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# MUCH FINE GOLD

THE REVISED COMMON LECTIONARY

A little  
book on  
liturgy

 CHURCH  
PUBLISHING  
INCORPORATED

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## *Introducing our Revised Common Lectionary*

The decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple.  
More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold.

Psalm 19:7, 10

### *Praising the Word of God*

Christians agree with Jews and Muslims that God speaks to believers, in the past and the present, in many different ways. We may hear these words from God in the sounds of the earth itself, in an interior voice inside us, in the speech of a friend or a stranger, in music and art, and in various religious rituals. But Christians hear the Word of God most definitively in the Bible, especially in the scripture as it is proclaimed in the worshiping assembly. It is this proclaimed word of God that this small book addresses.

Among the biblical texts that have prominent place in Christian worship are the poems that are called psalms. The psalms, honored by the Church as the Word of God, are filled with praise for the Word of God. For the believer, to read and to receive the empowering religious literature that fills the Bible is to open up the self to God. Psalm 119 offers compelling comparisons to describe this transformational word: the Law is better than thousands of silver pieces (v. 72), sweeter than honey (v. 103), a lamp to my feet and a light to my path (v. 105), my heritage forever (v. 111), and like

great spoil (v. 162).<sup>1</sup> “Truly I love your commandments more than gold, more than fine gold” (v. 127). In Psalm 19, the author employs synonyms to name this word: the Law, the testimony of LORD, God’s statutes, God’s commandment, the judgments of the LORD—these are more to be desired than gold. Other biblical translations of Psalm 19 call this Word God’s instructions, decrees, precepts, and ordinances. But all translations agree that the Word of God is more to be desired than gold, more than “much fine gold” (v. 10).

Each week worshipers listen to short selections chosen from the Bible, acclaiming what we hear as “the Word of the Lord,” “what the Spirit is saying to God’s people.” Our lectionary invites us to join with many Christians to support these readings by singing and praying those psalms that praise “the Word of the Lord” as sweeter than honey, as a light to my path. At the annual Easter Vigil, after we receive the word from Baruch or Proverbs that speaks of divine Wisdom, we join in Psalm 19 to sing of this fine gold. On a Sunday in Lent, after receiving the commandments as delivered on Mount Sinai, we laud this teaching as if it were fine gold. In September when we hear that the spirit of Moses was shared with seventy elders, we once again rely on Psalm 19 to describe their prophesies as more than gold. With the words of Psalm 19, we praise the word heard through the lectionary, to laud what the Spirit is saying, as more to be desired than much fine gold.

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1. All biblical quotations in this book come from the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible.

## *Learning Our Lectionary*

The term “lectionary” is used to designate the list of readings appointed for proclamation during assembly worship, as well as for the bound book in which the readings are printed sequentially. In this little book we will study the list of readings that is titled the Revised Common Lectionary.<sup>2</sup> The Revised Common Lectionary is appointed for use in the Episcopal Church and is recommended or adopted by many churches worldwide. It is hoped that the more we know about these readings and why they have been selected for Sundays and feasts, the more meaningful our praise will be in recognizing that this Word of God is better than gold.

First in chapter 1 we ask: what is the design of the lectionary? What is the logic of the ordering of readings throughout the year? Then we investigate why this lectionary serves the Church as well as it does. How does this lectionary enrich our worship, enhance our daily devotion, and shine through us to share God’s radiance with others? Four descriptors will guide our discussion: examining the lectionary as ecumenical (chapter 2), metaphoric (chapter 3), historic (chapter 4), and contemporary (chapter 5) assists us in valuing this set of readings as more desirable than much fine gold. The final chapter addresses yet other issues.

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2. See Consultation on Common Texts, *The Revised Common Lectionary*, 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Annotated Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012). Alternatively, *The Revised Common Lectionary: Years A, B, C, and Holy Days according to the use of The Episcopal Church* (New York: Church Publishing, 2007).

You might preface your study of our lectionary by imagining how you might design a worthy lectionary. Should a lectionary cite from every book of the Bible, or should it focus on only the central parts of the scripture? Should the citations be easily grasped? Is it better to have several short readings or one long one? Should the lectionary include or omit troubling passages? Should the lectionary assume that the hearers have some knowledge of basic Christian vocabulary, or should it be entirely available also to seekers? Will it matter which biblical translation is used? Should an entire Church body use the same lectionary?

The hope is that the more we understand the plan and potential of this lectionary, the more we will appreciate its proclamation. This small book will encourage us to learn something about the original biblical location from which the readings are taken and to understand the specific seasonal intentions of the selections. Why were these texts appointed for this Sunday, and where are they headed? We may become more inspired to prepare for assembly worship by reading through the selections beforehand. We will come to expect that the hymns we sing; the preaching we hear; the colors, music, and art that adorn our worship space; the catechesis that our parish offers to children and adults; and our home worship between Sundays will support the lectionary.

Becoming “lectionary Christians” is one style of Christian spirituality, and those who live by the lectionary heartily recommend it. May this study and your conversation concerning it entice you to become a lectionary Christian, affirming the Church’s lectionary, not with vexation, but with enthusiasm and joy.

*Introducing our Revised Common Lectionary*

At the outset, we explore the following questions:

1. Psalm 19 is a poem. Do you ever choose to read poetry? What kind? If not, why not?
2. Describe some behavior pattern or ritual that you have gladly adopted, having been convinced of its value. When and why did you begin this practice?
3. What is some discipline that is forced upon you that you resent? Why do you resent it?
4. What is your experience of a church that uses a lectionary? Do you judge that experience to be spiritually worthwhile, or rather inexplicable and tedious?
5. Do you read from the Bible at home with any regularity? How do you choose which passages to read? Who or what encouraged you in this practice? In what ways do you find this practice helpful? Do you take breaks?
6. Do you read the lectionary selections at home before worship? When did you begin this practice? Is it always helpful? Sometimes? (Never?)
7. Have some fun designing an awful lectionary.