

Why I'm trying the Narrative Lectionary this fall

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Read [the Century article on the Narrative Lectionary and other alternatives to the Revised Common Lectionary](#)

Eugene Peterson [notes](#) that when we read scripture, "we find that we are not being led to see God in our stories but to see our stories in God's. God is the larger context and plot."

This fall, I'm using the the [Narrative Lectionary](#), put together in 2010 by the good folks at Luther Seminary and [Working Preacher](#). I've been preaching regularly for nearly a decade now, which means I've been through the *Revised Common Lectionary* three times. I haven't always stuck to the assigned texts; I've taken a break here and there to do a series on a theme or a particular book. But primarily, I've let the *RCL* carry me through the liturgical year.

Lectionary preaching is a good discipline. Left to my own devices, I'd probably preach on the same two or three stories every week—and never force myself to wrestle with some of those tough texts. I also like that folks at my church are hearing the same passage that the Episcopalians across the street or the Methodists downtown are hearing. It's a good reminder that we're all in this together, that our roots are in the same story.

But I was not looking forward to diving back into the *RCL* texts this fall. Nor was I eager to go off on my own and do something thematic. I always learn a lot when I do those extra-curricular series, and I think my congregation does, too. But it's a lot of work. We've got a lot going on at church this season, and the thought of creating a sermon series from scratch was a bit overwhelming.

Enter the Narrative Lectionary, which has been a breath of fresh air for me this fall. In each of four years, the NL tells the biblical story from start to finish—starting in Genesis each September, sweeping its way through the Old Testament until Christmas, then working through one of the Gospels and Acts in the spring.

It's only a few years old, but already there is a wealth of resources out there for NL preachers. Working Preacher features a weekly commentary and podcast, which I listen to religiously every week. RevGalBlogPals recently started [an NL weekly feature](#), and [Textweek](#) now links to articles on the NL text. An NL Facebook group, boasting several hundred members, has become a place where preachers share ideas, inspiration and resources.

For me, the NL has been a good compromise between the well-tested *RCL* and a do-it-yourself series. The biblical story itself provides a thematic structure that ties my sermons together week to week, and the online community offers the resources and support that keep me connected to the wider church.

I also appreciate how the NL presents a unique teaching opportunity. When we dip in and out of the scriptures—the prophets one week, a parable the next—it's sometimes hard to keep track of where a passage fits into the larger story. In a time when the Sunday morning sermon may be the only Bible study most people get, the NL gives us a chance to put these stories in context.

And the NL doesn't let me off the hook with those tough passages. Right off the bat this fall—the second week in—I had to find something to say about the near-sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22. It's a downright awful story for anyone who loves their children and loves God, and I'd never preached on it before. The *RCL*, with its four readings, always gave me the option of choosing another (safer) passage. Not so with the NL: with only one text on the table, I had to look Abraham squarely in the eye and ask him what the heck he was thinking, tying his son to an altar and raising the knife.

This Sunday we get introduced to David, who, despite his ruddy good looks and famous place in Israel's history, was not actually all that great a role model. Our Bible stories are filled with flawed and very, well, *human* people. And yet—and this is the theme you can't ignore when you work through these stories in order—God never lets us down. God's covenant is renewed over and over and over again.

These are our stories—the good, the bad and the ugly—and the task of preaching is to help people understand that the story isn't over yet. God's work in the world didn't end when the canon was closed. The stories we're living, our lives now, are part of that narrative that began generation upon generation ago. We find our story in God's.