

The verses left out

By [Sara Maitland](#)

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*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Maitland's current Living by the Word column as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.*

I decided to write about the Joel reading in [my Century column for this week](#), because I find his language and imagery—like that of many of the prophetic books—so rich and inspiring. But if I were preaching myself (not that I ever have to) I would probably choose to address the omissions from the Jeremiah and Timothy readings.

The creators of the lectionary decided to leave out Jeremiah 14:11-18 and 2 Timothy 4:9-15. They might be able to justify truncating Jeremiah on the grounds of length, but only just. And slicing up the epistle leaves us with a very short reading, just six verses. The Gospel reading is even shorter, but it is complete—a full parable with nothing easily connected on either side. And the semicontinuous cycle's first reading includes 10 long verses of Joel.

What has been edited out of Jeremiah is the prophet warning against the dangers of positive thinking, the optimistic good cheer that says everything is going to be all right. Jeremiah, in words which he claims come directly from God, is weighing in against his fellow prophets who are delivering a more upbeat message of security and peace.

Paul, after some truly elevating words in verses 6-8, suddenly becomes conspicuously self-pitying, self-righteous, bossy and grumpy. He is also of course being very human—worrying about a lost coat, a shortage of books and the selfishness of others. Despite his usual talk about “service” and unity in Christ, he is simply not behaving very well.

It is hard not to feel that the lectionary is attempting to bowdlerise the bible to say what they want it to say, or what they think we want to hear. Positive and hopeful prophecies are, as Jeremiah obviously knows, attractive and welcome; we like positive thinking in our present culture and do not want to learn that serene optimism may be misplaced. Similarly, we need our saints to be perfect—if Paul is to have his authority, we need to hear him saying “The Lord will rescue me from every evil,” not “When you come bring the cloak I left with Carpus,” without even any hint of “please.”

But I think there are always dangers in this sort of *post hoc* editing. Congregations deserve the full text. How different things might be for women, for example, if Genesis 23:1 was ever in the lectionary—after the attempted murder of her son, Sarah moved out of Abraham’s camp and set up her own. At the very least I believe we should always make it clear when announcing the readings that bits have been left out.