INTRODUCTION

The Three-Dimensional Lectionary

The Revised Common Lectionary was primarily designed as a liturgical tool, with homiletics being a secondary concern. For most Protestant pastors, however, it has primarily been used as a homiletical tool, with liturgical import being secondary. As a pastor I would consult the lectionary on Monday morning to choose a single text from which to preach for the coming Sunday, but do little to design a worship service in which all of the lections would be read effectively in the midst of the congregation. The problem with this pastoral practice is that while I gained some sense of the cumulative nature of the lectionary over time, the connective tissues of the lectionary (and thus to some extent of the liturgical year) were completely lost on the congregation.

The practice is also problematic in theological terms. Choosing one text from the lectionary to use for the sermon and discarding the other three shows that we have subordinated the reading of scripture to the sermon. Yet surely when asked, most of us would claim, theologically and ecclesiologically, that preaching should be in service to the reading of scripture, not that the reading of scripture should serve the preacher.

Before turning to the practical aids of introductions to the lections and cumulative preaching strategies, it is important to obtain a broad view of the way the Revised Common Lectionary functions cumulatively itself. The best entryway into understanding the cumulative nature of the Revised Common Lectionary is to recall a little of its historical evolution.

A Brief History of the Revised Common Lectionary[1]

Prior to the mid-sixteenth century, practices concerning the liturgical calendar varied to a great extent from region to region, which meant that lectionaries varied as well. In 1563 the Council of Trent established a liturgical calendar and a corresponding lectionary that was authoritative for the whole of the Roman Catholic Church. This Tridentine lectionary varied greatly from the denominational and ecumenical lectionaries of today in two major ways. First, there were only two lections assigned for each Sunday—an Epistle and a Gospel reading. On a few occasions, a reading from the First Testament was substituted for the Epistle reading; otherwise the only part of the First Testament that was used each Sunday came from the Psalter, with portions of a psalm used as the gradual hymn. Second, the lectionary followed an annual cycle, so that the same lections were used year after year. The same lections were used for five hundred years…until Vatican II.

During the Second Vatican Council, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy decreed, along with other sweeping changes, 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 sacred scripture be read to the people over a set cycle of years."[2] So, beginning in Advent 1969, the Roman Catholic Church initiated use of a new *Lectionary for Mass*.

Although the liturgical calendar still dictated the ways choices of lections were made for each Sunday, some broader principles were brought into play that made the lectionary function cumulatively. First, the *Lectionary for Mass* moved from an annual to a three-year cycle, with each year focused on one of the Synoptic Gospels (with John used each year during Lent and Easter). This dominance of the Synoptic Gospels affects not only the shape of the lectionary year, but also the tone of most individual Sundays. Second, the number of readings for each Sunday was expanded to include a selection from the First Testament. During the liturgical seasons (Advent to Epiphany and Lent to Pentecost), the lections from the First Testament and the Epistles are almost always subordinate to the Gospel reading. (The choice of a psalm is usually derived from the themes and language of the First Testament reading.) A third principle was developed for Ordinary Time. During the Sundays after Epiphany and after Pentecost, the *Lectionary for Mass* utilizes a modified *lectio continua*. Semicontinuous readings from the Synoptic Gospel of the

year and from the Epistles are used, instead of the two readings being connected thematically.

This new lectionary marked a major shift in liturgical and homiletical practice for Roman Catholics. Moreover, it quickly began to attract the attention of those outside the Roman Catholic Church as well. And why wouldn't it? The melding of biblical texts and liturgical calendar, the focus on the Synoptic portrayal of the Christ Event, the exploration of much of the canon, and the interplay between a thematic approach and literary approach to choosing texts make the *Lectionary for Mass* a potentially powerful cumulative liturgical tool. Most mainline North American Protestant denominations had adapted some version of this lectionary by the mid-1970s. Use of these adaptations marked as radical a change for Protestant liturgical practice as had the lectionary revision for the Catholic Church, for, prior to the 1970s, most Protestant denominations had no such guiding lectionary.

These new adaptations of the *Lectionary for Mass* became so popular among Protestants that in 1978, the Consultation on Common Texts, an ecumenical group that works to create English liturgical texts, formed a group to develop a consensus concerning the liturgical calendar and an accompanying lectionary. The resulting *Common Lectionary*, published in 1983, was a monumental success. It remained very close to the *Lectionary for Mass*, but made two significant adjustments. First, while the dominance of the gospel readings was retained, the reins were loosened a bit. This allowed for a few changes here and there in the First Testament and Epistle choices during the liturgical seasons (Advent through Pentecost). But during the Season after Pentecost (Ordinary Time) the First Testament selections were radically revised so that they were no longer preparing for the Gospel reading but instead followed the same principle of semicontinuous reading that was used for the Epistle and the Gospel lessons. Second, the lections overall (and especially those from the First Testament and the Psalter) were expanded in length. Growing out of the decreased control of the Gospel reading for any given Sunday, this change allowed each passage to be heard better in terms of its original literary context and function.

The *Common Lectionary* was published and widely tested for two cycles—i.e., six years—and then feedback was sought from denominations and congregations, scholars and preachers. More changes were called for and made in the *Revised Common Lectionary*.

For example, the relative absence of biblical women from lectionary choices was corrected by replacing a number of readings (especially the readings from the First Testament for the season after Pentecost) with narratives involving women characters (although more changes in this direction should have been made). Another change was an attempt to offer the option to return to the dominance of the Gospel over the First Testament reading in Ordinary Time without letting go of the advances made in developing a pattern of semicontinuous readings for the First Testament. Thus the full version of the Revised Common Lectionary published by the Consultation on Common Texts in 1992 offers an alternate reading for both the First Testament lesson and the responsive psalm. In many mainline Protestant publications utilizing the Revised Common Lectionary, however, the choice for semicontinuous readings is the only one provided, and indeed this is the option followed in this book.

This sense of how the Revised Common Lectionary evolved from the cumulatively structured *Lectionary for Mass* prepares us to explore the cumulative character of the Revised Common Lectionary itself in more detail.

The Three Dimensions of the Revised Common Lectionary

We can grasp the Revised Common Lectionary's cumulative structure by thinking of the three-year lectionary as three-dimensional, that is, as having width, height, and depth. (See Table 2 on next page.)

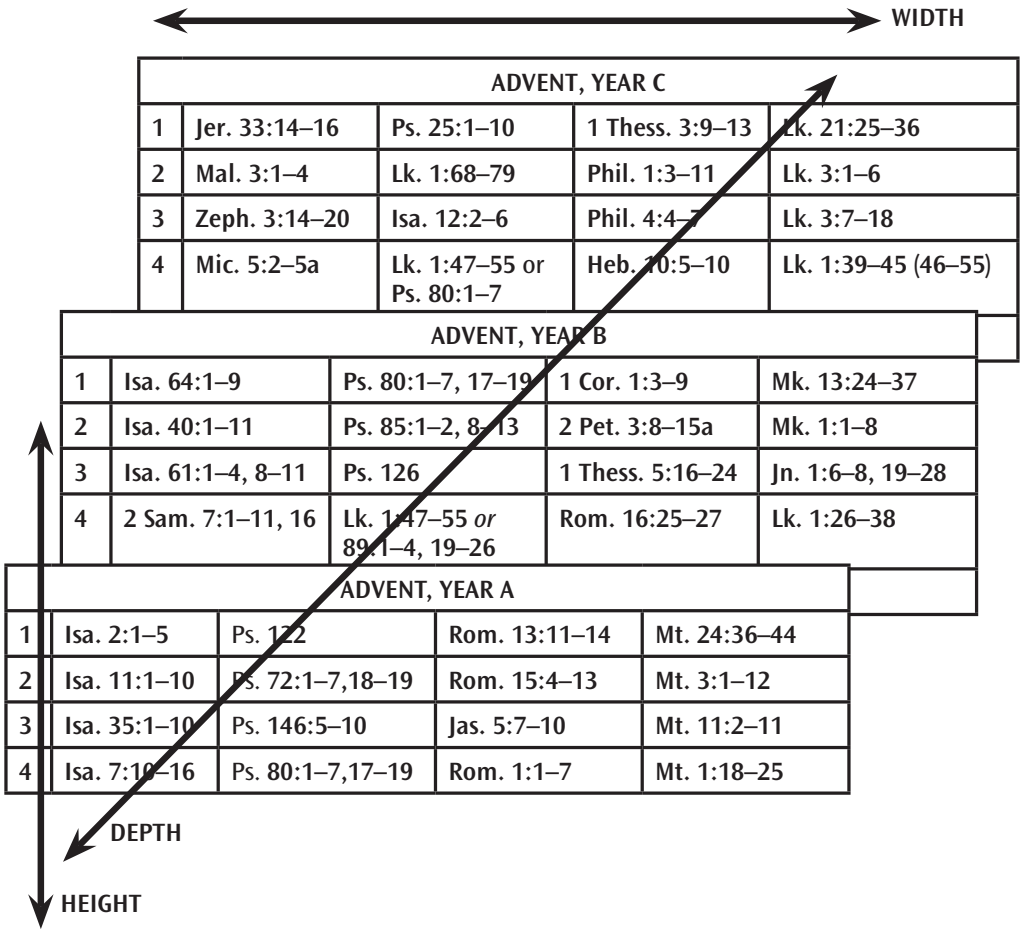
Width: the connection between the four lections on any given Sunday or feast day

As we have noted, during the liturgical seasons (Advent, Christmas, after Epiphany, Lent, Easter), the Gospel reading is usually the anchor of the other two readings and the psalm. The Revised Common Lectionary thus offers a Gospel passage that is appropriate to the themes and narrative memories associated with a particular day or season. From the choice of the Gospel lection proceed the choices of readings from the Epistle and First Testament, with the Psalter reading proceeding from the First Testament lection. At different times, this procession is based on obvious intertextual relations, common theological themes, related imagery, or shared vocabulary.

During the liturgical seasons, many preachers unwisely attempt to preach on the width dimension instead of simply using it as one

way to help focus their attention on one of the individual lections. The result is too often a sermon that at best preaches on the lectionary instead of scripture, or at worst uses the lections in proof-text fashion to preach a thematic, instead of biblical, sermon. Preachers or lectors should certainly point out the width dimension of the readings for the day during the reading of the lections. However, when preaching the sermon, the preacher should choose one text and do exegetical and homiletical justice to it, while at most using the width dimension to help shape the way she or he approaches or focuses on that text.

TABLE 2: Three Dimensions of the Revised Common Lectionary



ADVENT, YEAR C				
1	Jer. 33:14–16	Ps. 25:1–10	1 Thess. 3:9–13	Lk. 21:25–36
2	Mal. 3:1–4	Lk. 1:68–79	Phil. 1:3–11	Lk. 3:1–6
3	Zeph. 3:14–20	Isa. 12:2–6	Phil. 4:4–7	Lk. 3:7–18
4	Mic. 5:2–5a	Lk. 1:47–55 or Ps. 80:1–7	Heb. 10:5–10	Lk. 1:39–45 (46–55)

ADVENT, YEAR B				
1	Isa. 64:1–9	Ps. 80:1–7, 17–19	1 Cor. 1:3–9	Mk. 13:24–37
2	Isa. 40:1–11	Ps. 85:1–2, 8–13	2 Pet. 3:8–15a	Mk. 1:1–8
3	Isa. 61:1–4, 8–11	Ps. 126	1 Thess. 5:16–24	Jn. 1:6–8, 19–28
4	2 Sam. 7:1–11, 16	Lk. 1:47–55 *or* 89:1–4, 19–26	Rom. 16:25–27	Lk. 1:26–38

ADVENT, YEAR A				
1	Isa. 2:1–5	Ps. 122	Rom. 13:11–14	Mt. 24:36–44
2	Isa. 11:1–10	Ps. 72:1–7,18–19	Rom. 15:4–13	Mt. 3:1–12
3	Isa. 35:1–10	Ps. 146:5–10	Jas. 5:7–10	Mt. 11:2–11
4	Isa. 7:10–16	Ps. 80:1–7,17–19	Rom. 1:1–7	Mt. 1:18–25

An even worse mistake, which is made all too often, is to try to give this same sort of homiletical attention to the width dimension during the Season after Pentecost. But trying to connect the four lections during this season is a contrived effort. The width dimension during Ordinary Time all but disappears. While on occasions the different readings will connect and while the responsive psalm is usually

related to the First Testament lection, there is rarely a connection between the semicontinuous readings from the First Testament, the Epistles and the Gospels. A different dimension becomes dominant during this season—height.

Height: the connection between lections progressing from Sunday to Sunday

During the Season after Pentecost, this dimension is most evident and easily observed. Because the principle of semicontinuous reading is used for the First Testament, Epistle, and Gospel readings, there is a natural literary connection from week to week. Of course, this cumulative pattern applies only for each individual type of reading, not for the set of readings as a whole. During this season, or—better—for parts of this long season, pastors should choose sequences of readings from a specific biblical writing to preach on. This offers the opportunity to dive deeper into the theological perspective of a particular biblical writer, the themes and progression of a particular biblical argument, and the theological plot of a particular biblical narrative. In an age of biblical illiteracy, this approach is a wonderful gift of the lectionary.

During the liturgical seasons, the height dimension is certainly present, but takes a different form. The connection from week to week from Advent to Pentecost is drawn less from the biblical writings themselves (although the dominance of one of the Synoptic Gospels does add to this aspect), and more from the progression of themes and celebrations/remembrances of the liturgical calendar. In particular, the progression is one that loosely follows the narration of the Christ Event: expectation (Advent); birth (Christmas); revelation epitomized in the baptism and transfiguration (Epiphany); temptation, facing Jerusalem, passion (Lent); resurrection and exaltation (Easter); and gift of the Spirit to the church (Pentecost). Within the individual seasons, the height dimension of the lections grows out of the range of themes associated with the season along with specific events from the Christ narrative associated with particular days (e.g., John the Baptist, the baptism, the transfiguration, and the ascension).

While the height dimension during the liturgical seasons is fairly easy to identify for the group of readings as a whole, it is difficult to use this connection for cumulative preaching without focusing on the Gospel lections to the exclusion of the rest of the canon for nearly half of a calendar year. This is a problematic habit, and one into which

the lectionary invites us to fall. While it is certainly appropriate for the stories of Jesus to receive special attention, it is a mistake to send congregations the message that the gospel (i.e., God's good news) should be equated with the Gospels. Preachers must work to bring the fullness of the canon to bear on the congregation's Christian worldview.

Depth: the connection of lections from year to year

When one examines the three-year lectionary cycle as a whole and reflects on the repetitious patterns of readings utilized during each of the three years of the Revised Common Lectionary cycle, the depth dimension is obvious. But in the slow moving, week-to-week experience of worshipers sitting in the pews, this dimension is nearly invisible. If pastors and lectors want Christian lives to be informed by the liturgical cycle, they must be intentional about exposing worshipers to this dimension (both in their sermons and in other venues) by repeatedly offering them broad views of the liturgical calendar and the lectionary. This dimension is evident in two main ways.

First, while the lectionary is a three-year cycle, the Christian liturgical cycle is annual. Therefore, each of the three years follows the same sequence of liturgical events and its pattern of thematic progression. So while the primary Gospel lections that anchor the Revised Common Lectionary each year rotate among the Synoptic Gospels, the readings that are chosen from each Gospel during its year will echo the readings chosen from the other Gospels in their years on days and in the seasons when the liturgical themes and remembrances dictate what Gospel text must be read. Likewise, the First Testament and Epistle readings will often support the Gospel reading in similar ways on the same liturgical day of each of the three years.

Second, following the original intent of the *Lectionary for Mass,* the Revised Common Lectionary offers a great span of readings from across the whole of the canon. Of course, it is undeniable that the Revised Common Lectionary has a canon-within-a-canon, and most preachers are frustrated with the omission of key (and sometimes some of their favorite) biblical passages. This problem is especially troubling when considering the First Testament, since the thirty-eight, often quite lengthy writings of the first part of the canon (excluding the Psalms) are assigned one reading per Sunday while the twenty-seven, often quite short writings of the New Testament are assigned

two. Nevertheless, if we are honest, the lectionary's canon-within-a-canon is much broader than the canon-within-a-canon from which most individual preachers choose preaching texts when left to their own devices. This is not only due to the fact that the Revised Common Lectionary provides four lections for each Sunday, but also due to its efforts to touch on as many parts of the canon as possible in the three-year cycle. So, while from Advent to Pentecost liturgical themes dictate the range of choices and at times (especially on the highest liturgical days) the same readings are used for multiple years in the three-year cycle, the Revised Common Lectionary offers a fair amount of variation each year during the liturgical seasons. Especially over the course of the three years of Ordinary Time, the Revised Common Lectionary carries congregations into the narrative, wisdom, and prophetic literature of the First Testament; into most of the epistolary literature of the New Testament; and through significant portions of the Gospels.

The Liturgical Year

Knowing the history of the Revised Common Lectionary and recognizing its three-dimensional character gives us a broad view of the cumulative nature of the Revised Common Lectionary. To fully appreciate this character, however, we need to put down our wide-angle lens and zoom in our focus upon the cumulative tendencies of the Revised Common Lectionary as they get played out in the annual liturgical cycle.[3]

Liturgical Time

As noted above, the liturgical year presents two types of time—liturgical time and ordinary time—that divide a calendar year in half. Liturgical time, the first half of the annual cycle, is devoted to remembering, celebrating, and liturgically experiencing the Christ Event in a basic narrative order. The two foundational stones of this liturgical arch are Christmas and Easter. Advent to Epiphany moves toward and grows out of the celebration of the *nativity*. Ash Wednesday to Pentecost moves toward and grows out of the celebration of the *resurrection*.

Advent

The liturgical year begins with the four Sundays before Christmas known as Advent. While Advent prepares the church for Christmas,

it is not simply a pre-Christmas season. Advent (from the Latin, meaning "to come to") is a season of expectation of and waiting for the coming of Christ, or, better, for the coming of God-in-Christ. Originally the season was a forty-day period of fasting and penitence leading up to Epiphany, similar to the Lenten preparation for Easter. But as the liturgical cycle evolved and the celebration of the nativity was separated from Epiphany and designated for Christmas (see below), Advent was shortened to the four Sundays leading up to Christmas. Thus the season prepares for the coming of God-in-Christ in the nativity, but not only in Jesus' birth.

Indeed, the emphasis of the season is more on our future than on the past. For instance, while the First Testament readings for Advent are almost all from prophetic passages that the early church interpreted as predicting the coming of Christ, they are thoroughly eschatological and invite modern hearers to think of God (and Christ) as being in our future. The Epistle readings for Advent often share these eschatological tones.

This future-oriented emphasis also serves to highlight the eschatological nature of the Incarnation. Consider the pattern of the Gospel readings during Advent:

Advent 1	Reference to the *parousia* in Jesus' eschatological discourse
Advent 2 Advent 3	Presentation of John the Baptist as the one who prepares for the coming of Jesus
Advent 4	Announcement of Jesus' coming birth

In Christian terms, the liturgical year begins apocalyptically at the "End" with announcements of the second coming. It steps backwards then to John the Baptist preparing for Jesus' adult ministry with language that highlights the eschatological significance of Jesus' person and work (e.g., the one who will come to baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire). Finally, on the Sunday before Christmas, an angel tells Mary or Joseph that Jesus is to be born as God's Son, or Elizabeth exclaims that Mary will give birth to her Lord. The reverse chronology of the season represents a correctly ordered theology: in order to look to God in our future, we must search for God in our past so that we remember what we are to be looking for.

Christmas

As mentioned earlier, the celebration of the nativity anchors the first set of liturgical seasons. Although worship attendance might imply otherwise, this celebration comprises not a day but a season. A serious problem with which liturgical congregations struggle is that the contemporary American church has lost the battle to define the season of Christmas to secular culture, which defines it as the shopping period between Thanksgiving and Christmas. But the "twelve days of Christmas" of the liturgical year actually extend from Christmas Day (on December 25) to Epiphany (on January 6).[4]

To be more precise, in a manner similar to the Easter Vigil (which few Protestant congregations observe), the first service of Christmas is on Christmas Eve. Many churches have services on Christmas Eve, while their doors are closed on Christmas Day due to our giving in to culture's view of Christmas as a family holiday instead of a religious one. Nevertheless, the practice of celebrating the nativity on Christmas Eve also reflects the ancient Jewish understanding that the day begins at sundown (instead of at sunrise). Thus when the angels come to the shepherds at night, it is not at the end of the day but at the beginning. So, Christmas Eve is the liturgical beginning of the Christmas season and Epiphany is the end.[5]

With this understanding of the season in hand, let us consider the pattern of readings provided by the Revised Common Lectionary for the Christmas cycle. On three out of the four days (the First Sunday after Christmas is the exception), the same readings are used for all three years of the lectionary cycle; and the Gospel lessons are the focal point. The pattern is as follows:

Christmas	The birth story in Luke 2 in which the angel reveals the birth to the shepherds.[6]
Christmas 1	A story from Matthew or Luke concerning Jesus' childhood (A: the flight to Egypt in Matthew; B: the presentation of Jesus in the temple and the witness of Simeon and Anna in Luke; and C: Jesus at age twelve questioning the elders in the temple in Luke).
Christmas 2	The prologue of John in which the Incarnation is described in poetic/philosophical terms of the Word becoming flesh.
Epiphany	The Matthew 2 story of the Magi's pilgrimage to give homage to the king whose birth the star revealed—traditionally interpreted as the first revelation of Christ to the Gentiles.

It is important to recall that since Christmas and Epiphany are fixed dates that rotate through the days of the week year after year, the number of Sundays after Christmas each year varies. (See the discussion of this issue under Cumulative Preaching Strategies for Christmastide, Year A, pp. 34–38.) So not all of these texts will be available each year. Nevertheless, viewing all the possibilities makes it clear how the Revised Common Lectionary has achieved a tight focus for the very short season: the story of Jesus' birth (as told in Lk. 2) anchors the season, the readings concentrate (in terms of narrative chronology) on Jesus as infant/child, and the doctrine of Incarnation sweats out of every pore. Yet at the same time, the readings invite congregations to overcome the harmonization of the birth stories that is burned into the minds of most of us thanks to St. Francis's creation of the crèche by separating Luke's Jewish shepherds coming to the stable on Christmas Eve/Day from Matthew's Gentile Magi coming to the house on Epiphany. So in the course of twelve days, this season, woven so thematically tight, takes Christ from a stable in Bethlehem to the world as a whole.

Sundays after Epiphany

The Roman Catholic Church (and thus the *Lectionary for Mass*) construes the Sundays after Epiphany to be a bridge of Ordinary Time in between the two groupings of liturgical time.[7] For most Protestants who follow the liturgical year and use the Revised Common Lectionary, however, the Sundays after Epiphany comprise a season that flows out of Epiphany and allows its themes to unfold over the course of a number of weeks. This means that the Feast of Epiphany is both the end of Christmastide and the beginning of the Season after Epiphany.

To get a sense of how the Sundays after Epiphany appropriately extend the liturgical emphases of Christmas, it is helpful to understand how the Season after Epiphany evolved. *Epiphany* means "revelation" or "manifestation." Epiphany is the celebration of the revealing of God's divine glory in Christ. This celebration originated in the Eastern Church and is actually older than Christmas (which originated in the Western Church). In its earliest form, Epiphany seems to have been a celebration of the extraordinary revelations of Christ—in the nativity, in the star given to the Magi, in Jesus' baptism, and in Jesus' first sign of changing the water to wine at Cana. As time passed and Epiphany was adopted by the Western Church, which by that

time was celebrating Christ's birth on Christmas, Epiphany evolved into the twelfth day of Christmas, completing or complementing Christmas Day. Its emphasis on the nativity was diminished without being eliminated. Emphasized instead was the manifestation of the divine glory in the visit of the Magi. Thus the original unitive feast of Epiphany was broken into a sequence of celebrations. Epiphany was followed by the celebration of Christ's baptism, which was in turn followed by the commemoration of Jesus' miracle at the wedding at Cana.

The Revised Common Lectionary still contains this extended pattern. Because the annual liturgical cycle has been expanded into a three-year lectionary cycle, however, the story of the miracle at Cana is read only on the Second Sunday after Epiphany in Year C instead of every year.

The Revised Common Lectionary expands Epiphany's emphasis on revelation even more dramatically by assigning the Transfiguration of the Lord to the Last Sunday after Epiphany. The Roman Catholic calendar celebrates the Feast of the Transfiguration on August 6, and the traditional lection for the second Sunday of Lent is also the story of the transfiguration. Protestants following the Revised Common Lectionary, however, celebrate Transfiguration of the Lord on the Last Sunday after Epiphany, so that the heavenly voice at the end of the season echoes back to the voice on the Baptism of the Lord. The result of this evolution is that the annual pattern of readings for the season as configured by the Revised Common Lectionary looks like this:

Epiphany	The Matthew 2 story of the Magi's pilgrimage to give homage to the king whose birth the star revealed—traditionally interpreted as the first revelation of the Christ to the Gentiles
Epiphany 1 (Baptism of the Lord)	First Testament reading with calling and water imagery; Psalm 29 with "the voice of the LORD…over the waters"; a passage in Acts dealing with baptism substituted for the Epistle reading; one of the Synoptic versions of Jesus' baptism
Epiphany 2	A reading from the Gospel of John (dealing with Jesus' baptism, the calling of the first disciples, or the first sign at the wedding at Cana) replaces Synoptic Gospel
Epiphany 3–?[8]	Semicontinuous readings from First (and Second) Corinthians; semicontinuous readings from the Synoptic Gospel of the year taken from the beginning of Jesus' ministry, with the lections from the First Testament and Psalter supporting

Last Sunday after Epiphany (Transfiguration of the Lord)	One of the Synoptic versions of Jesus' transfiguration; supporting readings that deal with Moses or Elijah (who appear in the transfiguration stories) and the revelation of divine glory

What this history and the chart of the current cycle of lections demonstrate is that the cumulative emphasis on revelation in the Revised Common Lectionary plays itself out in this season in three ways. (1) The season flows forth from the paradigmatic revelation of the epiphany given to the Magi in relation to Jesus' birth and moves immediately into the celebration of the Baptism of the Lord. (2) The influence of the *Lectionary for Mass*'s approach to the season as part of Ordinary Time is evident in the use of semicontinuous readings from 1 and 2 Corinthians and the Gospel for the year in the middle of the season. But in the context of the thematic emphasis of Epiphany, the readings from the Gospel, which tell of the beginnings of Jesus' ministry, call the church to reflect on the ways Jesus' deeds and teachings manifest God. (3) The celebrations of Jesus' baptism and transfiguration serve as bookends to the season. In all three Synoptic versions of these two stories, a heavenly voice speaks from a cloud declaring Jesus to be God's beloved Son. Thus, by its very structure, the season of revelation extends the Christmas season's emphasis on christology.

Lent

The historical evolution of the Lenten season is difficult to ascertain. For our purposes, however, it is enough to recognize that the season grew backwards out of Easter instead of forward from Epiphany. This historical memory, combined with the fact that the *Lectionary for Mass* views the Sundays after Epiphany as Ordinary Time so that there is a clear break between Christmastide and Lent, accounts for a decisive change of themes and tone from Epiphany to Lent. The somber sounds of, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return; repent and believe in the gospel," that are whispered on Ash Wednesday begin a new phase of liturgical time that sounds radically different from the cymbal crash with which the Season after Epiphany ends on Transfiguration of the Lord. In sum, Lent does not grow out of Epiphany, but leads to Easter.

Lent prepares the church for Easter in two primary ways. The first is biblical in nature, and the second is in relation to the rituals of

Christian initiation. First, the liturgical procession to and through Holy Week with its emphasis on Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, last supper with the disciples, arrest in the garden, trials before the Sanhedrin and the Roman authorities, and crucifixion prepares the congregation to hear the good news of the resurrection in its proper theological and narrative contexts. Second, Lent evolved from the early church practice of preparing adult catechumens for baptism on Easter. This tradition of preparation included fasting, self-examination, and intense biblical and theological study. Today, Lent is still practiced as a time of preparation for baptism and, by extension, confirmation using these same methods. But the fact that the season leads up to the commemoration of the crucifixion and resurrection as the center of the Christ Event means that Lent serves as a preparatory time of penitence, self-examination, study, and remembrance of baptism for *all* those in the faith.

The "narrative" preparation for Christ's death and resurrection as well as the individual and corporate preparation for the "baptismal" experience of dying and rising with Christ account for much of the three-dimensional character of the lectionary choices for Lent. Let us consider a number of significant lectionary patterns.

First, the readings that open the season on Ash Wednesday and the First Sunday in Lent set the tone for the whole season. In all three years of the Revised Common Lectionary cycle, the readings for Ash Wednesday are the same (Joel 2:1–2, 12–17; Ps. 51:1–17; 2 Cor. 5:20b—6:10; and Mt. 6:1–6, 16–21). While the imposition of ashes confronts worshipers with mortality, themes of penitence and religious discipline dominate the lections. On Lent 1 the Gospel reading for all three years is the story of Jesus' temptation (A: Mt. 4:1–11; B: Mk. 1:9–15; and C: Lk. 4:1–13). In all of the synoptics, the temptation scene follows the story of Jesus' baptism. After being baptized, the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness where he fasts for forty days and the devil tests him in preparation for the beginning of his ministry. Assigned to the First Sunday in Lent, this Gospel reading establishes the forty-day liturgical season as one of fasting and preparation for Christian ministry into which all believers are baptized.

Second, language and imagery related to baptism fills the readings for Lent. For example, consider all of the references to baptism, water, and anointing over the course of the three-year cycle:

	YEAR A	YEAR B	YEAR C
Lent 1	Ps. 32:6	Gen. 9:11, 15 1 Pet. 3:20–21 Mk. 1:9–11	
Lent 2	Jn. 3:5	Ex. 20:4, 11	
Lent 3	Ex. 17:1–7 Ps. 95:5 Jn. 4:5–15	Num. 21:5	Isa. 55:1 Ps. 63:1 1 Cor. 10:1–4
Lent 4	1 Sam. 16:1, 3, 12–13 Ps. 23:2 Jn. 9:6–7, 11	Ps. 51:2, 7	Ps. 32:6
Lent 5			Isa. 43:16, 19–20 Ps. 126:4 Jn. 12:3

While these images function quite differently in their various literary contexts and while no clear structural pattern emerges from this chart, the number of references to imagery that is often related to baptism is substantial (especially in Year A) and clearly has potential for a cumulative approach to preaching the Revised Common Lectionary.

A third lectionary pattern that is unique to Lent is that the width dimension of the four readings for each Sunday functions differently than in other seasons. While often the same kinds of thematic and vocabulary connections exist between the Gospel reading for the day and the other lections, two other controlling patterns and Lenten themes play a role in the readings as well. One relates to the First Testament lections and the second to the Epistolary lessons.

The First Testament readings assigned by the *Lectionary for Mass* for the Sundays in Lent leading up to Palm/Passion Sunday follow a salvation history schema that involves origins, Abraham, the exodus, the nation of Israel, and God's eschatological promise. As the Revised Common Lectionary modified the readings for Year B, this schema was damaged in places. Nevertheless, the overarching pattern is still evident and can be seen in the following chart. Where the Revised Common Lectionary changed the lections in Years B and C, the original lections in the *Lectionary for Mass* are included in brackets [ ].[9]

	Year A	Year B	Year C
Lent 1 Origins	Gen. 2:15–17; 3:1–7 The tree in the garden	Gen. 9:8–17 God's covenant with Noah	Deut. 26:1–11 "Creedal" declaration associated with first fruits
Lent 2 Abraham	Gen. 12:1–4a God's promises to make a nation from Abram	Gen. 17:1–7, 15–16 God's covenant with Abram and Sarai [Gen. 22:1–2, 9–13, 15–18, Sacrifice of Isaac]	Gen. 15:1–12, 17–18 God's covenant with Abram
Lent 3 The Exodus	Ex. 17:1–7 Water from the rock	Ex. 20:1–17 Decalogue	Isa. 55:1–9 Call to repentance [Ex. 3:1–8, 13–15 Moses and the burning bush]
Lent 4 The Nation	1 Sam. 16:1–13 Samuel's anointing of David	Num. 21:4–9 Moses' lifting the bronze serpent [2 Chr. 36:14–17, 19–23, The fall and rebuilding of Jerusalem]	Josh. 5:9–12 Transition from manna to eating fruits of the promised land
Lent 5 The Promise of the New Covenant	Ezek. 37:1–14 Valley of the dry bones	Jer. 31:31–34 God's new covenant written on the heart	Isa. 43:16–21 Exodus from exile

So while on individual Sundays the themes and imagery of a First Testament lection may be related to the Gospel reading for the day (width), their more significant connection is with the historical pattern shaped over sequential Sundays (height).

Turning to the Epistle readings for Lent, we find a similar situation. They are often thematically and linguistically related to the other readings, especially the First Testament lections. But considered as a group of readings on their own, it is clear that a soteriological orientation dominates the selection of Epistle lections. Repeatedly, the Epistle readings present an interpretation of the new life effected through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ in a way that functions liturgically to prepare worshipers to embrace fully the reality to which Holy Week and Easter give testimony.

A fourth lectionary pattern for this season involves less Lenten themes or specific theological concerns and more the problems of

having a three-year, Gospel-oriented lectionary when the canon includes four Gospels. It would be difficult to base a full liturgical year on John because, whereas the Synoptics easily break into many short pericopae, John's passages are much longer and thus fewer in number. Lent and Easter are the seasons in which John most often substitutes for the Synoptic Gospel of the year. As can be seen in the following chart, however, during Lent the use of John decreases with each year of the three-year cycle.

	Year A	Year B	Year C
Lent 1	Matthew	Mark	Luke
Lent 2	John 3:1–17	Mark	Luke
Lent 3	John 4:5–42	John 2:13–22	Luke
Lent 4	John 9:1–41	John 3:14–21	Luke
Lent 5	John 11:1–45	John 12:20–33	John 12:1–8

This discussion of John being substituted for the Synoptic Gospel assigned to the year leads us to consider a fifth and final cumulative pattern to be found in Lent. Specifically, our attention turns to the way the Gospel readings chosen for Palm/Passion Sunday stand in contrast to those selected for the weekdays of Holy Week. On Palm/Passion Sunday during the three-year cycle, the liturgy of the palms and the liturgy of the passion rotate among the three Synoptic versions of the final week of Jesus' life, beginning with the entry into Jerusalem and ending with his death and burial. In contrast, the Holy Week readings for each year are the same, with the Gospel lections being drawn from John and culminating in (1) the scene of Jesus' washing the disciples' feet and giving the new commandment on Holy Thursday (13:1–17, 31b–35) and (2) Jesus' arrest, trials, crucifixion, and burial on Good Friday (18:1—19:42). This pairing of the Synoptic version on Sunday with the Johannine version on the weekdays leads to a choice to be made on Easter Sunday.

Easter

In terms of developing a Christian liturgical calendar, Christianity's first liturgical innovation was making the move from worshiping weekly on the Jewish Sabbath to worshiping on the day of the resurrection. The Church's next major innovation was developing *Pascha* as the first annual liturgical celebration. *Pascha* is the Greek

word for the Jewish Passover. Because the Gospels narrate Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection in relation to Passover, the Christian commemoration of those events was initially called *Pascha*. Indeed, as the "Christian Passover" developed in the early centuries of the church, there was a great deal of debate concerning whether it should continue to be connected to Passover in its dating or not. This complicated controversy is not important for us to explore here.

It is important to recognize, however, that originally *Pascha* was not simply a celebration of Jesus' resurrection; it was a unitive commemoration of the crucifixion and resurrection. It was not until the fourth century that the celebration was separated into a commemoration of the passion (which evolved backward from Sunday into Good Friday and back further into Holy/Maundy Thursday) and a celebration of the resurrection with the Easter Vigil (on Saturday evening) and Easter Sunday. Likewise, the celebration of the resurrection and exaltation of Christ separated into Easter and Pentecost (fifty days later, following the Jewish practice of celebrating Pentecost fifty days after the Feast of Unleavened Bread as described in the chronology of Acts), from which Ascension later separated into its own solemnity ten days earlier. Thus Easter Sunday functions as a hinge in the liturgical seasons of Lent and Easter. It is both the climax of Holy Week (or more narrowly of the Easter Triduum, i.e., three days of Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Vigil/Sunday) and initiates the Great Fifty Days of Easter.

With this developmental background in mind, let us consider some of the cumulative tendencies of the Revised Common Lectionary for the season of Easter:

First, we find the depth dimension of Easter Sunday. During all three years of the lectionary cycle, the Gospel readings obviously focus on the discovery of the empty tomb. But the pattern is more complex than just that. Each year the Revised Common Lectionary offers two choices for the Gospel reading for the day: John 20:1–18 and the empty tomb narrative from the Synoptic Gospel of the year. There are two related reasons for this approach. The first is that the choice on Easter allows the preacher to flow cumulatively from either the Gospel readings from Holy Week, which come from John, or from the extended Gospel reading for the previous Sunday (Palm/Passion Sunday), which comes from the Synoptic Gospel of the year. The second reason comes from the readings for the Easter Vigil on Saturday night. In all three years, the readings for the Great Vigil

remain the same with the exception of the Gospel lesson. It circulates each year among the Synoptic versions of the empty tomb story. The results of these two patterns looks like the following:

Palm/Passion—One of the Synoptic versions of the events in Jerusalem including the Last Supper and institution of the Lord's supper, the crucifixion, and the burial.

Holy Week—Johannine readings including Jesus' last meal with the disciples (washing their feet and commanding them to love one another), crucifixion, and burial.

Easter Vigil—One of the Synoptic versions of the discovery of the empty tomb.

Easter Day—Either John's or a Synoptic version of the discovery of the empty tomb.

For congregations that observe an Easter Vigil, it is obvious that the Gospel reading for Sunday morning should be John 20:1–18, since they just read the Synoptic choice the night before. But for those that do not hold a vigil (and that includes most Protestant congregations), the choice to be made is whether the best cumulative approach is to bring to completion for the congregation the Synoptic account of the events in Jerusalem from the previous Sunday or the Johannine account from Holy Thursday and Good Friday.

The decision is often weighted toward John since the Revised Common Lectionary substitutes John for the Synoptic Gospel of the year throughout the remainder of the Easter season (with the exception of the Third Sunday of Easter, Years A and B). This use of John is the second cumulative tendency of the season we should consider. Emphasizing John during Easter in a three-year lectionary cycle is especially appropriate since resurrection is a major theme throughout the gospel. Moreover, Jesus' farewell discourse in John, from which lessons for Easter 5–7 are drawn, repeatedly speaks of Jesus' "departure" in reference to the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension as a unitive whole.[10]

In terms of the way John is used during Easter, the readings for the season divide into three sections: Easter 1–3, Easter 4, and Easter 5–7. The pattern is laid out as follows:

Easter 1–3 focuses on the event of the resurrection and the resurrection appearances primarily in John 20-21:

EASTER 1–3	
Easter	The empty tomb (Jn. 20:1–18)
Easter 2	The gift of the Spirit and the revelation to Thomas (Jn. 20:19–31)
Easter 3	The Risen Christ revealed in relation to the sharing of a meal (Year A: Lk. 24:13–35; Year B: Lk. 24:36b–48; Year C: Jn. 21:1–19)

Easter 4 focuses on Jesus as the Good Shepherd, and the Gospel readings for all three years are drawn from John 10.

Finally, as already noted, the Gospel lections for Easter 5–7 come from Jesus' farewell discourse to his disciples. Reading Jesus' testament just before his death may seem like an odd liturgical practice for Easter, but it is not if we remember that the Johannine Jesus speaks of his departure and glorification as involving his crucifixion, resurrection, and exaltation. The readings from the farewell discourse for each year follow narrative order and always end with a portion of Jesus' prayer for the disciples in chapter 17. Themes especially appropriate for the church to consider during the Easter season that show up during Easter 5–7 each year include the relation of Jesus and the "Father," the new commandment, Jesus' departure, and the coming of the *Paraclete*.

The third cumulative pattern of the Revised Common Lectionary lections for Eastertide is that the First Testament readings are replaced with readings from Acts, that is, primarily from the first half of Acts. Since Acts is neither a gospel nor an epistle, it does not fit naturally into the normal categories of lectionary readings. While it is somewhat odd to displace the First Testament during this season, it is actually a practice that dates back to the fifth century. Moreover, the substitution is justified given that the chronology of Acts establishes the fifty-day celebration of the season of Easter, and tells the story of the post-resurrection church—i.e., the story of the shift from Jesus' preaching to the church's preaching about Jesus and of the transition from a band of followers in Galilee to an empire-wide movement. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that there is something uncomfortable about reading stories of the post-Pentecost church before we have celebrated Ascension and Pentecost in our liturgical cycle. The Revised Common Lectionary attempts to deal with this problem by assigning John 20:19–31 (the Fourth Gospel's version of Jesus giving the Spirit to the disciples) for Easter 2 each year.

A fourth cumulative pattern involves the Epistle readings. First Peter (Year A), 1 John (Year B), and Revelation (Year C)[11] are read

for Easter 2–7. These texts are chosen because they are thematically appropriate for the season of Easter, and individual readings do at times relate to the Gospel or Acts reading. However, the dominant relational dimension for these texts is that of height in that the Epistles are presented in a semicontinuous manner (although Revelation does not receive enough attention in six Sundays to cover the breadth of the writing). Thus, the Epistle readings during Eastertide need to be heard and preached in relation to the reading from the week before and after.

Ordinary Time

The Revised Common Lectionary functions quite differently in Ordinary Time than it does during the liturgical cycle extending from Advent to Pentecost. Since the season is not thematically focused, neither are the lections. Semicontinuous readings, as a modified *lectio continua* approach to choosing biblical texts for weekly worship, are the standard for the Sundays after Pentecost.

The Revised Common Lectionary inherited this semicontinuous approach from *Lectionary for Mass*'s choices for Epistle and Gospel lections. The *Lectionary for Mass,* however, was not consistent in this approach. It continued to use the readings from the First Testament in a typologically supportive role for the Gospel reading for each Sunday.

The *New Common Lectionary*, in a theologically sound move, abandoned this practice of subordinating First Testament texts to New Testament ones and extended the semicontinuous approach to the First Testament lessons. The Revised Common Lectionary, however, offers both approaches as a compromise. Worship leaders can choose either the typological set of readings for the season or the semicontinuous set. Churches need to hear the First Testament texts on their own terms for at least part of the Christian year. Thus only the semicontinuous readings will be considered in this resource. This choice means that the width dimension all but disappears during the Sundays after Pentecost. On occasion, the semicontinuous readings are aligned in such a way that a significant thematic relation emerges between the lections assigned to a particular Sunday, but these are the exceptions that make the rule. Usually the only width connection is that the Psalter reading responds to the First Testament lection. Thus, in our search for cumulative tendencies in the Revised Common Lectionary lessons for Ordinary Time, our attention needs to be given only to the height and depth dimensions.

Gospel Readings

We begin with the Gospel readings by exploring three cumulative tendencies. First, as already noted, each year of the three-year lectionary cycle has at its center one of the Synoptic Gospels (Year A: Matthew; Year B: Mark; Year C: Luke). During the Sundays after Epiphany (see above) the readings from the Gospels begin working through the opening ministry of Jesus in a semicontinuous fashion. On the Sunday after Trinity Sunday, the Revised Common Lectionary returns to this pattern and begins reading semicontinuously through the Gospel for the year at the point where the semicontinuous reading stopped on the Sunday before Transfiguration of the Lord. With the eschatological themes emphasized at the end of Ordinary Time as the Reign of Christ and Advent draw near, the semicontinuous Gospel readings end each year with a text taken from the eschatological discourse (Mt. 24—25; Mk. 13; Lk. 21), returning to the point at which the year began on Advent 1. (See above.)

A second pattern of the Revised Common Lectionary that is important to recognize is that the semicontinuous reading strategy during Ordinary Time is subordinate to the use of Gospel texts during the liturgical time. In other words, to utilize as much of the Gospel as possible, pericopae read during the liturgical seasons are not reread during Ordinary Time, even though this practice would aid the congregation in gaining a true sense of the whole of the Gospel's narrative. For example, while reading through the Synoptic narratives in Ordinary Time prepares readers to understand the stories of the cross and the resurrection at the end of the story in different ways, the Revised Common Lectionary does not return to those stories during Ordinary Time, since they have been read earlier in the year during Holy Week.

The third cumulative pattern that shapes the use of Gospel texts during Ordinary Time is the tendency toward harmonization among the three Synoptics. In other words, during Ordinary Time, the Revised Common Lectionary avoids a pericope when its parallel in another Gospel is chosen for a different year. The impetus behind this tendency need not be understood as either a theological or historical claim about the unity of the Gospel narratives. Instead, as with the previous tendency, this pattern simply results from the goal to include as much of the Gospel material as possible in three years.

Epistle Readings

Throughout the Sundays after Pentecost, the Revised Common Lectionary has us read through various epistolary materials. Unlike the Gospel and First Testament lections for Ordinary Time, there is no clear pattern that seems to determine these choices across the three years. The primary aspect of the depth dimension to be noted is the principle of not repeating materials during Ordinary Time. A second is that in Years A and C, the season begins with extended reading from one of Paul's major "theological" works, Romans and Galatians, respectively. (In Year B the opening of the season is dedicated to continuing the readings from 2 Corinthians, which began during the Season after Epiphany earlier in the year.) Finally, as with all the readings, at the end of Ordinary Time eschatological emphases determine choices. Thus, in Years A and C, the liturgical year ends with 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

Likewise during each year there are only a few places where clear patterns that connect the choices of letters grouped together can be determined. In Year A all of the Epistles are undisputed Pauline letters. In Year B, James and part of Hebrews are placed side by side as general Epistles. And in Year C, 1 and 2 Timothy are together.

First Testament Readings

As noted above, although the Revised Common Lectionary offers two alternatives for the First Testament lections for each Sunday in Ordinary Time—a First Testament passage typologically related to the Gospel and a text that is part of a semicontinuous reading series—we will only consider the semicontinuous options. To continue to use the First Testament in a supportive role during Ordinary Time gives the impression that the First Testament is sub-canonical and robs preachers and hearers of the opportunity to listen to these texts on their own terms.

The height dimension of the First Testament readings during Ordinary Time extends over the whole of the three-year cycle, because the Revised Common Lectionary moves through ancient Israel's canonical story as a whole in a semicontinuous pattern across the three years. Year A draws its readings from narratives that lead to the constitution of the people of Israel as a nation—primarily from Genesis and Exodus, with a few readings from Deuteronomy, Joshua,

and Judges. In Year B, the readings for the first half of Ordinary Time deal with the early years of Israel by focusing on Samuel, David, and Solomon as found in the narratives of 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 Kings. The introduction of Solomon is used to move into the wisdom literature and "The Writings" (*Kethuvim*) of the First Testament in the second half of the season. Finally, in Year C the readings come from later periods in the history of Israel and Judah as the texts focus on the prophets. The schema for the year is chronological: Elijah and Elisha, eighth-century prophets, Jeremiah, and post-exilic prophets.

Remembering the Woods while Examining the Trees

This broad overview of the cumulative liturgical tendencies of the Revised Common Lectionary serves to help us better utilize those tendencies homiletically season by season. In the material that follows, we will consider cumulative preaching strategies for each season of the three-year lectionary cycle. As preachers consider potential strategies for each season, it will be helpful to glance back to the corresponding section of the above overview to stay oriented toward the full potential for proclamation and theological development that the Revised Common Lectionary offers a congregation.