

A Handbook For Lectors

Until I arrive, give attention to the public reading of scripture, to exhorting, to teaching.

1 Timothy 4:13

Revised September 8, 2017

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Alexandria, Virginia

Introduction

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.

2 Timothy 3:16

The practice of reading selections from the holy scriptures during worship services is of great antiquity and was already well-established in the Jewish synagogues before Christianity became a religion distinct from Judaism. Public reading of the scriptures assumed a fresh importance at the Reformation, when translations into the vernacular became widely available. The central position of scripture for the English reformers is succinctly set forth in the Articles of Religion:

VI. Of the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation.

Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation; so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation. In the name of the Holy Scripture we do understand those canonical Books of the Old and New Testament, of whose authority was never any doubt in the Church.

from The Articles of Religion (p. 868, Book of Common Prayer, 1979)

The solemnity with which the early church approached the reading of scripture during worship eventually resulted in the recognition of readers, both in the Eastern Orthodox and in the Roman Catholic traditions, as one of the minor orders of clergy, as explained in the following brief article from *The Encyclopedia Britannica* (11th ed., Cambridge: 1911), vol. XX, p. 358 (internal citations omitted):

LECTOR, or READER, a minor office-bearer in the Christian Church. From any early period, men have been set apart, under the title of *anagnostae*, *lectores*, or readers, for the purpose of reading Holy Scripture in church. We do not know what the custom of the Church was in the first two centuries, the earliest reference to readers, as an order, occurring in the writings of Tertullian; there are frequent allusions to them in the writings of St Cyprian and afterwards. Cornelius, bishop of Rome in A.D. 251-252, in a well-known letter mentions readers among the various church orders then existing at Rome. In the *Apostolic Church Order*, mention is made of the qualifications and duties of a reader, but no reference is made to their method of ordination. In the *Apostolic Didascalia* there is recognition of three minor orders of men, subdeacons, readers, and singers.... A century later, in the *Apostolic Constitutions*, we find not only a recognition of readers, but also a form of admission provided for them, consisting of the imposition of hands and prayer. In Africa, the imposition of hands was not in use, but a Bible was handed to the newly-appointed reader with words of commission to read it, followed by a prayer and a benediction.

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The concept of “minor orders” was rejected by the English Reformers, and in the Episcopal Church today the lections (other than the Gospel during the Eucharist) are commonly read by lay persons. Nevertheless, the reading of the lessons remains, together with the sermon, a central focus of the Liturgy of the Word.

Organization of the Lectionary

The scripture readings for the Sunday Eucharistic service are arranged in a 3-year cycle organized around the church year. (There is a separate 2-year cycle of readings for the Daily Offices, i.e., Morning and Evening Prayer.) The list of prescribed readings is referred to as the “lectionary” — a term that is also used to refer to a book containing the readings. The lectionary in use at the present time is known as the Revised Common Lectionary.¹ This lectionary, with minor variations, is also used by a number of other denominations.

The 3 years of the lectionary cycle are referred to as Years A, B, and C. Each year starts on the first Sunday in Advent, with Year A being any year divisible by 3 without a remainder. Thus, the first Sunday in Advent, A.D. 2016, started a new cycle, Advent 2017 will start Year B, and so on.

Organization of the Church Year

Since the lectionary follows the church year, it is important to understand the order of the Church seasons, some of which are fixed in length and some of which vary in length. The seasons and major festivals are as follows:

Advent	(4 Sundays)
Christmas	(December 25)
Epiphany	(January 6)
Epiphany Season	(4 to 9 Sundays)
Ash Wednesday	(46 days before Easter)
Lent	(6 Sundays)
Palm Sunday	(Last Sunday in Lent)
Easter	(varies from March 22 to April 25)
Eastertide	(7 Sundays)
Feast of Pentecost	(8th Sunday after Easter)
Trinity Sunday	(Sunday after Pentecost)
Pentecost season ²	(22 to 27 Sundays following Trinity)

1 Prior to the adoption of the Revised Common Lectionary in 2007, a somewhat different lectionary was set forth in the Book of Common Prayer and for that reason was referred to as the “Prayer Book Lectionary.” Copies of the Book of Common Prayer printed since then show the new readings, while existing copies of course show the older readings.

2 Prior to the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, the season following Pentecost was known in the Anglican and Episcopal Church as Trinity Season, and the Sundays were numbered accordingly. In the Roman Catholic Church, this season is referred to as “Ordinary Time.” For Pentecost, the Revised Common Lectionary provides two separate “tracks” — referred to as Track 1 and Track 2 — for the Old Testament readings.

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The major complexity arises because Christmas (which in turn determines the start of Advent) occurs on a fixed day, while the date of Easter (which affects many of the other holy days) varies from year to year, which is why it is referred to as a “moveable feast.” Determining the date of Easter involves quite an esoteric calculation (the gory details of which are set out at page 880 in the Book of Common Prayer), but it's simplest simply to use the table on page 882 of the Book of Common Prayer, which shows the date of Easter for the next 80 or so years. Given the date of Easter, you can then use the table on pages 884-5 of the Book of Common Prayer to find the date of those holy days that depend on Easter, e.g., Ash Wednesday and Pentecost.

Some of the church seasons always have the same number of Sundays. For example, there are always 4 Sundays in Advent and 6 in Lent. But because Easter floats relative to Christmas, the length of Epiphany and Pentecost will vary. The lectionary uses different strategies for adapting to the variable-length seasons. For Epiphany (which may have as few as 4 and as many as 9 Sundays), the readings start with those for the first Sunday after Epiphany but at the appropriate point simply skip to the reading for the Last Sunday in Epiphany. For Pentecost (which may have as few as 22 and as many as 28 Sundays), there are 29 numbered sets of readings ("Proper"), and the Second Sunday after Pentecost begins with the Proper that will result in Proper 29 falling on the Sunday before Advent.

The Books of the Bible

The Episcopal Church accepts as *canonical* – meaning authentic – (a) those portions of Jewish scripture that, after the destruction of the Temple, were accepted by the rabbis as authentic and are included in today's Hebrew Bible or *Tanakh* ("the Old Testament"); and (b) the Christian writings which by the end of the 4th Century had been generally accepted by the Church as authentically inspired ("the New Testament"). The readings in the lectionary, however, are also taken in some instances from the non-canonical books known as the Apocrypha.³

The Old Testament

The received books of the Old Testament are as follows:

Genesis	2 Chronicles	Daniel
Exodus	Ezra	Hosea
Leviticus	Nehemiah	Joel
Number	Esther	Amos
Deuteronomy	Job	Obadiah
Joshua	Psalms	Jonah
Judges	Proverbs	Micah
Ruth	Ecclesiastes	Nahum
I Samuel	Song of Solomon	Habakkuk
2 Samuel	Isaiah	Zephaniah
1 Kings	Jeremiah	Haggai

³ Because of differing views about the Apocrypha among the denominations that collaborated in compiling the Revised Common Lectionary, an alternative reading is always provided for any reading from the Apocrypha.

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2 Kings	Lamentations	Zechariah
1 Chronicles	Ezekiel	Malachi

The New Testament

The books of the New Testament are as follows:

Matthew	Ephesians	Hebrews
Mark	Philippians	James
Luke	Colossians	1 Peter
John	1 Thessalonians	2 Peter
Acts	2 Thessalonians	1 John
Romans	1 Timothy	2 John
1 Corinthians	2 Timothy	3 John
2 Corinthians	Titus	Jude
Galatians	Philemon	Revelation

The Apocrypha

Like other churches in the Protestant tradition, the Episcopal Church does not regard as canonical those portions of the Jewish scriptures which, although widely accepted as scriptural in Jesus' day, were ultimately rejected by the rabbis. Most of these books (or additions to the canonical books) were part of the famous translation called the Septuagint (abbreviated LXX) prepared for the Jewish community in Alexandria, Egypt, approximately 200 years before the time of Jesus. These books are included in Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic Bibles as part of the Old Testament. In Protestant Bibles, however, they are either omitted altogether or printed in a separate section between the Old and New Testaments called the Apocrypha. (In the Roman Catholic usage, these books, although printed as part of the Old Testament, are sometimes designated as "Deuterocanonical.") The formal position of the Episcopal Church, as set forth in the Articles of Religion, is that "the Church doth read [the books of the Apocrypha] for example of life and instruction of manners; but yet doth it not apply them to establish any doctrine." The books in question are as follows:

Tobit	Additions to Daniel:
Judith	Prayer of Azariah
Additions to Esther	Song of the 3 Young Men
Wisdom	Susannah
Ecclesiasticus	Bel and the Snake
Baruch	1 Maccabees
1 Esdras (3 Ezra)	2 Maccabees
2 Esdras (4 Ezra)	Prayer of Manasseh

Ecclesiasticus is also called *Sirach* (in Roman Catholic editions of the Bible) or *Ben Sira* (by scholars); don't confuse it with *Ecclesiastes*, which is part of the Old Testament canon. The 6th chapter of *Baruch* is sometimes printed separately as the *Letter of Jeremiah*.

What Translations are Approved?

This question is answered by Canon 2 (“Of Translations of the Bible”), Title II, Canons of the Episcopal Church:

The Lessons prescribed in the Book of Common Prayer shall be read from the translation of the Holy Scriptures commonly known as the King James or Authorized Version (which is the historic Bible of this Church) together with the Marginal Readings authorized for use by the General Convention of 1901; or from one of the three translations known as Revised Versions, including the English Revision of 1881, the American Revision of 1901, and the Revised Standard Version of 1952; from the Jerusalem Bible of 1966; from the New English Bible with the Apocrypha of 1970; or from The 1976 Good News Bible (Today's English Version); or from The New American Bible (1970); or from The Revised Standard Version, an Ecumenical Edition, commonly known as the "R.S.V. Common Bible" (1973); or from The New International Version (1978); or from The New Jerusalem Bible (1987); or from the Revised English Bible (1989); or from the New Revised Standard Version (1990); or from translations, authorized by the diocesan bishop, of those approved versions published in any other language; or from other versions of the Bible, including those in languages other than English, which shall be authorized by diocesan bishops for specific use in congregations or ministries within their dioceses.

TIPS FOR READERS

- If you are unable to read on a Sunday to which you have been assigned, please arrange for a substitute and let the Lector Coordinator know (so there won't be panic when he or she doesn't see you in church!) If there is sufficient time, also let the parish administrator know, so the correct name can be printed in the service bulletin.
- **Know what you are reading.** The Bible is full of many different kinds of materials: narrative, poetry, and instruction; warning and encouragement. Each requires a different type of voice. Careful preparation will enable you to **read with expression** and to **read from the heart**, both of which are essential to make the reading a meaningful experience for your listeners.
- **Look beyond your assigned verses.** Read the passage leading up to and beyond the assigned reading to make sure you understand the context. If at all possible, you should consult a good study Bible or commentary to make sure you understand the historical context in which the particular book was written and the meaning of any obscure references and allusions.
- **Spiritual Preparation.** Mitch Finley, in *The Joy of Being a Lector* (Totowa, N.J.: Resurrection Press, 2000) suggests an ancient prayer technique known as "holy reading" as an effective method of spiritual preparation:
 1. Find a time and place when you can have a few quiet minutes to yourself.
 2. Sit down in a comfortable chair. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your mind and heart to the words you are about to read.
 3. Open your Bible to the verses you will be proclaiming as lector.
 4. Begin reading the words, slowly.
 5. When a particular word or phrase grabs your attention or touches your heart, pause and reread until you have this word or phrase in your mind.
 6. Close your eyes and repeat the word or words silently to yourself.
 7. Gently allow the word or phrase to lead you into an awareness of God's loving presence in and all around you.
 8. Rest quietly and calmly in that presence.
 9. When it seems natural to do so, open your eyes and continue reading.
 10. Repeat the process until you have gone through the entire reading.
- **Practice your reading aloud** before coming to church. It's sometimes surprising how words or names you think you know how to pronounce can cause you to stumble when you actually have to say them. If the Bible you use for preparation does not include pronunciation marks for proper names, there is a pronunciation guide that is kept at the lectern (which is another good reason to get to church early!)
- **Plan on arriving at least ten minutes early.** Check that the book of readings is opened to the correct page. Sometimes, there is more than one choice of readings for a particular Sunday. Also, for some Sundays and certain special services, the reading won't actually be

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printed at its appropriate position in the book; rather, there may simply be a cross-reference to a reading printed elsewhere in the book. Don't discover any of this for the first time when you walk up to the lectern during the service!

- It is optional whether you introduce the reading with a short explanation of its significance. There is a book on the lectern that has appropriate introductions. Some of these are a little wordy, and you may wish to simply use the first sentence of the canned introduction. If you are going to do your own introduction, **please prepare it carefully beforehand**: ad libbing is seldom effective. Otherwise, simply say:

"A reading from ... "

It is usually sufficient to simply state the name of the book (e.g., "the book of Genesis" or "the letter of Paul to the Romans" or "the book of the prophet Isaiah"). There is normally no need to announce the chapter and verse. (Chapter and verse are helpful when listeners are following in their own Bibles, but are of little use when there are printed scripture inserts in the bulletin).

- If you are going to read from a translation other than the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), you should announce the translation you will be using and explain that it differs from the text that is printed in the bulletin scripture inserts. Otherwise members of the congregation (particularly those who are heard of hearing) may get very confused as they attempt to follow along! Of course, you should *always* read loudly and clearly, but it is *especially* important that you do so if you are using a different translation, since the scripture inserts can't be used as a crutch.
- The rubrics allow minor modifications to the biblical text to place the reading in context. For example, suppose the assigned reading is I Kings 19:9-13. In the New English Bible, that passage begins, "He entered a cave and there he spent the night." It is perfectly acceptable to replace the pronoun by a proper name so that the listener will know who "he" is: "Elijah entered a cave and there he spent the night." Since the rubrics also allow a reading to be lengthened at discretion, you might even pick up the tail end of the preceding verse in order to provide additional context: "When he reached Horeb, the mountain of God, Elijah entered a cave and there he spent the night."
- Speak clearly and **take your time**. It's almost impossible to read too slowly. **Don't let your voice drop**, particularly on the last sentence. Concentrate on the person in the last pew: that's the person who needs to hear you.
- When you are finished with the reading, **pause** briefly (I recommend silently counting to three), then say,

"The word of the Lord"

(When the reading is from the Apocrypha, some readers prefer to say "Here ends the reading," rather than "The Word of the Lord.")

Quick Reference

Lectionary Cycle

Year	A	starts	Dec 1, 2013
Year	B	starts	Nov 30, 2014
Year	C	starts	Nov 29, 2015
Year	A	starts	Nov 27, 2016
Year	B	starts	Dec 3, 2017
Year	C	starts	Dec 2, 2018

Year	Ash Wed.	Easter	Pentecost	Advent
2014	Mar 05	Apr 20	Jun 08	Nov 30
2015	Feb 18	Apr 05	May 24	Nov 29
2016	Feb 10	Mar 27	May 15	Nov 27
2017	Mar 01	Apr 16	Jun 04	Dec 03
2018	Feb 14	Apr 01	May 20	Dec 02

The lectionary readings for any particular Sunday or festival — in both the RSV and NRSV translations — can be found at:

- a. Book of Common Prayer p. 889
- b. <http://satucket.com/lectionary>
- c. <http://www.lectionarypage.net>
- d. <http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu>