SOFTWARE & TECH

United Methodist Church 2015 Lectionary

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Navigating Scripture: A Deep Dive into the United Methodist Church 2015 Lectionary

For communities of faith that follow a structured liturgical calendar, the lectionary serves as more than just a reading list; it is a spiritual roadmap guiding congregations through the depths of the biblical narrative. Within the Wesleyan tradition, the practice of engaging with Scripture through a prescribed cycle of readings has been a cornerstone of worship for decades. For those exploring the specific liturgical framework used in the Wesleyan tradition during that period, the **United Methodist Church 2015 Lectionary**offers a fascinating case study in how ancient texts are made relevant for contemporary believers. This article provides a comprehensive look at the structure, purpose, and practical application of the lectionary as it was observed in United Methodist congregations during the year 2015.

The Foundation: The Revised Common Lectionary and the UMC

To understand the **United Methodist Church 2015 Lectionary**, one must first understand its source. The United Methodist Church does not create its own unique lectionary from scratch. Instead, it officially adopts and adapts the **Revised Common Lectionary (RCL)**. The RCL is a three-year cycle of Scripture readings used by a broad spectrum of Protestant denominations, including Lutherans, Presbyterians, Anglicans, and Methodists. This ecumenical tool was developed to foster unity among Christian churches while ensuring that congregations hear a wide breadth of Scripture over time.

The year 2015 corresponds to **Year B** in this three-year cycle. Each year of the RCL focuses on a particular Synoptic Gospel: Year A on Matthew, Year B on Mark, and Year C on Luke. Passages from the Gospel of John are interspersed throughout all three years, particularly during the seasons of Lent and Easter. Therefore, the **United Methodist Church 2015 Lectionary**was primarily guided by the Gospel of Mark, offering a distinctive emphasis on the urgency, action, and humanity of Jesus' ministry as portrayed in Mark's fast-paced narrative.

Structure of the 2015 Lectionary: A Year of Mark

The liturgical year does not begin on January 1. Instead, it starts with the season of Advent, which typically falls in late November or early December. Thus, the **United Methodist Church 2015 Lectionary**actually spans from Advent of 2014 (November 30, 2014) through the Reign of Christ Sunday (November 22, 2015). Understanding this cyclical nature is crucial for effective worship planning.

Each Sunday and major holy day within the lectionary includes four readings:

- First Reading: Usually from the Old Testament (Hebrew Scriptures). In 2015, these readings were often chosen to complement the Gospel text for the day.
- Psalm: A responsive reading from the Psalter. The Psalm is treated as a congregational prayer or song, reflecting on the themes of the First Reading.
- Second Reading: Typically from the Epistles (New Testament letters). This reading often progresses

sequentially through a book, such as 1 Corinthians or Hebrews.

- Gospel Reading: The culmination of the Scripture readings. In 2015, this was predominantly from the Gospel of Mark.

Key Seasons and Texts in the 2015 Cycle

The **United Methodist Church 2015 Lectionary**took worshippers on a profound journey through the life of Christ and the early church. Here is a breakdown of the major seasons and the thematic highlights they presented.

The year began with Advent readings from Mark, which are notably shorter and less narrative-driven than Luke's infancy narratives. The focus was on preparation, watchfulness, and the abrupt appearance of John the Baptist. Christmas and Epiphany (January 6, 2015) brought readings from Luke and John, focusing on the incarnation and the visit of the Magi.

This period dove headfirst into Mark's Gospel. Congregations encountered the baptism of Jesus, the calling of the first disciples, and Jesus' early ministry of healing and exorcism. The theme of authority was prominent, as Mark presents a Jesus who teaches with an authority unlike the scribes.

Lent in 2015 was a journey through the challenging demands of discipleship found in Mark. The lectionary selections included the temptation of Jesus, the call to take up one's cross, and the Transfiguration (a key pivot point in Mark's narrative). The readings grew increasingly somber as the season progressed toward Holy Week.

Easter Sunday featured the resurrection account from Mark 16, though congregations grappled with the shorter ending of Mark (Mark 16:1-8) which ends with the women fleeing the tomb in fear. This unique ending prompted deep theological reflection on faith, fear, and the unexpected nature of the resurrection. The Easter season continued with readings from the Acts of the Apostles and the First Letter of John, emphasizing the life of the early church.

The long stretch of Ordinary Time (also called the Season After Pentecost) in the **United Methodist Church 2015 Lectionary**was dominated by a semi-continuous reading of the Gospel of Mark. This allowed congregations to walk through Jesus' ministry in a systematic way. Key highlights for 2015 included:

- Parables of the Kingdom: The parable of the sower, the mustard seed, and the growing seed.
- Miracles: The feeding of the 5,000, walking on water, and the healing of the Syrophoenician woman's daughter.
- Peter's Confession: A pivotal moment where Peter declares Jesus is the Messiah.
- The Journey to Jerusalem: The latter half of Mark focuses on Jesus' determined journey toward the cross, culminating in the Passion narrative.

Practical Application for Worship and Preaching

For pastors and worship leaders using the **United Methodist Church 2015 Lectionary**, the year presented specific challenges and opportunities. Mark's Gospel is the shortest of the four, and its narrative moves quickly. Preachers had to resist the temptation to rush through the text. Instead, the lectionary invited them to linger on key stories.

One of the strengths of using the lectionary is that it prevents "cherry-picking" favorite texts. In 2015, preachers were forced to confront difficult passages, such as Jesus' harsh words to the Syrophoenician woman (Mark 7:24-30) or the "hard saying" about the cost of discipleship. This rigorous engagement with Scripture is a hallmark of Wesleyan theology, which emphasizes the importance of the whole counsel of God.

Furthermore, the second readings in 2015 often came from the Epistle of James and the Letter to the Hebrews. These texts, which emphasize faith in action and the supremacy of Christ, complemented Mark's dynamic portrait of Jesus. Worship services were designed to show the connection between the Old Testament type

(first reading) and its fulfillment in the New Testament (Gospel).

The Role of the Psalm in 2015 Worship

In the **United Methodist Church 2015 Lectionary**, the Psalm was not an afterthought. It served as the congregation's prayerful response to the first reading. In many United Methodist churches, the Psalm was sung as a chant, read in unison, or used as a call to worship. The Psalms selected for Year B often reflected the themes of trust in God's power (Mark's theme of Jesus' authority) and lament (the journey to the cross). This practice grounded worship in the rich liturgical tradition of the Hebrew people.

Challenges and Critiques of the 2015 Lectionary

No liturgical tool is perfect, and the **United Methodist Church 2015 Lectionary**was not without its critics. Some pastors noted that Mark's Gospel omits many beloved teachings of Jesus, such as the Beatitudes and the Lord's Prayer. Others pointed out the "Markan sandwich" structure (interrupting one story with another) can be confusing for congregations.

Additionally, the brevity of Mark's resurrection account (versus the longer endings found in later manuscripts) led to theological debates. Many United Methodist churches chose to read the longer ending of Mark (16:9-20) for Easter Sunday, while others strictly adhered to the lectionary's recommendation of the shorter ending. This decision often reflected the congregation's theological orientation and comfort with ambiguity.

Despite these challenges, the 2015 cycle was widely praised for its focus on the suffering servant and the call to radical discipleship. It pushed congregations to move beyond a comfortable, sentimental faith and embrace a Gospel that demands action.

Wesleyan Distinctives and the 2015 Lectionary

The United Methodist Church has a unique theological lens through which it reads Scripture, often described by the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience. The **United Methodist Church 2015 Lectionary** was interpreted through this lens.

- Scripture: The lectionary ensured that the Bible remained central to worship.
- Tradition: By following the ancient pattern of the liturgical year, United Methodists connected to the universal church across time and space.
- Reason: Preachers were encouraged to use their intellect to discern the meaning of difficult texts, such as Jesus' prophecy of the destruction of the Temple in Mark 13.
- Experience: The lectionary allowed the faith experience of the congregation to be shaped by the narrative arc of the biblical story.

John Wesley himself was a firm believer in the importance of a disciplined approach to Scripture. While Wesley did not use the RCL (which is a modern creation), his emphasis on "constant reading" of the Bible aligns perfectly with the lectionary's goal of covering a broad swath of the biblical canon.

How Congregations Engaged with the Texts

In practice, the **United Methodist Church 2015 Lectionary**shaped congregational life in several tangible ways. Small groups and Sunday school classes often followed the lectionary readings, allowing members to study the same texts they would hear on Sunday. This created a coherent educational experience. Children's ministries also adapted the lectionary, telling the stories of Mark in age-appropriate ways.

Music directors faced the task of selecting hymns that resonated with the day's readings. In 2015, hymns that focused on the kingdom of God, the cost of discipleship, and the suffering of Christ were particularly common. Rituals such as the passing of the peace and the prayer of confession were tailored to the season.

The lectionary also provided a safety net for congregations without a full-time pastor. Supply preachers and lay

speakers could easily access the designated texts for any given Sunday, ensuring continuity of worship even in the absence of a regular minister.

Digital Resources for the 2015 Lectionary

By 2015, digital resources for the lectionary were abundant. The United Methodist Church Publishing House (Abingdon Press) produced resources such as *The Abingdon Preacher's Annual* and *Adult Bible Studies* based on the lectionary. Websites like **TextWeek.com**and the official UMC website provided free sermon helps, commentaries, and worship planning guides.

Social media also played a role. Pastors shared sermon notes on Twitter and Facebook, creating a virtual community of preachers wrestling with the same texts. This digital connection enriched the preaching experience and fostered a sense of shared ministry across geographic boundaries.

Lessons from the 2015 Cycle for Future Lectionary Use

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