helped me to better understand the congregation and the community in which my church is located. Her text proved helpful

Fellowship Congregational Church (UCC). The methods included analyzing surveys that were designed and created for this research, journaling conversations and dialogues with members, and church records and minutes of the meeting of the congregation and Church Council dating back to 1886. These recorded minutes provided invaluable material that enabled me to understand the themes of naming and renaming, how the community was being reflected in the life of the congregation, and how the social experience of the community and the church aided in its ability to truly live out its identity as a fellowship of believers in Christ. I found Moschella's text especially helpful as I sought to understand how, in the 1940's, a largely White congregation became willing to "test whether or not there was enough vitality in [the] religious experience to inspire men and women to normal natural brotherly relations" through church membership and church growth with a young Black minister.¹³ Strangely enough, this vitality is being tested again in the 21st century.

Congregational Analysis

The Setting and History of a Black UCC Church in Southern California

Christian Fellowship Congregational Church of San Diego, United Church of Christ is one of the oldest Congregational churches in continuous operation in the City of San Diego. It was organized on the second Sunday in November 1886 when the Rev. J.W. Harwood first conducted services. The church was founded as the

in exploring the effectiveness of preaching and biblical literacy, and how listening and journaling can become an evaluative tool for ministry effectiveness.

¹³ From a small pamphlet entitled, "The Christian Fellowship Story," dated November 14, 1965.

Second Congregational Church and members of the First Congregational Church contributed liberally to the establishing of the new church. The congregation predates the establishment of the United Church of Christ, and its predecessor denominations the Congregational-Christian Church and the Evangelical Reformed Church, which merged in the 1957 to create the United Church of Christ.

When the congregation first formed in 1886 as the Second Congregational Church there was a sense of excitement and joy in the growing community of believers who were realizing this new endeavor in the City of San Diego. The new church, which was a mission outgrowth of the First Congregational Church of San Diego, fought hard against meager giving, fires, internal quarrels, consistent clergy turnover, and closure to maintain itself as a viable presence in the City of San Diego. At the turn of the century, the congregation decided to rename itself. The initial renaming of the church came as result of these early struggles of the community as it sought to establish itself apart from First Congregational Church with which it was affiliated. While the church's recorded minutes in 1905 do not cite an official name change of the congregation from Second Congregational Church, the oral history ascribes the change in name to this date, and the earliest official document with the church's new name, Logan Heights Congregational Church is dated in 1907.¹⁴ The congregation at that time doubled its membership to more than 500, and within a decade had erected a new building and burned its mortgage.

The Logan Heights Years: A Growing Diversity

¹⁴ The new church name appears on the cover of the "1907 Church Book and Directory" of the Second Congregational Church, San Diego, California.

A second renaming of the church happened during a period of history when many of the Congregational churches in San Diego were adopting “Community” into their names, and some were withdrawing “Congregational” altogether. Within the archives of the church there is a photograph, believed to be dated in 1946, where the Rev. Lowell E. Cantrell, a seminarian who was called as minister of the church in 1945, is pictured standing among a racially integrated group of school-aged children beneath a banner bearing the words: “Logan Heights Community Church...interdenominational, interracial.” The addition of the name Community and the racially integrated school-church standing together in the 1940’s, underscores the growing diversity of Logan Heights, and its efforts to become more community-minded in reaching people as disciples of Jesus Christ who have been transformed by the Good News preached and taught within the congregation.

By 1949 the community of Logan Heights was becoming more diverse, vibrant and alive, and the growing congregation strove to reflect this diversity and vibrancy. As the Logan Heights community shifted in racial makeup, the membership of Logan Heights also began to experience this shift. Some within the congregation were not keen on continuing the ministry in Logan Heights because of the “stigma” associated with the diverse and growing neighborhood—the stigma being the growing number African-Americans. In the minutes of a November quarterly meeting in 1949, the following is written at the end of the regular business meeting: “Changing church name from Logan Heights Community Church (Congregational) to Church of Christian Fellowship (Congregational) will be placed on the agenda of the Annual Meeting. This is in keeping with moves of other

organizations...to get away from the stigma usually associated with Logan Heights.”¹⁵

In 1947 the congregation decided to call its first African-American minister, the Rev. E. Major Shavers, to serve as co-pastor of the newly re-named congregation, and appeal to the new racial demographic of Logan Heights. Very quickly the congregation began to take on the identity of its local community, filled with educated, middle-class African-Americans, many being educators, military, and business professionals—groups that still make up the base of the congregation today.

Christian Fellowship and the Future of Emerald Hills

San Diego is located in Southern California and has been named one of the most beautiful places in America to live. It is the second largest city in California and the eighth largest city in the United States. There are roughly 3 million residents in the county and 1.3 million within the city. Most notably, San Diego is home to over 70 miles of beautiful beaches, the world famous San Diego Zoo and Safari Park, SeaWorld, Legoland, the legendary Balboa Park, and nearly 100 golf courses. Two hours to the north one can ski and snowboard, and return in the same day to surf in the Pacific or row in Mission Bay. While San Diego is not the most affordable place to live, its moderate climate, low crime, and good public school systems make it an ideal place to live and raise a family. What makes San Diego so unique is its layers of multiculturalism, helped tremendously by San Diego’s position

¹⁵ November 5, 1949, Church Minutes of Logan Heights Congregational Church, San Diego, California.

as a border city to Mexico, and its strong military communities. This creates both unique challenges and opportunities for those who choose to make “America’s Finest City” their home.

Christian Fellowship Today

Today Christian Fellowship Congregational Church is working hard to remain a beacon of light and hope in southeast San Diego, California, with a current membership of approximately 150 persons. San Diego is widely known as a military town, and Christian has a significant number of members who have at least one member of their family who has served, or is currently serving, in the Armed Forces, mostly the US Navy. As relates to adult educational attainment, most adult members hold undergraduate degrees, and a number of members hold terminal and professional degrees. The church is culturally grounded as a Black mainline congregation, which is a strongly represented ethnic group in the Southeastern community of San Diego. While San Diego is the eighth largest city in the United States and the second largest city in California, it is not home to large numbers of African-Americans. Less than 7 percent of the city population identify themselves as Black. The congregation’s desire to be remain a Black mainline congregation, and the challenging demographics of the city, will require the church to carve out a unique niche within the Black religious life and culture of San Diego, if it is going to survive for future generations of Black San Diegans. The unique theological niche that the church presently occupies is that of being a mainline Black Church that embraces Black culture and liberation theology. Christian Fellowship presents itself as a well-educated, middle-class, Black Bible-based church that has grown over the

course of this project, to be accepting and affirming of humanity's diversity and sexual difference, gender equality and worker justice, and the practice of environmental stewardship. The church has come to embrace, particularly in the last year, a deep sense of call to be a community that cares for the immigrant, the marginalized and oppressed and other "blues bodies."¹⁶

Lectionaries

"Many preachers feel that a lectionary preaching schedule may be too confining, but experience with it proves something different...the Spirit was guiding those who prepared the lectionary...[and it is an] exercise...on which God has breathed."¹⁷

The distinctive practices of reading, hearing and preaching Sacred Scripture are vital to Christian faith, formation and ultimately Christian transformation. The need for Christian communities to know and understand the fullness of their biblical heritage is challenging today—even with the conveniences of modern technology that place many of these texts in the palm our hands. In the African-American Christian community, the primary way in which people of faith are shaped and formed is through passionate and prophetic preaching. Through stirring sermons, people of faith come to know the stories of creation, the stories of Abraham and Sarah, Hagar, Moses, Vashti, Hezekiah, David, Mary, Jesus and the early church. It is a significant responsibility, therefore, that the pastoral leader carefully guide and

¹⁶ Kelly Brown Douglas, *Black Bodies and the Black Church: A Blues Slant* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 73-78.

¹⁷ Samuel DeWitt Proctor, *The Certain Sound of the Trumpet: Crafting a Sermon of Authority* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1994), 37-38. Kindle Edition.

direct the spiritual and biblical development and maturation of a congregation. A lectionary, a collection of readings assigned for each given day, can serve as an important tool in helping to ensure that a congregation's spiritual diet is well balanced with Scripture from both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Testament.

Brief History of Modern Lectionary Development

The developments of 21st century common lectionaries are the results of many years of labor to ensure that our sacred texts are not lost to present generations in worship and study. The development of any lectionary is a programmatic way for people of faith to recite, remember, know and live with a foundational biblical commitment to the faith. Thomas O'Loughlin suggests that it was important for Israel, when they gathered for worship and study in the synagogue, to find themselves constantly moving in cycle from "memory-making to identity-shaping."¹⁸ This process of forming and shaping identity has deep and lasting roots in the ritualistic hearing, reciting and keeping of God's Holy Word. Much of that process of hearing, reciting, keeping and cultural identity shaping in the church has been systematized and organized into the common lectionaries of the 21st century.

Our common lectionaries are the result of "thousands of years of Jewish and Christian experience."¹⁹ However, it was in December of 1963 that the Roman Catholic Church signaled a major shifting in the way in which scripture was

¹⁸ Thomas O'Loughlin, *Making the Most of the Lectionary: A User's Guide* (London: Morehouse Publishing, 2012), 11.

¹⁹ Gail R. O'Day and Charles D. Hackett, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: A Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 3.

presented in its congregations. This later prompted Protestant communities to look at the way in which the presentation of scriptures were (or were not) ordered or systematized. In a gathering of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (1963), the Roman Catholic Church decreed that “the treasures of the Bible be opened up more lavishly so that richer fare might be provided for the faithful at the table of God’s word [and] a more representative portion of holy scripture will be read to the people in the course of a prescribed number of years.”²⁰ Six years later, in December of 1969, the Roman Catholic Church began using a new lectionary, called the *Lectionary for Mass*. The church’s previous lectionary, the Tridentine Lectionary—which was a single-year lectionary established in 1563 by the Council of Trent and used by the Roman Catholic Church for more than five hundred years and “included readings from the Gospels and the epistles only”—was replaced in 1969 under the authority of Vatican II.²¹ Professor O. Wesley Allen Jr. notes that the “new lectionary marked a major shift in liturgical and homiletical practice for Roman Catholics...[and] began to attract the attention of those outside the Roman Catholic Church as well.”²²

In October 1963, at the invitation of the Archbishop of Canterbury, a year before the establishment of the North American Consultation on Common Texts (CCT), a forum consisting of Christian Churches in the United States and Canada

²⁰ The Roman Catholic Church, “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy Sacrosanctum Concilium,” The Roman Catholic Church. accessed January 21, 2017, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html.

²¹ Fritz West, *Scripture and Memory: The Ecumenical Hermeneutic of the Three-Year Lectionaries* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1997), 25.

²² O. Wesley Allen, Jr., *Preaching and Reading the Lectionary: A Three-Dimensional Approach to the Liturgical Year* (Danvers: Chalice Press, 2007), 3.

with a primary focus on worship renewal, the Joint Liturgical Group was established and began its work of bringing into realization a two-year Protestant lectionary. In 1967, two years ahead of Vatican II's work, the Joint Liturgical Group developed one of the earliest known lectionaries for the Protestant church. The work of the Joint Liturgical Group, however, did not stand in opposition to the work that the Roman Catholic Church was beginning to realize through its reformation efforts, but stood in support of the Roman Catholic's three-year lectionary design with great hope that it would positively shape and reform the Church.

The movement of the lectionary in American Protestant circles began some time around 1970 when Presbyterians began to incorporate a version of the *Lectionary for the Mass* into its worship book. Within a year of this move by the Presbyterian Church, other religious bodies followed and began to publish versions of the *Lectionary for the Mass* in their worship books with the support of the North American Consultation on Common Texts. These included the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in 1971, the United Church of Christ in 1974, the United Methodist Church in 1976, the American Episcopal Church in 1977, and the North American Lutheran Church in 1978. Liturgical scholar James F. White states that "one of the most useful developments of the post-Vatican II era has been the ecumenical lectionary."²³ Fritz West, a pastoral scholar of the United Church of Christ, points out the significance of the period of time in which American Protestant bodies began adopting lectionary texts. West notes that it was during a time of great division due to war, racism and political scandal that these lectionaries

²³ James White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980), 81.

began to emerge among North American denominations. This seems to suggest that the early development of lectionaries among denominations in North America grew out of a desire for some sense of unity amid the “turmoil” that roiled the world from 1968 to 1974.²⁴

A Black Critique: Black Church Resistance

There are many who begrudge the systematic approach to Christian preaching, formation, education and transformation in the church that the lectionary offers, and this is especially pronounced among those in the Black Church. It is common knowledge, as Martha Simmons has remarked, “that Black folks just don’t use the lectionary.”²⁵ A brief Monday morning internet search of sermons preached in Black pulpits across the country on any given Sunday proves that the majority of Black pulpits do not follow any of the modern lectionaries that are available, including the African American Lectionary, which Simmons developed. Pastors who stand in Black pulpits often take exception to the use of a lectionary, and favor instead a scriptural focus emerging from time spent in prayer or meditation at best, or a Sunday morning scramble at worst. This is not to suggest that Black pulpits where a lectionary-based preaching is avoided are pulpits that haphazardly select texts, or are all communities lacking in biblical literacy, but it is to suggest that the consistent and regular use of a lectionary presents a far-better,

²⁴ West, 21.

²⁵ Part 3 of a Forum on Lectionaries: African American Lectionary, Narrative Lectionary and Panel Discussion, YouTube video, 1:52:00, lecture series sponsored by The Consultation on Common Texts, accessed on April 25, 2016, posted by Taylor Burton Edwards, February 15, 2016, <https://youtu.be/aDA1Vlxbog?t=1m15s>.

scriptural diet for people in the pews and the preachers who prepare the meal. One finds with experience, as Samuel DeWitt Proctor writes to preachers, that a systematic approach to preaching and Christian formation in the church like the lectionary provides may feel “too confining, but experience with it proves something different.”²⁶

The most common reason I have found for resisting the use of a lectionary as a tool for worship and teaching in the Black Church is the idea that it confines or quenches the freedom of the Spirit. This idea is often cited because lectionaries do place limits on the preacher—binding him or her to particular texts or books, even with what some may claim to be generous offering of four different readings. Those who resist using lectionaries are those who enjoy the freedom of being able to move unencumbered throughout the entire Bible to select their preaching text—one Sunday Revelation, the next Mathew, the next Luke, and some obscure verse from Philemon on the fourth Sunday. Some Black preachers therefore push back against the requirement to select their text from a sampling of texts that have been decided upon by individuals, most of whom are White and largely removed from their particular context and the culture of the Black Church. But such resistance costs them something, and that price I believe is biblical illiteracy and a lack of Christian transformation. A preacher who misses the opportunity to engage in a form systematized movement through the biblical cannon with his or her congregation, in favor of cherry-picking favored or prized biblical texts will often avoid the tough texts that challenge foundational theologies and ecclesiastical norm; often

²⁶ Proctor, 37.

disadvantaging the preacher and the congregation to whom they are called to justly “shepherd” and “feed.”²⁷

I, do however, believe that resisting the use of lectionaries in the Black Church is far more complex than simply resisting textual limits, and the desire for more freedom in the Spirit. Proctor correctly reminds the Black Church, and its preachers in particular, that “the Spirit was guiding those who prepared the lectionary...and that the total exercise is one which God has breathed.”²⁸

Nevertheless, a more nuanced examination of the Black Church might conclude that a resistance to lectionaries might dwell in the DNA of the Black Church—before it gathered in secret circles along riverbeds, under the canopy of brilliant stars, in the hush arbors of Virginia and North Carolina. It could be argued that the resistance Black Churches feel toward the textual limits of the lectionary reminds those in the Black Church of the oppressive injustice that racist-Whites held over Blacks when worship in the visible institution was controlled and maintained “under White supervision.”²⁹ In this visible institution, oppressive biblical texts were preached to enslaved Africans that “advocated submission and docility among slaves,” and was “more attentive to the espousal of White social and biblical doctrines” than Black liberation and freedom.³⁰ Under White supervision and away from ring shouts and the Africanized religion of the “Invisible Institution” where transformation, Black

²⁷ Ezekiel 34, Common English Bible.

²⁸ Proctor, 37.

²⁹ Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings: The Long-Hidden Realities of the First Years* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 8.

³⁰ Martha Simmons and Frank Thomas, *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 22.

liberation, and freedom were sought, enslaved Black preachers were often forced by White oppressors, to categorically prioritize Black oppression and powerlessness using *recommended* biblical texts.³¹

The resistance today that many who stand in Black pulpits have to lectionaries “recommending” texts for use is thus far more complicated than mere resistance to textual limits and a desire for spiritual freedom. It is resistance to the visible institution that tried, and even presently works, to diminish Black life and deny Black liberation and freedom. It is resistance to White religious authorities, culturally and contextually distant from the Black Church, as is the case with the Narrative Lectionary and the Common Lectionary, who present confining textual limits on Black pulpits under the pretense of Christian Unity, masked in the nomenclature of systemization, *still* telling Black preachers what to preach and prioritizing biblical texts that inform what those in Black pews believe. This legitimate resistance and distrust of the overarching goals and aims of culturally distant lectionaries, is grounded in the discovery of a Truth that emerged when the Black Church discovered its freedom away from the oppressive gaze of “Mister Charlie.”³² The question to be furthered in this section is whether or not a lectionary that maintains confining textual limits but embraces Black cultural and contextual sensitivity—a lectionary created and developed for the Black Church and by the Black Church, is able to loosen the grip of resistance that many in the Black

³¹ E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books 1963), 16.

³² For the most significant use of “Charlie-ism,” see James Baldwin’s play and social commentary “Blues for Mister Charlie” in which he critiques the Christian faith in its historic justification of Black suffering and powerlessness, and its promotion of White superiority and the whiteness of God.

Church have to lectionaries in general. It is to this historic (re)formation and development that we now turn.

A Black Response: The African American Lectionary

In 2007 the Rev. Dr. Martha Simmons, an ordained Baptist and UCC minister and academic, began developing the African American Lectionary. Sober about the resistance that many Black Churches have against lectionaries, Simmons realized early in her development process that if there was to be any success in getting Black Churches to consider using a lectionary that her lectionary would have to be altogether different in design from all other lectionaries, and provide a relevant cultural and contextual emphasis that was missing in other lectionaries. The lectionary Simmons created is relevant to the Black Church in that it follows the Black Church calendar, celebrating Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) Sunday, Usher's Day, Women's Day, Men's Day, Church and Pastor's Anniversary and Watch Night Service—worship days in the Black Church that are important to the lectionary's primary constituency, the Black Church. To say that this online lectionary, www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org, is expansive and broad is an understatement—Simmons estimates that “the site has more than 220 thousand pages of content for the Black Church.”³³

The creation of a lectionary for the Black Church, and by the Black Church, was birthed out of Simmons' concerns of biblical illiteracy she identified as

³³ Part 3 of a Forum on Lectionaries: African American Lectionary, Narrative Lectionary and Panel Discussion, YouTube video, 1:52:00, lecture series sponsored by The Consultation on Common Texts, accessed on April 25, 2016, posted by Taylor Burton Edwards, February 15, 2016, <https://youtu.be/aDA1Vlxbog?t=1m15s>.

president and publisher of *The African American Pulpit* preaching journal. *The African American Pulpit*, which is no longer in publication, was a premier quarterly that served “as a repository for the very best of African American preaching,” and sought to provide “practical and creative resources for persons in ministry.”³⁴ In her role as publisher, Simmons received several thousand sermon manuscripts from pastors, ministers and seminarians for possible publication. In reviewing those sermons Simmons became overwhelmingly concerned about what she sensed was a lack of biblical literacy in Black pulpits across the nation. In developing the world’s first online lectionary-resource of its kind, Simmons has significantly helped Black Churches by providing otherwise unattainable access to excellent scholarship and cultural resources, but according to Simmons a decade later the state of biblical literacy in the Black church, especially in the pews, remains largely unchanged since the lectionary’s inception. What we are left to conclude is that even if there are now biblically literate Black preachers, this does not always translate into biblically literate Black folks in the pews.

It must be noted that Simmons’ efforts in the creation of the African American Lectionary are both significant and historic. Her work has exposed thousands of Black Churches to the idea of lectionary-based worship and preaching. The success of the African American Lectionary has not been in its ability to improve biblical literacy in the pews, but its success has been in its ability to resource its primary constituency, the Black Church, and others with interests in the Black Church, with biblical, cultural and theological resources from some of the brightest

³⁴ *The African American Pulpit*, Volume 11, Number 2, Spring 2008, 3.

minds of the Black Church. The contributions of these scholar-pastors are as diverse as their primary fields of study: James Abbington (Music/Worship), Brad Braxton (New Testament), J. Cameron Carter (Theology), Cain Hope Felder (Hebrew Bible), Stacey Floyd-Thomas (Ethics), Luke Powery (Homiletics) and Mitzi Smith (New Testament) to name a few.

The African American Lectionary is without a doubt a timeless, dynamic repository of excellent cultural, liturgical and theological resources to assist Black preachers, but it fails to address biblical illiteracy in the pews. At the 2016 Forum on Lectionaries, sponsored by the Consultation on Common Texts, Simmons confessed that the African American Lectionary struggled to address biblical literacy among those in Black pews as successfully as it did those in Black pulpits: “We understood that we may not get people to do more Bible reading at home, but the hope was that at least the pastor would do a better job of making the text...more exegetically sound.”³⁵

The presence of the African American Lectionary has without question helped the Black Church embrace the idea of a lectionary, but it has not improved biblical literacy in the pews through its successful development of more exegetically sound Black pulpits; Black pulpits may have become more biblically literate (and theologically sound), but not those in Black pews. This is not to suggest that those in the pews of the Black Church are biblically illiterate, but it is to say that literacy

³⁵ Part 3 of a Forum on Lectionaries: African American Lectionary, Narrative Lectionary and Panel Discussion, YouTube video, 1:52:00, lecture series sponsored by The Consultation on Common Texts, accessed on April 25, 2016, posted by Taylor Burton Edwards, February 15, 2016, <https://youtu.be/aDA1Vllxbog?t=1m15s>.

must be construed upon a spectrum and that one moves from one level of biblical literary to greater biblical literacy. Admittedly, the African American Lectionary has not move those in the pews of the Black Church farther along the spectrum. What we need in the Black Church today is not bite-size nuggets of the Bible, nor tidy tidbits of exegetically sound biblical wisdom that fits neatly with the Black Church calendar. The Black Church needs Black Narrative Pulpits—Pulpits that proclaim the overarching story of the whole Bible and encourage people in the pews to read the Bible, after having had their biblical imagination sparked by the story of God in worship. The Black Church needs Black Narrative Pulpits that tell the story in such a way that those who sit in the pews understand the text, even if there is not an annual celebration of Homecoming, Usher’s Day, Friends and Family Day, Deacon and Deaconess Sunday, and Church Anniversaries where fellowship halls feature overflowing punchbowls of cherry Kool-Aid, yellow sheet cake noting the anniversary number, and secret special mix of salted peanuts and melt-in-your-mouth buttermints that only Big Momma knows how to prepare. If concern for biblical literacy is to be taken seriously in the Black Church, a Black Narrative Pulpit is needed.

My strongest complaint of the African American Lectionary is, very simply, that it seeks to do too much and yet simultaneously fails to fully meet the needs that Simmons first identified: namely, biblical literacy. In its desire to reach the broad and expansive diversity of the Black Church through cultural, theological, and liturgical resources, it fails to chips away at the lack of biblical literacy in the Black Church. To be sure, Scripture is presented and is the focus of every lection, but a

lectionary that lacks an organized sequence to lead congregants along God's meta-narrative in the text from week to week does nothing to stem the growing tide of biblical illiteracy. Building brand new exegetical context from week to week, instead of building upon an already established context, is challenging work for even the most studied preacher. Criss-crossing the canon from Hebrew Bible to Epistle, preaching from John one week and Luke from the next makes developing biblically literate disciples more difficult than it ought to be. What is needed to fully address Simmons' motivating concern is continuous flow from week to week, and unfortunately the African American Lectionary does not provide this. Somewhere along the line from inception to conception Simmons' motivating concern of biblical literacy in the Black Church, especially for those in the pews, was lost. But I believe there is hope in reclaiming biblical literacy in this generation, and I believe the way forward for the Black Church is in establishing a Black Narrative Pulpit.

The Narrative Framework

"A story—a good story—longs to be retold and reheard again and again until we see scenes from the story in every encounter; until every choice we make is born of the reality created in its telling; until the imaginations of our community are so shaped by that narrative that everyone understands in a flash the references made in a single line...the church must become conversant again with the storied reality of Christian Scripture. The narrative counts!"³⁶

³⁶ Joy Moore, "Preaching the Story in a Sound-Bite Culture" in *Generation Rising: A Future with Hope for the United Methodist Church* ed., Andrew C Thompson (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 33.

Stories are a part of us all. We use them to organize our experiences and “to make sense” of both our lives and relationships.³⁷ Ask a person how they fell in love, they will tell you a story. Ask person how they first came to know the faith, they will tell you a story. Ask a person to tell you about their favorite meal, they will tell you a story. Story and narrative shape almost every aspect of our lives. Roger Schank, an expert in story-centered models of leadership in business, education and artificial intelligence suggests that “we tell stories to describe ourselves not only so others can understand who we are but also so we can understand ourselves...[and] we interpret reality through our stories and open our realities up to others when we tell our stories.”³⁸ Stories shape our lives and experts in various disciplines from theology, psychology, philosophy, biology all agree that we live, see and experience much of life through the lens of story.³⁹ The idea of a narrative that several disciplines have come to embrace is due in part to the philosophy of Stephen Crites, who suggests that we organize our experiences of life in story-like forms.⁴⁰

R. Ruard Ganzevoort suggests that in coming to understand the role that narratives play in our world, a working definition of narrative is needed that does not limit narrative to a textual form, but is open and dynamic enough to include the

³⁷ John Winslade and Gerald Monk, *Narrative Mediation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 3.

³⁸ Roger Schank, *Tell Me A Story: Narrative and Intelligence* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1995), 44.

³⁹ See Galen Strawson, “Against Narrativity,” *Ratio* (New Series) 17, no. 4 (2004) 428, though he contests the accuracy of this claim he does acknowledge that there is widespread agreement among experts in these and many other fields.

⁴⁰ Stephen Crites, “The Narrative Quality of Experience,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39, no. 3 (1971): 291-311.

shaping and forming of identity.⁴¹ Ganzevoort's suggestion underscores the scholarship of Joy Moore and Dale Andrews, two African American practical theologians, who both use story and narrative, particularly the story of God as revealed within Scriptures, as a starting point for answering the deep questions of meaning and value. Moore writes that as people of Christian faith we must proclaim anew the story of Scripture and allow "ourselves to be formed by [the biblical] story....[T]he Bible opens up a world showing us how to live life now."⁴² And Andrews notes that the narrative approach to practical theology ought not simply be "a retrieval of the 'good old days and ways,' but rather the discernment of God's redemptive activity in our history and day-to-day lives."⁴³ We are shaped by story, and for Christians the biblical story is to be that primary story-shaping story for our lives. When God's story meets our story, lives are changed and transformed for the good, and our stories become inextricably tied to God's story.

One of the core beliefs of the creators of the Narrative Lectionary is that the body of Christ, the Church, cannot exist without the story of God's coming "alongside our stories" and becoming the story that tells us the truth about lives and the world in which we live.⁴⁴ Craig Koester furthers this idea by suggesting that God's promise for humanity is extended when "the stories we tell about ourselves are challenged

⁴¹ R. Ruard Ganzevoort, "Narrative Approaches" in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* ed., Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 216.

⁴² Moore, 33.

⁴³ Dale P. Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches: Bridging Black Theology and African American Folk Religion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 95.

⁴⁴ Rolf Jacobson, "We Are Stories: Narrative Dimension of Human Identity and Its Implication for Christian Faith Formation" *Word and World* 32, no. 2 (2014): 126.

and rewritten in light of the story of God.”⁴⁵ The narratives that we find in the Bible are the stories that we have of God, and while they are not the only stories, they are stories that reveal, if only in part, who God is and how humanity has interacted with God in the past. The Bible does not tell us only the stories that we love to hear that have neat and tidy endings, but the Bible also invites us to pay attention to “texts of terror,” along with other stories that make us terribly uncomfortable, and bitterly frustrated with God and humanity.⁴⁶ Rolf Jacobson suggests that the texts we encounter in the biblical story function at their best when “God, the great storyteller, comes alongside us and offers us a better story. A story that tells us who we really are and makes promises to bestow that new identity on us.”⁴⁷

Our world today is filled with so many stories of God, and this is both a gift and a challenge to the body of Christ. The fact that the United States has become one of the most religiously diverse nations on earth is both a gift and honor, particularly as we seek to learn from other religious traditions and discover many things that we have in common.⁴⁸ Yet, with this diversity has come as a challenge for the Church to discover anew how to proclaim its story of faith. No longer can the Church, the body of Christ, “rely on a wide variety of cultural co-tellers who helped teach the Christian

⁴⁵ Craig Koester, *Were You There? (John 18-19): Telling the Stories of Jesus’ Trial—and Ours* *Word and World* 34, no. 3 (2014): 263.

⁴⁶ Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984). In one of the earliest known womanist debates on Trible’s critique see Koala Jones-Warsaw, “Toward a Womanist Hermeneutic: A Reading of Judges 19-21” in *A Feminist Companion to Judges* (ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 172-186.

⁴⁷ Jacobson, 127.

⁴⁸ See Diana Eck, *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), who writes about pluralism and religious diversity in America.

story...[like the] public school systems, the artists on stage and screen, and the print and radio media” as it once did years ago.⁴⁹ The Church must learn anew the importance of telling its story, from Genesis to Revelation, or we will continue to slip down the slope of biblical illiteracy and lack the experience Christian transformation. This does not assume that most know the biblical story, but it does take seriously the fact the biblical story must be told by the Church.

What is true, we know, is that the biblical story is not solely proclaimed to a people who understand their lives to be shaped by the story of God. Many of those who hear the biblical story are no more familiar with the narratives, and the larger narrative arc of God’s story, than they are familiar with quantum physics or neurobiology. The stories of God are proclaimed in pulpits to those whose lives rub against the broad diversity of people who live their lives in a globally diverse world. This is not to suggest that the broad diversity we enjoy should be scaled back, but it is to suggest that the Church must proclaim the whole story of God without shying away from “the gospel promises.”⁵⁰

If what Robert Schank has suggested is true, that we define ourselves both through stories we hear and tell, then the Church must compellingly tell the story not simply to come against the mounting lack of biblical literacy, but to become a people who live transformed lives in the world. As Richard Bauckman notes, we must build communities where we are “constantly retelling the story, never losing sight of the landmark events, never losing touch with the main lines of theological

⁴⁹ Jacobson, 130.

⁵⁰ Robert Jensen, “How the World Lost Its Story” *First Things First* 36 (1993): 24.

meaning in Scripture's own telling and commentaries, always remaining open to the never exhausted potential of the texts in their resonances with contemporary life."⁵¹

Narrative Lectionary

Robert Jensen writes that "it is the church's constitutive task to tell the biblical narrative to the world in proclamation and to God in worship, and to do so in a fashion appropriate to the context of that narrative; that is, as a promise claimed from God and proclaimed to the world."⁵² The Narrative Lectionary, developed by Rolf Jacobson and Craig Koester of Luther Theological Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, was conceived by Jacobson at a denominational gathering (2010) where he contemplated in a breakout session with local church pastors, "why churches don't preach the Old Testament in big brush strokes from Labor Day through Christmas, preach one gospel from Christmas through Easter, and preach early church stories and Acts until Pentecost."⁵³ The idea quickly became a liturgical experiment when Dan Smith, an ordained minister of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), recruited a handful of ELCA churches who agreed to put the idea into practice in their local congregation if Jacobson were to create it.

After the denominational gathering, word about the experiment, first conceived as a nine-month project to address the "perceived biblical illiteracy in the

⁵¹ Richard Bauckman, "Reading Scripture as a Coherent Story," in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 44.

⁵² Jensen, 19.

⁵³ Thorngate, 22.

ELCA,” spread quickly and at its launch, in the Fall of 2010, Koester and Jacobson had approximately 40 preachers and congregations ready to embrace the new idea.⁵⁴ The Narrative Lectionary, at present, has grown to include congregations from many different Protestant denominations within the country and around the globe. Jacobson and Koester created the Narrative Lectionary with the aims of exposing “people to preaching on the major stories” and reinforcing through worship “the importance of the biblical story.”⁵⁵

The Narrative Lectionary is structured as a four-year lectionary.⁵⁶ It consists of a preaching text and an alternative reading to complement the preaching text. The narrative emphasis is reflected in much longer lections than those presented in the Revised Common Lectionary. Scholars and practitioners agree that people of faith must become more conversant in the biblical narratives given to us in Scripture. Today, too often, we read and listen to tweets of 140 characters and short headlines, instead of listening and reading longer narratives, but this should not be so in the church. To this end Moore writes, “our congregations need to be taught again how to listen... Sunday sermons should be less like CNN Headline News and more like the storytelling we see in the best of modern filmmaking.”⁵⁷ We need greater context around the texts that we hear in worship. Those in the pew need to hear the fullest story possible, not just the one verse that draws an emotional response. We need the narrative.

⁵⁴ Timothy Andrew Letzeke, “Lectionaries and Little Narratives: Children of the Revised Common Lectionary,” *Liturgy* 29, no. 4 (2014): 29, accessed January 24, 2017, doi: 10.1080/0458063X.2014.922004.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵⁶ See Appendices 1, for Narrative Lectionary Years 1-4.

⁵⁷ Moore, 37.

The Narrative Lectionary, with its long and expanded narratives, disciplines both the pastor and the congregation to the sacred art of listening. For example, on the Narrative Lectionary's opening Sunday in Year 2 and Year 4 the primary preaching texts are Genesis 2:4b-25 and Genesis 1:1-2:4a, respectively. On Transfiguration Sunday in Year 1 and Year 3 the primary preaching texts are Matthew 16:24 -17:8 and Luke 9:28-45, respectively. These lections present decent-sized samplings of the long narratives that all Narrative Lectionary congregations must discipline themselves to hear in worship. The curators of the Narrative Lectionary fundamentally assert through its intentional narrative framing of the text that "the church must be constantly retelling the story...always remaining open to the never exhausted potential of the text."⁵⁸

The Narrative Lectionary has created the following structure for its four-year cycle. For sixteen weeks in the fall, beginning in September, the primary preaching texts are taken from the Hebrew Bible and move from stories in Genesis to the return from exile. Each year the primary preaching text begins in Genesis with the story of creation and moves to the stories of Abraham and Sarah and their offspring; "each year preaches its way rapidly through the Old Testament story."⁵⁹ In the season of Advent, the Narrative Lectionary goes a different direction than the Revised Common Lectionary in that it focuses on prophetic stories of God's activity. For example, on the First Sunday in Advent in Year 1 the story of Habakkuk is the selected preaching text. On the Second Sunday in Advent in Year 3 the selected

⁵⁸ Richard Bauckman, "Reading Scripture as a Coherent Story," in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 44.

⁵⁹ Rolf Jacobson, "The Narrative Lectionary" *Lutheran Forum* 46, no. 1 (2012), 26.

preaching text is taken from Joel 2. On the Third Sunday in Advent in Year 2 the selected preaching text is taken from Ezra on the rebuilding of the temple.

In the Narrative Lectionary from the First Sunday of Christmas to Eastertide, over the course of sixteen to twenty weeks, the story of Jesus is preached using one Gospel, following in the tradition of the Revised Common Lectionary. However what is unique about the Narrative Lectionary's focus on one Gospel is that it "is read in sequence with an effort to avoid overlapping stories between the Gospels."⁶⁰ This important sequencing allows for both the preacher and congregation to bring out unique aspects of not only the theme and focus of the particular gospel writer, but also narrative nuances. For example, in exploring the preaching texts for the Third Sunday after Epiphany (Luke 5:1-11) in Year 3, I was able to remind the congregation of the preaching text from the Second Sunday after Epiphany where they heard/read of the established relationship that Jesus had with Simon Peter in the healing of Simon Peter's mother from a high fever. In the Revised Common Lectionary, the lection of Luke 5:1-11 on the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany is preceded by Luke 4:21-30 on the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany. An important textual nuance, which names the established relationship between Simon Peter and Jesus through the healing of Simon Peter's mother-in-law, is completely omitted in the Revised Common Lectionary, but included in the Narrative Lectionary.

In the final official weeks of the Narrative Lectionary, six to seven weeks in the season of Easter concluding on Pentecost Sunday, the preaching texts are from

⁶⁰ Timothy Andrew Letzeke, "Lectionaries and Little Narratives: Children of the Revised Common Lectionary," *Liturgy* 29, no. 4 (2014): 29, accessed January 24, 2017, doi: 10.1080/0458063X.2014.922004.

the Acts of the Apostles and the epistles. In moving to highlight the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Narrative Lectionary turns from its focus on the development of the early church and joins with the Revised Common Lectionary in focusing its preaching text on Acts 2.

While the Narrative Lectionary does seek to conform “both to the rhythms of the liturgical year, especially its major festivals, as well as to the realities of the annual cycle of our culture,” it does not take its cues from the liturgical calendar in most cases. For congregations that are deeply committed to the liturgical calendar or have traditional celebrations like those of the Black Church, the Narrative Lectionary must be adapted. For example, in celebrating Christ the King Sunday in Year 3, the Narrative Lectionary’s primary preaching text is Jeremiah 36:1-8, 21-23, 27-28; and 31:31-34, which invites challenging preaching or perhaps sometimes abandoning the lectionary altogether as I did on Historically Black College/University Sunday (Fifth Sunday after Epiphany), choosing both to remain in the book of John and to follow the text sequentially, when I preached a sermon entitled “Thirsty” from John 7:37-52 (a story that the Narrative Lectionary leaves out) instead of the selected preaching text of John 4:1-12.⁶¹

The curators of the Narrative Lectionary do not assume that the Narrative Lectionary is ideal for every congregation. They think of it still very much as a tool that should be adapted and they hope that every congregation feels “free to tweak, tinker, try out their own ideas: in short, to use their evangelical freedom well and

⁶¹ See www.soundcloud.com/revjlhj, for online content of other sermons I preached at Christian Fellowship Congregational Church (United Church of Christ) throughout this project.

wisely.”⁶² The idea of tweaking and tinkering with the Narrative Lectionary offers Black Churches the freedom of being able to take the important milestones of the Black Church calendar, like HBCU Sunday, and shape a culturally relevant, biblically sound worship service that not only improves biblical literacy but also establishes transformational communities of faith who are shaped by God’s story.

What both Jacobson and Koester assert is that the narrative story of our faith are key to building transformational communities of the faith—communities that are not simply biblically and religiously smart in that they know biblical facts, but communities where individuals have been transformed by the power of the Word. As Joy Moore, comments, “the kind of literacy we need is not just a knowledge of individual Bible verses but a holistic knowledge of the story of God” that makes us a “story-shaped community,” that is ready to engage in the transformation of the world according to God’s aims.⁶³ When we hear, particularly in the presentation of the gospel narratives, the way Jesus brought those from the margins into the center of the community, the way he embodied radical welcome and inclusion woven together in a compelling message from the preacher inviting the community to become more Christ-like, which is the work of transformation, communities are changed for the good, and to the glory of God. The Narrative Lectionary, I believe, is an excellent tool to develop and shape transformational disciples of Jesus Christ.

⁶² Jacobson, 26.

⁶³ Moore, 31, 38.

A BLACK NARRATIVE PULPIT

When communities of faith come in touch with God's story, when they are familiar with the liberating narrative arc of God's journey with humanity, they become transformed with knowledge and the ability to make transformative acts in the world. In my ethnographic research, congregants shared with me the connections they were making to social justice efforts as a result of the narrative preached using the Narrative Lectionary. One respondent noted on the sermon survey, "I felt I was called to do more for the underprivileged and homeless" while another noted a "commitment to welcome other people to our church."⁶⁴

A Black Narrative Pulpit is where imaginative, soul-stirring, prophetic, biblical, Narrative Lectionary-based, black preaching occurs in Black Churches. Within the Black Church, preaching is often a high, celebratory, pastoral-prophetic dialectical moment where the church waits, with eager anticipation, to participate, to receive revelation, education and hope. Preaching in the Black Church remains to this very day a primary mode of religious instruction and education.⁶⁵ The responsibilities of preaching carry even more weight today than they did several decades ago when religious education on Sunday morning and Wednesday evening took greater precedence in the lives of parishioners. Today's Black preachers must not simply be "trivocal", maintaining pastoral authority as prophet, priest and sage,

⁶⁴ See Appendix 3.

⁶⁵ See Olin P. Moyd, *The Sacred Art: Preaching and Theology in the African American Tradition* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1995) who points out the significance of "Telling the Story," especially in Chapter 6.

as Kenyatta Gilbert suggests,⁶⁶ but must become *quadvocal*. Today's Black preacher must use the Black pulpit, more now than ever before, to teach those in the pews. Transformation expert bell hooks suggests that those who are engaged most actively in the work of transformation through education believe their job is "not merely to share information but share in the intellectual and spiritual growth" of people.⁶⁷ A Black Narrative Pulpit is imaginative, soul-stirring, prophetic, biblical, Narrative Lectionary-based, Black preaching that engenders God-infused wisdom through story that encourages "critical thinking, heightened imagination, and liberating practice" among those in Black pews.⁶⁸

For the last almost seven years I have served as the pastor of a Black Church, and for the last four years have used, almost exclusively, the Narrative Lectionary. This afforded me first hand experience of how using this lectionary, establishing a Black Narrative Pulpit, has contributed to greater biblical literacy and Christian transformation in the life one Black Church. Developing a Black Narrative Pulpit paved the way for my congregation to become better acquainted with the broad movement of the biblical story. In my research through conversations with members and I recall a woman reaching broadly across the biblical cannon showcasing wide fluency and literacy across the spectrum during the Bible Study. I remember her making fascinating connections between Genesis and Revelation as she spoke of the *shalom* and *wholeness* that the God created in the Garden, and

⁶⁶ Kenyatta R. Gilbert, *The Journey and Promise of African American Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 11.

⁶⁷ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 13.

⁶⁸ Peter Hodgson, *God's Wisdom: Toward a Theology of Education* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 8.

related it to *new creation* God longs to see fulfilled at the eschaton. The language of shalom and wholeness, is language she developed as a result of hearing Narrative Lectionary sermons in the fall of year, when the Narrative Lectionary invites preaching on the subject of creation in Genesis.⁶⁹

The Narrative Lectionary has also encouraged my congregation to become more Christ-like, truly yearning “to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly” with God which is the realization of Christian transformation.⁷⁰ In my research members congregation noted on the survey that they felt called “*to carry homeless bags in my car for those I see in the street,*” while another was “*reminded that recycling in my home is an act of [biblical] justice.*” A Black Narrative Pulpit utilizes the resources of the Black Church, in this case the prized place of preaching, and the resources of the Narrative Lectionary to contribute to greater biblical literacy and encourage transformative acts that build up the body Christ and transform our world toward God’s aims.

It has not been easy to establish a Black Narrative Pulpit at Christian Fellowship Congregation Church of San Diego (UCC). When I initially undertook this project there was great resistance. Several encouraged me to abandon the lectionary idea completely and just preach whatever the Lord laid on my heart. This group felt that my sermons would be more spirited if this were the approach to sermon development and formation. The idea of knowing the biblical text months in advanced troubled many who felt that this kind of advanced knowing signified that it was not a “fresh,” “in season,” or “right now” Word. Others, especially those

⁶⁹ See Appendix 3.

⁷⁰ Micah 6:8, Common English Bible.

who had come from the United Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church USA, and Evangelical Lutheran Church in America pushed for the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL). Many of them cited strong reasons to use the RCL, chief among them was being able to be in dialogue on Monday morning or Sunday evening with friends from around the country and compare notes, or, perhaps more accurately, determine which preacher did a better job with the text! Other who wanted the RCL cited very poor reasons, like wanting to keep an expensive color bulletin that the denomination provided featuring reflections on the RCL in word and art. Through educational moments in business and ministry meetings, along with notes in the bulletin and continuous conversation grounded in the language of being on the “Narrative Lectionary journey” the church has come to appreciate the unique qualities of our Black Narrative Pulpit.

One of the most significant, but less than enduring complaints of the Narrative Lectionary in use at Christian Fellowship has been the reading of lengthy passages of Scripture. Before establishing a Black Narrative Pulpit, the congregation had grown accustomed to only the preached text, often just a verse or two, being read in worship—not a long text and an accompanying reading as the Narrative Lectionary suggests. These complaints came primarily from the Sunday morning liturgists who held responsibility for reading the lessons, but secondarily from volunteers whose job was to put together our weekly bulletin. Their task was indeed a difficult one: to fit, on the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, Matthew 14:13-33 and Psalm 95:1-5 in the bulletin—in a readable-size font! The task became too much, and as the congregation’s attention to the long narratives and the reading

performance of the liturgist improved—with the help of special Scripture reading workshops liturgists took to heart that “proclamation begins with the speaking and hearing of the Scriptures”—it was deemed unnecessary to print the Scriptures in the weekly bulletin and the church has become a community that practices active listening each Sunday morning.⁷¹

The most enduring frustration of the Narrative Lectionary in use at Christian Fellowship is the long fall and winter weeks where Jesus is noticeably absent from preaching. Jacobson and Koester, early in the development of the lectionary noted this similar concern as pastors provided feedback on some of the challenges of its use within their congregations. The long winter weeks often weary my congregation to point where I wonder if the choir’s singing of “Give Me Jesus...Give Me Jesus” is a double entendre directed at the lectionary. At times during this somewhat long stretch some have flatly said, as I have greeted them at the door, that my sermons was good but needed a “dash more of Jesus.” Even though Jacobson and Koester encourage pastors to remember that the reading and preaching of the Hebrew Bible “take place in the midst of a Christian liturgy that mentions Jesus and the Trinity often” it is often a far more challenging experience for those in the pews.⁷² In establishing this Black Narrative Pulpit we have sought to “focus primarily upon the world within the text in relation to the world in front of the text—to look forward from Israel’s scriptures toward those enduring faith, both

⁷¹ G. Robert Jacks, *Getting the Word Across: Speech Communication for Pastors and Lay Leaders* (Grand Rapids: W.W. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 9.

⁷² Jacobson, 26.

Jewish and Christian, that appropriate this material as Scripture” when the primary preaching texts are drawn from the Hebrew Bible.⁷³

In establishing this Black Narrative Pulpit, over the last four years, I have worked hard to develop and refine my preaching method. In doing so, I have explored and tested several different preaching methods, among them Frank Thomas’ method of celebration in *They Like to Never Quit Praisin’ God*, Paul Scott Wilson’s weeklong method in *The Practice of Preaching*, James Henry Harris’ method of self-understanding, story and illumination in *The Word Made Plain*, and many others. But the method that I have most consistently returned to, again and again in establishing a Black Narrative Pulpit, is the method articulated in *The Certain Sound of the Trumpet* by Samuel DeWitt Proctor. In this excellent little book, Proctor encourages the preacher to slowly and critically think through his or her preaching text by following a time-tested preaching process that he was first attracted to when he heard the “clarion preaching” of Harry Emerson Fosdick at The Riverside Church in the City of New York. The method, first found in the philosophic writing of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, begins with a *proposition* (main idea), which develops into a *subject* (title, theme), which is to be debated with an *antithesis* (why preach this), which then develops into a *thesis* (proposition expanded), which is expanded to ask *relevant questions* (the “so what” of the sermon), and finally concludes with a *synthesis* (resolution/what is to be celebrated in the text). When preaching is consistently approached using this time-tested method a Black Narrative Pulpit can lead to to transformation in the pews.

⁷³ R. W. Moberly, *Old Testament Theology: Reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 283.

The Black Narrative Pulpit at Christian Fellowship Congregational Church (UCC) has worked, over the last four years, to establish a transformational biblically literate Black Church. The congregation has developed an intimacy with the biblical text that they did not have before. The congregation thinks critically about the texts and is unafraid of questioning, challenging texts, or outright disagreeing with a biblical text. As a result of establishing a Narrative Black Pulpit at Christian Fellowship, the church has gained comfort with the broad arc of the biblical narrative. This has been proven through surveys, conversations, and other feedback loops in which members recall the broad connections across the biblical canon showing not only familiarity with the text but a sense of intimacy with the story of God and biblical themes. The congregation has come to know and understand the text, and now longs to embody the kind of world that the text invites them to create, which is the most significant sign of transformation.

The most significant testimony of transformation in the life of this Black Church is that of becoming a Black Church that welcomes and affirms persons who identify as LGBTQI and those who are differently-abled.⁷⁴ Kelly Brown Douglass suggests that the radical welcome of “blues bodies” into the fullness of the Black Church embodies the very nature of being a transformative Black Church: a community with a “morally active commitment to advance the life, freedom, and

⁷⁴ See Horace Griffin, *Their Own Received Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2006) for the most current scholarship on Queer Theology and the Black Church.

dignity” of all Black bodies.⁷⁵ In testimony of this, the church has become the first Black United Church of Christ congregation in the nation to hold official designations by the denomination as both an 1) *Open and Affirming congregation*; welcoming and affirming of persons who are LGBTQI, and 2) *Accessible to All congregation*; affirming, celebrating and creating space for persons who are differently-abled.⁷⁶ Developing a practical understanding of a theology of limits has proved helped in understanding disability theology.⁷⁷ In this theology we are to understand disablism not as an exceptional instance that rubs against the norms of what it means to be fully human, but as one of the many limits that humanity has, or will have, in their lifetime. A theology of limits moves disablism from a place of pity and empathy to a place where norms become more fluid and the disabled are no longer expected to be “treated” or “rehabilitated” into an idealized normative ability.

I believe that establishing a Black Narrative Pulpit has been a significant most important factor that led to transforming Christian Fellowship from one that

⁷⁵Douglas, xiii. For more on “embodied Black theology” see for example Eboni Marshall Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation: Black Bodies, the Black Church, and the Council of Chalcedon* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

⁷⁶ See Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward A Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994) where she calls for radical inclusion and affirmation of persons who live with disability in to the full life the Church, and the creation of liberating images, ideas and values of persons who are differently-abled that view them as whole persons, not broken and in need of fixing.

⁷⁷ Deborah Creamer in *Disability and Christian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 64, suggests that humanity’s “limits need not be seen as negative but rather...an important part of being human.” For more on a theology of limits and debate on *normative ability* within disability theology see John Swinton who suggests that disability should be understood as a “social experience that is shaped and formed by the particular context in which a person’s perceived difference is experienced” in his article “Disability, Ableism and Disablism,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 444.

outright rejected LGBTQI and differently-abled persons from the “full life, membership, leadership, mission, fellowship, worship, and sacraments” of the church, to one that radically invites and welcomes “all to bear the responsibilities, blessings and joys of membership ministry and life” in the church; affirming “the inherent value, worth and dignity” of “all persons” as “children of God, created in God’s image.”⁷⁸ In hearing the long expanded narratives over the course of four years through the Narrative Lectionary, and truly longing to embody the narrative world of the text, my congregation has become a transformation a community of love and grace—actively seeking out those who are oppressed and marginalized, inviting them to table, and creating space within the community for sacred stories to be heard. In the congregational meeting where the vote was being called, to determine whether or not our congregation would formally welcome and affirm persons who are LGBTQI and differently-abled, the community occupied a posture of sacred listening, the very same posture they held when listening to the long narratives of Jesus during worship using the Narrative Lectionary.⁷⁹ The congregation, after listening to several stories, responded with the same compassion, love and grace that they heard in the story of Joseph, Hannah, the widow at Nain, and Jarius’ Daughter. The transformational shift from being a Black UCC congregation who thought little about denominational theology, to one that

⁷⁸ The “Open and Affirming & Accessible to All Statement of Christian Fellowship Congregational Church of San Diego (United Church of Christ).

⁷⁹ See <http://www.servedupsober.com/religion-inclusion-addicton> for a complete a blog post of a black lesbian woman who shared her story at the Annual Meeting of Christian Fellowship Congregational Church (UCC) on January 29, 2017, in support of the motion to become an Open and Affirming (ONA), Accessible to All (A2A) congregation of the United Church of Christ.

voted almost unanimously to radically include all persons in the life of the church is a significant transformation, one that I believe could not have been made without the Narrative Lectionary.

Establishing a Black Narrative Pulpit has strengthened worship, contributed to greater biblical literacy, and incited Christian transformation at Christian Fellowship Congregational Church (UCC). Establishing a Black Narrative Pulpit opened the way for this community to creatively embody a new world shaped by the biblical story revealed in the Christian Scriptures; a story that has helped this church live out its unique calling to be a culturally relevant, biblical, story-shaped community of faith, justice, liberation, and holy love. Further research on the topic should seek to determine if the findings experienced at Christian Fellowship Congregational Church (UCC) might be similarly experienced in other Black Narrative Pulpits.

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APPENDIX 1: Narrative Lectionary⁸⁰

Year 1 Matthew (2018-2019)

Liturgical Day	Theme	Preaching Text	Accompanying Reading
13th Sunday after Pentecost	Flood and Promise	Genesis 6:16-22; 9:8-15	Matthew 8: 24-27
14th Sunday after Pentecost	Call of Abraham	Genesis 12:1-9	Matthew 28:19-20
15th Sunday after Pentecost	Joseph in Prison	Genesis 39:1-23	Matthew 5:11-12
16th Sunday after Pentecost	Rescue at the Sea	Exodus 14:10-14, 21-29	Matthew 2:13-15
17th Sunday after Pentecost	Covenant and Commandments	Exodus 19:3-7; 20:1-17	Matthew 5:17
18th Sunday after Pentecost	Joshua Renews the Covenant	Joshua 24:1-15	Matthew 4:8-10
19th Sunday after Pentecost	David and Bathsheba	2 Samuel 12:1-9; Psalm 51:1-9	Matthew 21:33-41
20th Sunday after Pentecost	Solomon's Wisdom	1 Kings 3:4-9, 16-28	Matthew 6:9-10
21st Sunday after Pentecost	Elisha Heals Naaman	2 Kings 5:1-14	Matthew 8:2-3
22nd Sunday after Pentecost	Micah	Micah 5:2-4; 6-8	Matthew 9:13
23rd Sunday after Pentecost	Swords and Plowshares	Isaiah 36:1-3, 13-20; 37:1-7 then 2:1-4	Matthew 5:14
Christ the King Sunday	Jeremiah's Temple Sermon	Jeremiah 1:4-10; 7:1-11	Matthew 21:12-13
First Sunday of Advent	Faith as a Way of Life	Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:2-4; 3:17-19	Matthew 26:36-38
Second Sunday of Advent	Esther	Esther 4:1-17	Matthew 5:13-16
Third Sunday of Advent	Light to the Nations	Isaiah 42:1-9	Matthew 12:15-21
Fourth Sunday of Advent	Jesus as Immanuel	Matthew 1:18-25	Psalm 23:1-4 or 23:4
Christmas Eve	Birth of Jesus	Luke 2:1-14 [15-20]	Psalm 96:10-13
Christmas Day	Shepherds Visit	Luke 2:8-20	Psalm 95:6-7
First Sunday of Christmas	Magi Visit	Matthew 2:1-12	Psalm 96:10-13
Second Sunday of Christmas	Flight to Egypt	Matthew 2:13-23	Psalm 11:1-13

⁸⁰ Working Preacher, "Narrative Lectionary FAQ" accessed April 28, 2017, https://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_faqs.aspx.

First Sunday after Epiphany	Jesus' Baptism	Matthew 3:1-17	Psalm 2:7-8
Second Sunday after Epiphany	Tempted in the Wilderness	Matthew 4:1-17	Psalm 91:9-12
Third Sunday after Epiphany	Beatitudes	Matthew 5:1-20	Psalm 1:1-3
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany	Treasure in Heaven	Matthew 6:7-21	Psalm 20:7
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany	Feeding 5,000	Matthew 14:13-33	Psalm 95:1-5
Transfiguration	Bearing the Cross	Matthew 16:24 - 17:8	Psalm 41:7-10
Ash Wednesday	Who is the Greatest	Matthew 18:1-9	Psalm 146:7-10 or 51:1-3
First Sunday in Lent	Forgiveness	Matthew 18:15-35	Psalm 32:1-2
Second Sunday in Lent	Laborers in the Vineyard	Matthew 20:1-16	Psalm 16:5-8
Third Sunday in Lent	Wedding Banquet	Matthew 22:1-14	Psalm 45:6-7
Fourth Sunday in Lent	Bridesmaids	Matthew 25:1-13	Psalm 43:3-4
Fifth Sunday in Lent	Last Judgment	Matthew 25:31-46	Psalm 98:7-9
Psalm Sunday	Triumphal Entry	Matthew 21:1-13	Psalm 118:26-29
Maundy Thursday	Words of Institution	Matthew 26:17-30	Psalm 116:12-15
Good Friday	Crucifixion	Matthew 27:27-61	Psalm 22:1-2, 14-18
Holy Saturday			
Easter	Easter	Matthew 28:1-10	Psalm 118:19-24
Second Sunday of Easter	Great Commission	Matthew 28:16-20	Psalm 40:9-10
Third Sunday of Easter	Peter's Vision	Acts 10:1-17, 34-35	Matthew 9:36-37
Fourth Sunday of Easter	Paul's Mission	Acts 13:1-3; 14:8-18	Matthew 10:40-42
Fifth Sunday of Easter	Gospel as Salvation	Romans 1:1-17	Matthew 9:10-13
Sixth Sunday of Easter	God's Love Poured Out	Romans 5:1-11	Matthew 11:28-30
Seventh Sunday of Easter	Hope as Resurrection	Romans 6:1-14	Matthew 6:24
Pentecost	Nothing Can Separate Us	Acts 2:1-4/Romans 8:18-39	Matthew 28:16-20

Narrative Lectionary Year 2 Mark (2019-2020)

Liturgical Day	Theme	Preaching Text	Accompanying Reading
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost	Garden of Eden	Genesis 2:4b-25	Mark 1:16-20 or Mark 10:6-8
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost	Isaac Born to Sarah	Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7	Mark 10:27
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost	Jacob Wrestles God	Genesis 32:22-30	Mark 14:32-36

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost	Moses and God's Name	Exodus 1:8-14 [15-2:10]; 3:1-15	Mark 12:26-27a
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost	Hear O Israel	Deuteronomy 5:1-21; 6:4-9	Mark 12:28-31
Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost	Ruth	Ruth 1:1-17	Mark 3:33-35
Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost	David Anointed King	2 Samuel 5:1-5; 6:1-5/ Psalm 150	Mark 11:8-10
Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost	Kingdom Divided	1 Kings 12:1-17; 25-29	Mark 10:42-45
Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost	Elijah at Mount Carmel	1 Kings 18:20-39	Mark 9:2-4
Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost	Hosea	Hosea 11:1-9	Mark 10:13-14
Christ the King Sunday	Isaiah's Vineyard Song	Isaiah 5:1-7; 11:1-5	Mark 12:1-3
First Sunday of Advent	Josiah's Reform	2 Kings 22:1-10 [14-20]; 23:1-3	Luke 24:30-32
Second Sunday of Advent	Isaiah of the Exile	Isaiah 40:1-11	Mark 1:1-4
Third Sunday of Advent	Rebuilding the Temple	Ezra 1:1-4; 3:1-4; 10-13	Luke 2:25-32
Fourth Sunday of Advent	Zechariah's Song	Luke 1:5-13, 57-80	Psalm 11:3
Christmas Eve	Birth Of Jesus	Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)	Psalm 146:5-10 or Luke 1:46-55
Christmas Day	Shepherds Visit	Luke 2:8-20	Psalm 108:1-4
First Sunday of Christmas	Beginning of Good News	Mark 1:1-20	Psalm 91;9-12
Second Sunday of Christmas	Jesus' Ministry Begun	Mark 1:21-45	Psalm 103:1-5
First Sunday after Epiphany	Jesus Heals and Teaches	Mark 2:1-22	Psalm 103:6-14
Second Sunday after Epiphany	Parables in Mark	Mark 4:1-34	Psalm 126
Third Sunday after Epiphany	Jairus' Daughter Healed	Mark 5:21-43	Psalm 131
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany	Death of John the Baptist	Mark 6:1-29	Psalm 122
Transfiguration	Transfiguration	Mark 8:27-9:8	Psalm 27:1-4
Ash Wednesday	Passion Prediction	Mark 9:30-37	Psalm 32:1-5
First Sunday in Lent	First Last and Last First	Mark 10:17-31	Psalm 19:7-10
Second Sunday in Lent	Bartimaeus Healed	Mark 10:32-52	Psalm 34:11-14
Third Sunday in Lent	Parable of the Tenants/Taxes to Caesar	Mark 12:1-12/Mark12:13-17	Psalm 86:8-13
Fourth Sunday in Lent	Great Commandment	Mark 12:28-44	Psalm 89:1-4
Fifth Sunday in Lent	End of the Age	Mark 13:1-8, 24-37	Psalm 102:12-17
Palm Sunday	Triumphal Entry/Anointing at Bethany	Mark 11:1-11/Mark 14:3-9	Psalm 118:25-29

Maundy Thursday	Lord's Supper, Prayer in Gethsemane	Mark 14:22-42	Psalm 116:12-19
Good Friday	Crucifixion	Mark 15:-16-39	Psalm 22:1-2, 14-21
Holy Saturday			
Easter	Resurrection	Mark 16:1-8	Psalm 118:21-27
Second Sunday of Easter	You Shall Be My Witness	Act 1:1-14	Mark 6:7-13
Third Sunday of Easter	Peter Heals in Jerusalem	Acts 3:1-10	Mark 6:53-56
Fourth Sunday of Easter	Church at Thessalonica	Acts 17:1-9/ 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10	Mark 3:9-11
Fifth Sunday of Easter	Church at Corinth	Acts 18:1-4/1 Corinthians 1:10-18	Mark 12:28-31
Sixth Sunday of Easter	Faith, Hope and Love	1 Corinthians 13:1-13	Mark 12:28-31
Seventh Sunday of Easter	Death Swallowed in Life	1 Corinthians 15:1-26, 51-57	Mark 12:26-27a
Pentecost	Gifts of the Spirit	Acts 2:1-4/ 1 Corinthians 12:1-13	Mark 1:4-8

Narrative Lectionary Year 3 Luke (2020-2021)

Liturgical Day	Theme	Preaching Text	Accompanying Reading
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost	Creation and Fall	Genesis 2:4b-7, 15-17; 3:1-8	Luke 11:4
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost	God's Promise to Abraham	Genesis 15:1-6	Luke 3:8
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost	God Works Through Joseph	Genesis 37:3-8, 17b-22, 26-34; 50:15-21	Luke 6:35
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost	The Promise of Passover	Exodus 12:1-13; 13:1-8	Luke 22:14-20
Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost	Golden Calf	Exodus 32:1-14	Luke 23:34
Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost	God Answers Hannah	1 Samuel 1:9-11, 19-20; 2:1-10	Luke 1:46-55
Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost	God's Promise to David	2 Samuel 7:1-17	Luke 1:30-33
Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost	God's Care for the Widow	1 Kings 17:1-16 [17-24]	Luke 4:24-26
Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost	Jonah and God's Mercy	Jonah 1:1-17; 3:1-10 [4:1-11]	Luke 18:13
Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost	God Calls Isaiah	Isaiah 6:1-8	Luke 5:8-10
Christ the King Sunday	God Promises a New Covenant	Jeremiah 36:1-8, 21-23, 27-28 then 31:31-34	Luke 22:19-20
First Sunday of Advent	Daniel's Hope in God	Daniel 6:6-27	Luke 11:13

Second Sunday of Advent	Joel: God's Promised Spirit	Joel 2:12-13, 28-29	Luke 11:13
Third Sunday of Advent	Spirit of the Lord Upon Me	Isaiah 61:1-11	Luke 4:16-21
Fourth Sunday of Advent	Jesus' Birth Announcement	Luke 1:26-49	Psalms 113 or 113:9
Christmas Eve	Birth of Jesus	Luke 2:1-14 [15-20]	Psalms 96 or 96:3
Christmas Day	Shepherds Visit	Luke 2:8-20	Psalms 123:1-2 or 123:2
First Sunday of Christmas	Simeon and Anna	Luke 2:21-38	Psalms 131 or 131:3
Baptism of Our Lord	Jesus' Baptism	Luke 3:1-22	Psalms 51:6-17 or 51:13
Second Sunday after Epiphany	Sermon at Nazareth	Luke 4:14-30	Psalms 146 or 146:7b-8
Third Sunday after Epiphany	Fish for People	Luke 5:1-11	Psalms 90:14-17 or 90:17b
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany	Healing on the Sabbath	Luke 6:1-16	Psalms 92 or 92:4
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany	Raising the Widow's Son	Luke 7:1-17	Psalms 119:105-107 or 119:107
Sixth Sunday after Epiphany	Are You the One?	Luke 7:18-35	Psalms 146:5-10
Seventh Sunday after Epiphany	Forgiven at Jesus' Feet	Luke 7:36-50	Psalms 130:3-6
Transfiguration	Transfiguration	Luke 9:28-45	Psalms 36:5-10 or 36:9
Ash Wednesday	Jesus Turns to Jerusalem	Luke 9:51-62	Psalms 5:7-8 or 15:1
First Sunday in Lent	Good Samaritan	Luke 9:51-62	Psalms 5:7-8 or 5:8
Second Sunday in Lent	Lament over Jerusalem	Luke 13:1-9, 31-35	Psalms 15 or 15:1
Third Sunday in Lent	Lost Sheep, Coin, Son	Luke 15:1-32	Psalms 119:167-176 or 119:176
Fourth Sunday in Lent	Rich Man and Lazarus	Luke 16:19-31	Psalms 41:1-3 or 41:1
Fifth Sunday in Lent	Zacchaeus	Luke 18:31-19:10	Psalms 84:1-4, 10-12 or 84:10
Palm Sunday	Triumphal Entry	Luke 19:29-44	Psalms 118:19-23 or 118:20
Maundy Thursday	Last Supper	Luke 22:1-27	Psalms 34:8-10 or 34:8
Good Friday	Crucifixion	Luke 23:32-47	Psalms 31:5-13 or 31:5a
Holy Saturday			
Easter	Resurrection	Luke 23:32-47	Psalms 31:5-13 or 31:5a
Second Sunday of Easter	Emmaus Road	Luke 24:13-35	Psalms 30 or 30:11
Third Sunday of Easter	Stephen's Witness	Acts 6:1-7:2a, 44-60	Luke 23:33-34a, 46
Fourth Sunday of Easter	Ethiopian Eunuch Baptized	Acts 8:26-39	Luke 24:44-47
Fifth Sunday of Easter	Council at Jerusalem	Acts 15:1-18	Luke 2:29-32

Sixth Sunday of Easter	Living by Faith	Galatians 1:13-17; 2:11-21	Luke 18:9-14
Seventh Sunday of Easter	One in Christ	Galatians 3:1-9, 23-29	Luke 1:68-79
Pentecost	Pentecost	Acts 2:1-4; Galatians 4:1-7	Luke 11:11-13
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost	God's Love Poured Out	Romans 5:1-11	Matthew 11:28-30
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost	Hope as Resurrection	Romans 6:1-14	Matthew 6:24
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost	Nothing Can Separate Us	Acts 2:1-4/Romans 8:18-39	Matthew 28:16-20

Narrative Lectionary Year 4 John (2017-2018)

Liturgical Day	Theme	Preaching Text	Accompanying Reading
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost	Creation by the Word	Genesis 1:1-2:4a	John 1:1-5
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost	Binding of Isaac	Genesis 21:1-3; 22:1-14	John 1:29
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost	Jacob's Dream	Genesis 27:1-4, 15-23; 28:10-10	John 1:50-51
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost	God's Name Is Revealed	Exodus 2:23-25; 3:10-15; 4:10-17	John 8:58
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost	God Provides Manna	Exodus 16:1-18	John 6:51
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost	God Calls Samuel	1 Samuel 3:1-21	John 20:21-23
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost	God Calls David	1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 51:10-14	John 7:24
Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost	Solomon's Temple	1 Kings 5:1-5; 8:1-13	John 2:19-21
Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost	God Speaks to Elijah	1 Kings 19:1-18	John 12:27-28
Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost	Amos: Justice Rolls Down	Amos 1:1-2; 5:14-15, 21-24	John 7:37-38
Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost	Isaiah: A Child Is Born	Isaiah 9:1-7	John 8:12
Christ the King Sunday	Jeremiah's Letter to Exiles	Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14	John 14:27
First Sunday of Advent	Daniel: The Fiery Furnace	Daniel 3:1, 8-30	John 18:36-37
Second Sunday of Advent	Ezekiel: Valley of Dry Bones	Ezekiel 37:1-14	John 11:25-26
Third Sunday of Advent	Word Accomplishes God's Purpose	Isaiah 55:1-11	John 4:13-14
Fourth Sunday of Advent	Word Made Flesh	John 1:1-18	Psalm 130:5-8

Christmas Eve	Birth of Jesus	Luke 2:1-14 [15-20]	Psalm 96 :7-10
Christmas Day	Shepherds' Visit	Luke 2:8-20	Psalm 123:1-2 or 123:2
First Sunday of Christmas	A Voice in the Wilderness	John 1:19-34	Psalm 32:1-2
Baptism of Our Lord	Jesus Says Come and See	John 1:35-51	Psalm 66:1-5
Second Sunday after Epiphany	Wedding at Cana	John2:1-11	Psalm 104:14-16
Third Sunday after Epiphany	Jesus Cleanses the Temple	John 2:13-25	Psalm 127:1-2
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany	Nicodemus	John 3:1-21	Psalm 139:13-18
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany	The Woman at the Well	John 4:1-42	Psalm 42:1-3
Transfiguration	The Man Born Blind	John 9:1-41	Psalm 27:1-4
Ash Wednesday	The Good Shepherd	John 10:1-18	Psalm 23
First Sunday in Lent	Jesus Raises Lazarus	John 11:1-44	Psalm 104:27-30
Second Sunday in Lent	Jesus Washes Feet	John 13:1-17	Psalm 51:7-12
Third Sunday in Lent	Peter's Denial	John 18:12-27	Psalm 17:1-17
Fourth Sunday in Lent	Jesus and Pilate	John 18:28-40	Psalm 145:10-13
Fifth Sunday in Lent	Jesus Condemned	John 19:1-16a	Psalm 146
Psalm Sunday	The Crucified Messiah	John 19:16b-22	Psalm 24
Maundy Thursday	Jesus' Last Words	John 19:23-30	Psalm 26:3
Good Friday	Jesus the Passover Lamb	John 19:31-42	Psalm 31:9-18
Holy Saturday			
Easter	Resurrection	John 20:1-18	Psalm 118:21-29
Second Sunday of Easter	Thomas	John 20:19-31	Psalm 145:13-21
Third Sunday of Easter	Paul's Conversion	Acts 9:1-19	Matthew 6:24
Fourth Sunday of Easter	Paul and Silas	Acts 16:16-34	Luke 6:18-19, 22-23
Fifth Sunday of Easter	Paul's Sermon at Athens	Acts 17:16-31	John 1:16-18
Sixth Sunday of Easter	Partnership in the Gospel	Philippians 1:1-18a	Luke 9:46-28
Seventh Sunday of Easter	The Christ Hymn	Philippians 2:1-13	Luke 6:43-45
Pentecost	Pentecost: Rejoice in the Lord	Acts 2:1-21; Philippians 4:4-7	John 14:16-17

APPENDIX 2: Timeline of Modern Lectionary Development

1570	Missale Romanum
December 1963	Second Vatican Council—Constitution on Sacred Liturgy replaced Missale Romanum declaring “the treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God’s word.”
1967	Joint Liturgical Group produced a two-year lectionary used primarily in UK
1969	Lectionary for the Mass, Roman Catholic Church
1981	Revision to the 1963 Lectionary “Ordo Lectionum Missae”
1983	CCT developed the Common Lectionary
1990	Joint Liturgical Group revised its work named it “JLG-2” turned into 4-year lectionary using the Ordo Lectionum Missae and Common Lectionary plus John
1992	Revised Common Lectionary completed in Advent Season
1994	“Revising the Revised Common Lectionary” Four-Year Lectionary/RCL revision DMIN project at GTF

2007	Uncommon Lectionary created by Thomas G. Bandy two year lectionary; Year 1: Seeker Cycle, and Year 2: Disciple Cycle
	African American Lectionary a lectionary resource project for the Black Church. The project was led by Baptist/UCC clergywoman, the Rev. Dr. Martha Simmons.
2009	Fourth Year Proposal focused on OT, Robert Thomas Quisenberry D.Min. Project
2010	The Narrative Lectionary is developed
2010	The Open-Source Lectionary, Eric Lemonholm's D.Min. Thesis
2012	Year D: A Quadrennial Supplement to the Revised Common Lectionary, by Timothy Matthew Slemmons
2013	Beyond the Lectionary by David J. Ackerman, similar proposals to Year D

APPENDIX 3: Brief Sampling of Sermon Response Surveys of the Black Narrative Pulpit at Christian Fellowship Congregational Church from 2016-2017

Did the preaching today expand your knowledge of the biblical story?

YES NO
36 answered "Yes"
9 answered "No"

Was this your first time hearing this week's Narrative Lectionary Scriptures in a sermon?

YES NO
34 answered "Yes"
9 answered "no"

Where did find yourself addressed by the Gospel/Good News in the sermon?

- *I felt I was called to do more for the underprivileged and homeless. Actually making time like I've planned to feed the homeless.*
- *Change is possible, and everyday brings new possibilities.*
- *The biblical story was based on what is going on in the world today.*
- *Cleaning away of my sins. Have a repentant heart.*
- *God loves me unconditionally.*
- *The good news for me is that no matter the depths of sin and wickedness, God is always willing to make a new covenant. He never gives up on us.*
- *I was addressed as the widow who had very little to eat but trusted God (through Elijah) to provide for her needs if she faithfully obeyed (even if obeying seemed impossible).*
- *Baptism is a gift given to man. Once in a lifetime, it allows you enough grace until life eternal.*
- *God wants me to know wholeness/shalom.*

Where did you find yourself frustrated or confused in the sermon?

- *Not frustrated or confused.*
- *I was not frustrated, nor confused in sermon.*
- *Understanding the conflict between the gospel and daily living.*
- *Reference to slavery oppression in stereotyped terms—*
- *Frustrated by issues named in the community.*
-

Where did you find yourself delighted in the sermon?

- *The sermon is tied in with scripture*

- *Baptism is good because it is something to be made public. So we can remember our baptism. Baptism is communal event. Baptism lasts forever.*
- *I was delighted when I understood the gravity of the miracle, making a meal last years. My God is wonderful!*
- *Understanding the purpose of baptism and the risks associated with it in the past. That baptism is a community event.*
- *My past does not dictate my future.*

Where did you find yourself addressed by God in the sermon?

- *God wants me to be faithful and understand he will always provide for my needs in his own time, not mine.*
- *The need for a word of affirmation: our baptism is for our entire life.*
- *When the community was enjoying the revolution.*
- *Remember to reaffirm and rededicate self/ I tend to forget the choice being made and publicly demonstrated in baptism.*

How did you find your imagination stirred in the sermon?

- *Matter of doing simple things. Looking out to see what is needed. You are beloved. Remember your baptism today.*
- *I imagined being at a crossroad and making a decision to trust God because this has happened many times in my life.*
- *It brought back memories of my family and the love they had for me as a child.*
- *How God will and can change things.*
- *God created so much beauty in the world.*

What might you change in your life as a result of what you heard in the sermon?

- *Be more giving; we have so much; need to give more.*
- *I want to go straight to God each time without delays.*
- *This strengthens my feeling of love for my fellow man.*
- *Increased faith that things will change—things in America.*
- *Learning/Study the Bible more, reading the Bible more often.*
- *Once in a while meditate on when and how and why I was baptized and how those reasons change and don't.*

Is there an action for justice or witness that you felt called to do by the sermon?

- *Recommit ourselves for more witnessing.*
- *Commitment to welcome other people to our church.*
- *I feel compelled to tell my family members going through trials to hold on; God will provide for them.*
- *To carry homeless bags in my car for those I see in the street.*
- *Yes, justice for the less fortunate.*

- *Speak to my children about baptism.*
- *Reminded that recycling in my home is an act of justice.*

APPENDIX 4: Sample of Sermons

HBCU SUNDAY (Preached in February of Year 4)

Hebrew Bible Reading: Psalm 147:1-11

New Testament Reading: John 7:37-52 (omitted by the Narrative Lectionary)

Sermon Title: Thirsty

Pastor's Note in Bulletin

In the fall of 2013 there was a rare gathering of six HBCU presidents at the United Church of Christ headquarters in Cleveland, Ohio. There to deepen and expand the relationship between the schools and denomination, Geoffrey Black, our general minister and president, said the presence of these HBCUs “are tangible proof of the UCC’s continuing struggle for equality and education for all God’s people, a legacy that dates back to the Congregationalists and abolitionists of the Civil War era.” The American Missionary Association, an early abolitionist organization, established schools in the south to educate newly freed slaves. This organization is part of the rich legacy and history of the United Church of Christ. Walter Kimbrough, president of Dillard University said, “The history of the American Missionary Association is very important to the nation and the UCC should not only own this history but promote it...”

Today we heed President Kimbrough’s advice, and celebrate a visionary ministry that was dedicated to education and racial equality, founding eleven colleges primarily in the south, six of which continue to relate to the United Church of Christ:

- Dillard University, New Orleans, LA; www.dillard.edu
- Fisk University, Nashville, TN; www.fisk.edu
- Huston-Tillotson University, Austin, TX; www.htu.edu
- LeMoyne-Owen College, Memphis, TN; www.loc.edu
- Talladega College, Talladega, AL; www.talladega.edu
- Tougaloo College, Tougaloo, MS; www.tougaloo.edu

And two related HBCU Seminary/Divinity Schools

- Howard University School of Divinity, Washington DC
- Interdenominational Theological Seminary, Atlanta GA

May we stand with pride and celebrate the UCC and our African-American history!

† rev

Prayer: Lord, send your Spirit on this your people—and hide me behind the old rugged cross so that this waiting congregation sees none of me and all thee. Weave my hand the gospel plow, and tie my tongue in Jesus name. Amen.

Sermon: There is a line in my fraternity hymn that begins with these words, “...College days swiftly pass, and the recollection slowly fades away.” My college years are certainly not that far removed for me, but the memories have begun to slip and fade over the years. I imagine that the same may be true for you as well—but then, there are moments when we push past the blurring and fading memories to see again the brilliance of color from years gone by, the brilliance of light from those years of youthful living.

Moments like today—
when we gather to give God thanks for those years
of shameless young adulthood.

Moments like today—
when we remember the foolishness of our youth, and laugh
—maybe even cry.

Moments like today—
when we wear our school colors, Greek letters and celebrate the
witness of our people “over a way that with tears have been watered.”

Moment like today—
when we consider the struggle and fight that our people endured just
so our minds could be free—and their thirst for education, equality and
justice in Jesus’ Name—quenched with living water!

There was within the lives of the nineteenth century abolitionists, particularly those who met at the Second Convention on Bible Missions, a real thirst for education and justice in Jesus’ Name. Many of them had stood in defense of the Amistad captives in 1839, and had realized that in seeking justice and standing on the side of what was right that “streams of living water” were able to flow from the life of the believer. These folks, who constituted the American Missionary Association, who went on to found more than five hundred schools for African-American in the south, during and after the Civil War—they knew what it meant to be thirsty—and to have their thirsts quenched—in Christ.

WEB Dubois writes that these faith-filled thirsts for justice were a “gift of New England to the freed Negro; not alms, but a friend; not cash but character...[he

goes on to say that] The teachers in these institutions came not to keep the Negroes in their place, but to raise them out of the places of defilement where slavery had wallowed them. [and that] The colleges they founded were social settlements; homes where the best of the sons of the freedman came in close and sympathetic touch with the best...They lived and ate together, studied and worked, hoped and hearkened in the dawning light."⁸¹ *The Souls of Black Folks*, 1903.

To tell the story of the AMA is tell the story of liberal nineteenth-century theology which touched and impacted the lives of those who worked with their hands, prayed with their feet, used their minds for the cause of freedom and justice—and believed in the power of Jesus to give living water to all who thirst.

For the righteous thirsts of Theodore S. Wright, we give God thanks!
For the righteous thirsts of Samuel Ringgold Ward, we give God thanks!
For the righteous thirsts of James Pennington, we give God thanks!
For the righteous thirsts of Charles Bennett Ray, we give God thanks!
Early leaders of the AMA...

And for the countless educators who sacrificed....

Thirsting for justice, fighting insults and hatred.
Thirsting for righteousness, combating disease and terror.
Thirsting for racial equality, enduring hardship and poverty.
Thirsting for life, living above one-room schools.
Thirsting for salvation, willingly sacrificing their own freedoms for you and me...

These were men and women like Mary Kelsey Peak who “erected to herself a monument more enduring than brass or granite, by impressing her own image upon a group of susceptible pupils.”⁸²

An image of promise,
And image of grace;
An image of love, endurance and hope—
An image of a better life, not for her, but for generations she would never know...perhaps even the very embodiment of you and me.

⁸¹ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York, Dover, 1994).

⁸² “Blacks and the American Missionary Association,” United Church of Christ, accessed March 13, 2017, <http://www.ucc.org/about-us/hidden-histories/blacks-and-the-american.html>

These are the faithful—the saints of the church—who:
Realized that their thirsts could be quenched in Jesus.
Realized that their just longings could be satisfied in Jesus.
Realized in a world of systematic oppression the real possibilities of
Freedom—

The AMA knew that education was not enough. Clara DeBoer writes that the AMA realized that “an educated amoral person was more of a threat to society than an uneducated one.”⁸³ Sharing faith in Jesus Christ was as important as education—and so the AMA went on to build churches all through the south as adjuncts to their school. It is largely known in the south that if a church is named First Congregational and was founded during Reconstruction—it is more than likely Black and founded by the American Missionary Association.

Whether we wish to realize it or not, all of our lives have been touched and impacted by the righteous thirsts of Christian men and women who thought more of your life, than they thought of their own. And yet we live in a world today—where too often our thirsts are not grounded in lifting up people; or bringing others into freedom; or granting people liberation; or simply making somebody else’s world a better—no our thirsts are too often self-centered thirsts.

What monuments can we build to ourselves—for ourselves?
What lasting impression can we leave on others—to make us look
better?

What will we get out of it?—
not how we might profit as a people; as a community;
as the body of Christ.

When I was in college we called it Thirsty Thursday—some of you know what I’m talking about. Thursday nights, especially for those who did not have classes on Friday or at least on Friday mornings; we could get the Friday Night party started an entire day early—why wait till Friday when you could party on Thursday?

Thirsty Thursday—became a self-serving act of indulgence;
Thirsty Thursday— became a self-serving act of stupidity;
Thirsty Thursday— became a self-serving act of excess;
Thirsty Thursday— became a self-serving act of immoderation;
Thirsty Thursday— became a self-serving act of foolishness;

⁸³ Clara Merritt DeBoer, "Lewis Tappan: Advocate of the Whole Gospel," *AD* magazine, November 1977.

Thirsty Thursday— became a self-serving act of senselessness;

And for some of us—we have turned Thirsty Thursday into, Thirsty Sunday, Thirsty Monday, Thirsty Tuesday, Thirsty Wednesday, Thirsty Friday—and certainly Thirsty Saturday—

There is never enough shopping.

There is never enough self-centered titillating activities in our lives.

And it was Bill Moyers, progressive commentator and proud member of the United Church of Christ, who said: *Once you decide to titillate instead of illuminate . . . you create a climate of expectation that requires a higher and higher level of intensity.*"

Sisters and Brothers, We have become too focused on what we, individually, are going to get out of our life's work—

We have become too focused on ourselves.

And as a result our communities are wasting away.

Our people are perishing; men, women, girls and boys

And our collective lives are deteriorating. FAST.

"The ultimate test of the American conscience," said the Wisconsin Senator, Gaylord Nelson, is our "willingness to sacrifice something today for future generations whose words of thanks will not be heard."

Sacrifice. Sacrifice. Sacrifice.

We call ourselves Christian, but we don't want to live the Christian life. Did you not know that this life calls you to sacrifice? The Apostle Paul says in the 15 Chapter of Corinthians, "I die every day, exclamation point"

Not I die everyday period.

Not I die everyday comma.

Not I die everyday hyphen.

Not I die everyday semicolon.

Not I die everyday ellipsis.

Paul understood the sacrifice that was needed.

Paul understood the sacrifice that Jesus made.

Paul understood the power of the living water that Jesus offers.

Paul understood the power of the living water that Jesus gives....

Facing the unbelieving crowd, Jesus offers water to those who thirst.

Facing the questioning crowd, Jesus offers water to those who thirst.
Standing before a people who despise him, Jesus offers water to those who thirst.
Standing before officials who want him dead, Jesus offers water to those who thirst.

With Religious leaders feeling threatened, Jesus offers living water.
With temple police feeling intimidated, Jesus offers living water.
Before confused Nicodemus-like believers, Jesus offers living water.
Jesus says, “let anyone who is thirsty come...”

I don’t know about you this morning, but I’m thirsty!

I’m thirsty: Thirsty to see justice and liberation in the land.

I’m thirsty: Thirsty to see the school to prison-pipeline destroyed.

I’m thirsty: Thirsty to see hard-working families earn a Living Wage.

I’m thirsty: Thirsty to see the gap between the rich and poor closed.

I’m thirsty: Thirsty to see a real pathway to citizenship blazed in America.

Jesus says, “and let the one who believes in me drink...and out of the believers’ heart shall flow rivers of living water.”

Living Water: Quality Education!

Living Water: Real Equality—not that Arizona stuff!

Living Water: Workers Rights!

Living Water: Economic Empowerment!

Living Water: Racial Justice!

Living Water: Restorative Justice!

Living Water: Soul Freedom!

May we find the strength, as the descendants of the American Missionary Association, to have our thirst quenched in Jesus—and freely give to all:

Black, White and Brown

Gay and straight

Republican and Democrat

Skilled and unskilled

Young and old

The life-saving Living Water that flows from the heart of God, and Her people.

Amen.

First Sunday in Advent (Year 2)

Hebrew Bible Reading: 2 Kings 22: 1-10; 14-20, 23:1-3

New Testament Reading: Luke 24:30-32

Sermon Title: Surprised by Scripture

What shall we make of this particular story this Sunday morning, this first Sunday in Advent? A Sunday in which we are launched into a another holiday season—a time of remembering and recalling, a time of reflection and renewal, a time of hope-filled expectation of what God will do through Jesus Christ in the coming future?

Our passage of Scripture this morning is a rather odd story. It is a story that, for the majority of us this morning, is terribly unfamiliar—not because we fail to be good students of the Hebrew Bible and know our Old Testament Scripture well, but because, well, it is story that passes us so quickly in the text that we rarely pause long enough to reflect upon it, to gain a greater sense of its meaning, its mystery and its majesty.

Josiah is introduced to us this morning as an ideal ruler and king. One who walks with God and trusts in the Lord. Of Josiah the Scriptures say that there will never be another. The text tell us that Josiah is said to have done right in the very sight of the Lord, to have walked upright in ALL of the ways of the Lord—having not turned to the left nor to right. In reading and remembering the text we are reminded of other faithful rulers within the biblical canon who also have walked before the Lord aright: Hezekiah, David, Joshua and Moses.

As the Temple—the dwelling place of God—was being repaired and refurbished, a surprising discovery is made. Hilkiah the high priest informs King Josiah’s secretary Shaphan that he found an old dusty book that was found abandoned on the shelf. It appeared to be a book that contained laws, instruction and teaching. The secretary read the book completely. He then went to King Josiah and told him about all the work that had been done, all of the work that was currently being done, and all of the work that needed to be done in order to improve upon the physical structure of the building. And it was just as he was about to leave the presence of the King that he remembered something that the young priest had said—he remembered the old dusty book that was abandoned on the shelf that contained...and he read its words to King Josiah.

Have you ever been surprised by Scripture? Have you ever had a moment when, after having encountered the Word of God, that you were alarmed? Or maybe it wasn’t an alarm or a surprise—but it was a moment when your life was interrupted. Perhaps it was a place or a point in your journey when you realized that something needed to change. Have you ever been surprised by Scripture? Or have you

happened upon a time in your life when God spoke powerfully in your life and you said to yourself: If I do not make a move right now, I will be stuck here forever. Or, if I do not stop doing what I am doing right now, it will continue for years to come. Or, if I do not turn my life around right here today; if I do not make a commitment in this space right now; if I choose not to honor God...; if I choose not to honor myself...; if I choose not to move into a positive direction...I will be damned from here on out?

Have you ever found yourself in this place? Have you ever found yourself needing to make a change, not because you know it was the right thing to do, nor because someone else has told you it was the right thing to do. Have you ever found yourself needing to make a change in your life, because Scripture⁸⁴ demanded that you make some lasting change in your life?

This is the place where we find King Josiah this first Sunday of Advent. The Sunday on our lectionary calendar when we are called to consider the life-altering role that hope is to play in our lives as people of faith. King Josiah, upon hearing the words that were discovered in a temple that was undergoing repairs and renovations realizes the words that He is hearing are not only instruction, law and teaching from GOD—but that they are words not only about the past, but at the same time they are prophetic words for the present and future.

He recognized the power of God, in an old, dusty book—which had been abandoned in Temple of the Lord. In the words that were spoken to him he was called backward, present and forward all at the same—and he knew, in the precise moment of hearing the Word of God proclaimed that something in his life needed to change; he knew that something in community needed to change; he knew that something in his leadership needed to change; he knew that something in his spiritual life needed to change; he knew that something in his worship life needed to change; he knew that something in his world needed to change, and that change was needed right away. King Josiah was surprised by Scripture!

For too long scholars have debated the content of the Scripture that called Josiah to greater levels of accountability. Some scholars have concluded that what was read was Deuteronomy 12:26-28; a list of curses and blessings that had been abandoned on the shelf because of all of the reasons that WE, even today, choose to abandon and leave SCRIPTURES on a shelf instead of actively engaging them. Others have said, “No, it was not a list of blessings and curses but it was Deuteronomy 31”; the text where Moses prepared the Book of the Law gives instruction and tells the

⁸⁴ My use of the word “Scripture” is purposeful, because as the sermon comes to its close I want to emphasize that Scripture offers a theological perspective which asserts that Scripture is more than the biblical texts that have been handed down to us in the Bible, but Scripture is also the lived and discerned experience of God in the world. In the United Church of Christ this theology is grounded in the idea that that “God Is Still Speaking” and our theology should not be limited solely to past experiences God has had with humanity.

priests to place the scroll near the arc of the covenant. We could debate what the old dusty book said for the next 100 years—and go back and forth on what might have been there. Yet what seems more important to me is less about the content of the book and more about what the reading of the book evoked in the life of King Josiah.

Scripture made Josiah do something. Scripture made Josiah feel something. Scripture made Josiah get more connected with God. Scripture made Josiah get more in touch with what God was doing. Scripture did not rest idly in his body. Scripture did not sit stagnant in his spirit. Scripture did not remain idly on his mind. Scripture enveloped every part his privileged, kingly life. Josiah was surprised by Scripture—as it called him to account for his sins, missteps and the failures of the community in the sight of God.

Josiah is the bold and daring embodiment of hope in the face of destruction. He holds out hope, through his own divine reckoning with God and his being surprised by Scripture, that a people who had turned away from the teaching and instruction of the Lord could be saved.

He held onto hope, against the prophetic word of the female prophet Huldah. He held onto hope, against the slow response of the people. He held onto hope, against the laziness in worship of the people. He held onto hope, against the sluggish study of the people. He held out hope to the people who looked to him for leadership.

...Yet in the end disaster came to Judah and Jerusalem.

And yet we know that a shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse, from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. “Out of the stump of David’s family will grow a shoot—yes, a new Branch bearing fruit from the old root. And the Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. He will delight in obeying the LORD. He will not judge by appearance nor make a decision based on hearsay. He will give justice to the poor and make fair decisions for the exploited. The earth will shake at the force of his word, and one breath from his mouth will destroy the wicked. He will wear righteousness like a belt and truth like an undergarment.” King Josiah is that stump...Jesus is that new branch.

The Prophetess Huldah’s words ring true—even on this First Sunday of Advent—we cannot work our way into salvation. We cannot guarantee salvation through human acts of righteousness. We cannot earn our way into the grace of God. We cannot work our way into the grace of God. We cannot pay our way into the grace of God. We cannot privilege our way into the grace of God. We cannot position our way into the grace of God...but God’s grace comes through faith.

Grace comes to us as we are surprised by Scripture; as we allow our lives to become saturated with Scripture; as we allow our souls to be drenched in the Spirit; as we

open the way for God to speak to us through dusty old books, through prophets and teachers, through preachers and protestors, through cashiers and baristas, on Facebook, Twitter and maybe even Snap chat.

Will you allow yourself to be surprised by Scripture? In unexpected places will you allow yourself to be surprised by Scripture? In unexpected moments will you allow yourself to be surprised by Scripture? In unexpected times will you allow yourself to be surprised by Scripture? And sometimes the very surprise of Scripture is that God's speaks not only by way of Scripture tucked away in old dusty books, abandoned in church construction sites—but also through gentle breezes and sudden jolts, through grief and sorrow, through rest and renewal.

It is my profound HOPE this week that you find yourself Surprised by Scripture—both that which is written and that which is lived. Amen.