

# INTRODUCTION

The Word of God which we encounter in Holy Scripture is the inspiration for *Words That Listen: A Literary Companion to the Lectionary*. More specifically, these two volumes are made up of literary and artistic selections which “listen” to the gospel readings of the three-year lectionary of the Episcopal Church. In a short poem, Wendell Berry seems to expand the inspired canon and makes a claim for an “incarnate Word” which is “everything that is.”

The incarnate Word is with us,  
is still speaking, is present  
always, yet leaves no sign  
but everything that is.  
(Wendell Berry, “Sabbath IX, 1999”)

The Episcopal Church follows an authorized lectionary for readings from the Christian Bible in its worship services. The lectionary is shaped by the church year and, in the course of three years, exposes the faithful to much of the Old Testament and the New Testament. The lectionary means that the presider or preacher is not free to pick a reading which is on their mind or which seems appropriate. There is an inherent discipline imposed by the authorized lectionary.

We have probably all heard the old joke about the lectionary. It starts with a giant meteor heading toward the earth which will destroy all life on the planet. There is nothing like the end of the world to get people out to church! So, all the churches are expecting big congregations that coming Sunday. As is their wont in jokes of this nature, a Baptist pastor, a Roman Catholic priest, and an Episcopal priest are all sitting around thinking about what text they will preach on. The Baptist pastor goes first. “This is easy,” he says, “it has to be John 3:16—‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.’ I’m going to bring people to Jesus.”

The Roman Catholic priest goes next. “My text will be Matthew 16—‘for on this rock’ our Lord says to Peter ‘I will build my church.’ I will remind people that there is one true church in Christendom and it is important that you are right with Mother Church.”

They both look at the Episcopal priest and wonder what text she will choose. Without hesitating, the priest replies: “I will preach on the lectionary readings of the day.”

The lectionary is part of our discipline and part of our identity: we are one of the traditions that values the Word of God which is found in the lectionary. On a typical Sunday, four readings are part of worship in the Episcopal Church. Always, if there is a celebration of the Holy Eucharist, there is a reading from one of the four Gospels. The gospel is proclaimed and preached as part of our understanding of Word and sacrament. You could say that the Episcopal Church is a Bible-based church.

## For whom are these two volumes written?

*Words That Listen: A Literary Companion to the Lectionary* is written for a large audience. The preacher will find literary and artistic treasures which open up the Gospels for the three-year lectionary cycle of the Church seasons and “ordinary” (that long season from Pentecost to Christ the King) time. The preacher will find literary allusions or images to enrich the homily or sermon. These books will not replace a careful exegesis or examination of the text, but they will remind the preacher that the words of Jesus Christ in the Gospels are in conversation with culture in every age.

The most effective preaching in the Episcopal Church is “Bible-based” but blessed with cultural texture and an appreciation for the gift of the Word, the power of words, and the joy of a well-crafted text. Several years ago, a newly ordained graduate from Virginia Theological Seminary settled into his new parish. I received a call from the rector who lamented that the newly minted priest understood biblical exegesis but failed to connect the dots for those listening to him and most often preached a Bible study rather than a sermon. He asked what could they do to help him. I suggested that they send him to Florence, Italy, and instruct him to look at Michelangelo’s David for a week: an intense exercise in making room for beauty in the young preacher’s mind and with his limited cultural experience. *Words That Listen* is a “culture trip” which affirms that indeed the Eternal Word was made flesh, very flesh.

For the person who wants to “hear” the gospel before the Sunday service, these two volumes will be a helpful companion—almost an expanded canon of sacred texts. For the person who is not following a lectionary, *Words That Listen* is an invitation to

experience the ways the first-century Gospels have influenced great minds and faithful people.

The preacher and the person who is seeking a devotional resource should find the Gospels and their companion selections inspiring but not exhaustive or conclusive. Most of us need the inspiration of holy silence as much as we need additional words when it comes to gospel truth. Let this book not replace silent meditation but somehow encourage it as a practice for faithful reflection and living. Again, Wendell Berry is helpful. In his poem “How to be a Poet (to remind myself)” Berry celebrates the creativity of silence:

Accept what comes from silence.  
Make the best you can of it.  
Of the little words that come  
out of the silence, like prayers  
prayed back to the one who prays,  
make a poem that does not disturb  
the silence from which it came.

We pray that these volumes will give the gift of silence as the Word and the words invite us to have a closer walk with our Lord and the God of all. For preachers and for the faithful listeners, *Words That Listen* is a companion to point the way for a richer engagement with the Incarnate Word and the God who breathed us all into being.

## Lectionary preaching with literary and artistic companions

Perhaps it would be kind to offer an additional word to the preacher who will be using these volumes. How does one use a story or a poem in a sermon? Does it help always to name the source—or does that distract from the “flow” of the homily or sermon? Here is a portion of an ordination sermon which utilizes a scene from Flannery O’Connor’s only novel, *Wise Blood*. The source is named in a footnote, but not in the sermon itself.

“Nothing outside you can give you any place,” it is said in *Wise Blood*. “You needn’t look at the sky because it’s not going to open up and show no place behind it. You needn’t to search for any hole in the ground to look through into somewhere else. You can’t go neither forwards nor backwards into your daddy’s time nor your children’s if you have them. In yourself right now is all the place you’ve got. If there was any Fall, look there, if there was any Redemption, look there, and if you expect any Judgment, look there, because they all three will have to be in your time and your body and where in your time and your body can they be?”

In yourself now, as you are ordained a priest, you will spend the rest of your life proclaiming the mystery in yourself and in the Church of Fall, Judgment, and Redemption. You must throw “everything off balance” and hold up the host to a world that longs to be not displaced, not disabled. Hold up the host of wholeness to a broken world, the world God loves so much, in Jesus and now in us, his Body in the world.

Without actually quoting a poem, the preacher can appeal to the poetic imagination. In the following excerpt, I am clearly referring to several poems by W. H. Auden.

Poets like Auden help me make sense out of this world, the Kingdom of Anxiety. I need beauty when the world is dull, dark, and ugly. The poet's words are like the morning light after a dark cold night. I need Bethlehem after Newtown. I need the one who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Today we make our feeble "Way" to Bethlehem where "Truth" was told and "Life" made everlasting for the whole of the human household.

W. H. Auden takes us through the Word made Flesh, through Bethlehem, past the Newtowns of planet earth to "a great city that has expected your return for years." Let us be clear: our destination is not Bethlehem, nor is it any city that is home to the human household. No, we seek the One who waits for us in the New Jerusalem—the place where God is home and where there will be no tears, no sorrow but Life Everlasting. There is in the new Jerusalem a "bright clear day" for us and those we love.

The preacher's imagination is under a lot of pressure to offer thoughtful sermons and sermons which "feed the flock" Sunday after Sunday, week after week. These two volumes have some, but clearly not all, of the literary and artistic sources which could enrich gospel preaching. A final cautionary word: it is probably best for the preacher to be quite selective in utilizing additional or companion texts. Too many texts can obscure the preacher's own prose. A random text can be like a weed in a well-planned garden.

## Sources for the literary and artistic selections

These two volumes reflect the actual practice of preaching. Most of the selections have been utilized to increase the preacher's imagination and interpretation of the gospel. The selections have been "tried." The writings of Early Church fathers and mothers have been included. The Anglican Divines are well represented. European and American (north and south) writers and artists are quoted. Films, novels, short stories, poems, and plays are matched to gospel texts—implying what Wendell Berry concludes that the Incarnate Word is "still speaking." Works of art remind us of the place of beauty in interpreting the Word which becomes flesh of our flesh.

Naturally, the task of picking this text over that is hard. Some are included because of their universal recognition—a volume like this must include some Shakespeare and some Dante. Some texts have a particular resonance with the Episcopal Church—so Flannery O'Connor and Martin Luther King Jr. speak to our situation in powerful ways. But we also wanted even the most literary Episcopalian to be stretched—so Jorge Luis Borges fantasy story "The Library of Babel" might be new or the theological implications of Leonard Cohen's haunting "Suzanne" might not have been noticed before. We have striven to make sure that women and men are included. Ancient and modern. Young and old. There are classics and there are some selections which are not well known at all. We sought to create and introduce our readers to an exciting and rich world.

The diversity of the literary and artistic selections is an attempt to "listen" to the universal appeal of the Good News which is in each of the four Gospels. Just as a crèche or nativity scene embodies or expresses its original context, so a selection from El Salvador will capture a gospel truth differently than a rural Anglican priest in Wales.

## Concluding thoughts

My co-editor, Ian S. Markham, and I hope that readers of these two volumes will discover what we found in weaving this rich tapestry of literary gems. We learned that research is never a solitary task. We needed each other to explore the world of ideas which are informed by a first-century carpenter's son. There are times when we need someone to finish the thought we are having or the sentence we are writing.

Dean Markham and I also needed a community of thinkers to expand our ideas and to complete our project. So, we traveled to New York and Philadelphia to listen to Frank Griswold, the 25th Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church. His daily companions are the early church fathers and mothers. He introduced us in new ways to these timeless conversation partners and helped us connect them to various gospel texts and truths. Frank was, for us, a bridge to the wealth of the early church's encounter with the Risen Lord.

Mark Oakley introduced us to some contemporary English poets and writers. We met with him in a handsomely appointed room at St. Paul's Cathedral in London. He was a gracious host, taking us on a tour of that great cathedral of state occasions and opening his mind and heart to our research efforts. His own poetry graces our effort.

Our third consulting editor is the Very Reverend Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, the Dean and President at the Seminary of the Southwest. A number of Cynthia's literary companions are included in *Words That Listen*. She made sure the words of women were well represented, and we are delighted that two of her poems are included. After we met with Cynthia at Rather House, an arts and



crafts house on the campus of the Seminary of the Southwest, she invited us to her lovely home for drinks on her porch.

During our visits with Frank, Mark, and Cynthia, our consulting editors shared the poems, short stories, novels, films and art which are part of their very being and daily life. They introduced us to old friends, ports in the storm of life. Wendell Berry advises that we “accept what comes from silence.” Our consulting editors convinced us that good preaching and faithful meditation emerge from community and conversations deep and rich.

Our assisting editor is Greg Millikin, Associate Rector at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Alexandria, Virginia. Greg secured the countless permissions needed. But more importantly, he brought a vast knowledge of films to our endeavor from his Generation Y perspective. His preaching is enhanced by his ability to connect films and pop culture references seen to the gospel heard on Sundays.

Cameron Soulis was a great help as the project started. A junior at Virginia Theological Seminary, Jean-Pierre Seguin, from the Diocese of Michigan, studied Spanish language and literature, history, and creative writing at the University of Michigan. Jean-Pierre has provided some of the rich Hispanic literature which graces our selections. We are also glad for his translation contributions. Brit Bjurstrom-Frazier also provided some helpful literary expertise towards the end of the project and contributed to the permissions. Finally, Ryan Masteller provided expertise and care as he nursed the project to completion.

Finally, the commissioning editor at Church Publishing, Davis Perkins, was involved in the project right at the beginning and was so helpful.

Most of us spend hours each day dealing with ordinary, mundane matters. We go to work; attend meetings; check emails;

deal with family and friends. It is a gift from time to time to put aside the claims of being in this world and live for a brief time in the world of ideas, even in the world of silence. We may be at our best when we live fully into being in God's image, appreciating quietly the creative, generative ideas and images which feed the human soul and keep us in touch with God and the world God loved so much. This book is such an invitation, such a hope for those who yearn to "hear" the gospel anew in their search for the Christ-like, well-formed life.

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