



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

Where does the list of readings for our Sunday worship come from?

The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries on worship-related topics from across the church.

These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.

The response herein may be reproduced for congregational use as long as the web address is cited on each copy.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America uses a system of readings for Sundays in the church year. Any system of readings from Scripture is called a "lectionary." Lectionaries come in two basic forms: a list or table of the Scripture citations to be read from the Bible, or a book in which each lesson is printed out in full for the purposes of public reading and proclamation in the worship assembly.

This church uses both forms of lectionary. A book called *The Revised Common Lectionary* contains a list of the scripture readings and an introduction with information about the development of the Revised Common lectionary. The large and handsomely bound *Lectionary for Worship: Ritual Edition* is an example of the lectionary which includes the full text of each reading. This format is also available in a softbound edition in three volumes called *Lectionary for Worship: Study Edition*.

The lectionary system authorized for use in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is called The Revised Common Lectionary. This lectionary was developed by an organization called the Consultation on Common Texts. This ecumenical organization is made up of representatives from several church bodies in North America. Materials prepared by this group are always subject to the adoption of individual church bodies. The ELCA approved the use of this lectionary by action of the Church Council in 1993. Several other church bodies in North America have adopted this lectionary system. The result is that there is an ecumenically shared use of the same readings in a growing number of church bodies each Sunday. You may visit an Episcopal, Presbyterian, United Methodist, or other church where the readings are the same as or similar to those your own congregation is using on Sunday.

The Revised Common Lectionary is divided into three annual cycles of readings. In year A the gospel readings come primarily from St. Matthew. In year B the gospel readings come primarily from St. Mark. In year C the gospel readings come primarily from St. Luke. St. John is used in all three years. Each cycle begins on the First Sunday in Advent of the church year and continues through out the final Sunday, Christ the King/Reign of Christ.

The Revised Common Lectionary also provides for two systems of readings from the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament). One is based on lessons that relate to the gospel for the day. The other uses continuous reading from the Hebrew Scriptures during the time after Pentecost. The ELCA has chosen to encourage the use of the related lessons, rather than the continuous reading. However, the lectionaries published by this church that contain full texts for reading provide the continuous track.

This lectionary is a Sunday lectionary, that is, it includes a set of three readings and a psalm for each of the Sundays in the church year. Because Sunday is the oldest festival of the Resurrection of Christ, Sunday is regarded as the foundational day of celebration of Word and Sacrament. Readings for daily celebrations or lesser festivals and commemorations are not a part of this lectionary. Individual church bodies have different practices regarding these celebrations.

With the publication of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, a new daily lectionary “helps worshippers more fully bring Sunday worship into relationship with daily prayer and reading scripture” (*Keeping Time*, p. 158). This lectionary flows out of and towards the Sunday lectionary. This “schedule of reflecting on the past Sunday and preparing for the next Sunday is a wise and helpful aid in connecting daily prayer and Sunday worship” (*Keeping Time*, p. 159). This list of readings can be found on pp. 1121-1153). For more on the details and background of this lectionary, see *Keeping Time* (pp. 158-160). See also *Revised Common Lectionary Daily Readings: Consultation on Common Texts*.

In the ELCA we have inherited two traditions about the relative importance of Sunday and lesser festivals ([see also, “What is a lesser festival? When and how do we celebrate them?”](#)). Both traditions preserve important points of view. One tradition sees Sunday as so important a feast of Christ’s resurrection that when lesser festivals, which have fixed dates for their observance, fall on Sunday they do not replace the Sunday reading but, rather are celebrated on the next day, Monday. The other tradition sees in the lesser festivals an occasion to witness to Christ in the life of one of its saints. This tradition allows, even encourages, substituting the lesser festival for the Sunday readings when the festival falls on a Sunday for which the liturgical color is green. Lutheran practice has varied, although the current ecumenical preference is to keep the integrity of Sunday and not to interrupt to Sunday readings for these other celebrations.

Some people in the ELCA have raised a question about a few readings listed in the Revised Common Lectionary that come from the deuterocanonical or apocryphal books. These books are not within the 66 books of the canon of Scripture. They are, however, very closely related to the books in the canon. In some churches there is a very ancient tradition of reading from these books on Sunday alongside the canonical books. Luther himself recommended the study of these books. Because the Revised Common Lectionary is an ecumenical lectionary for use by both churches that use and those that do not use readings from these books, whenever a reading from these books is listed, an alternative from the canonical books of scripture is also provided. When the ELCA and its publishing house prepare resources for our congregations, the canonical books are always the preferred choice. The other reading may be listed or referred to but is not printed for reading.

Lectionaries can be used in a variety of ways. The introduction to the Revised Common Lectionary suggests using the lectionary:

- To provide whole churches or denominations with a uniform and common pattern of biblical proclamation.
- As a guide for clergy, preachers, church members, musicians, and Sunday school teachers, that shows them which texts are to be read on a given Sunday.
- As a guide and resource for clergy from different congregations who wish to work and pray together as they share their resources and insights while preparing for their preaching.
- As a resource for those who produce ecumenical preaching aids, commentaries, Sunday school curricula, music for assembly song and devotional aids.
- As a guide to individuals and groups who wish to read, study, and pray the Bible in tune with the church's prayer and preaching. Some congregations print the references to the following Sunday's readings in their bulletins and encourage people to come prepared for the next week's celebration; the psalm reference might also be included to encourage reflection on the first reading.

The Sunday lectionary is a powerful tool for the church's proclamation of Jesus Christ. In the words of *The Use of the Means of Grace*, The ELCA's set of priorities for the practices of word and sacrament:

The use of ELCA-approved lectionaries serves the unity of the Church, the hearing of the breadth of the Scriptures, and the evangelical meaning of the church year (UMG, 7A).

The Sunday lectionary readings do not include the whole Bible. They are chosen specifically to highlight the unique and saving ministry of Jesus Christ, and they work with the church year to unfold that reality. These readings do expose Christians assembled for worship to much of the gospels and other New Testament writings.

RESOURCES

[Frequently Asked Questions:](#)

- 🔗 What is a lesser festival? When and how do we celebrate them?

[Resources Available for Download on the ELCA Website:](#)

- 📄 *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997. (Available in English and Spanish)
- 📄 *Principles for Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002. (Available in English and Spanish)

[Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:](#)

- 📖 *The Revised Common Lectionary: 20th Anniversary Annotated Edition*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2012.
- 📖 *Revised Common Lectionary Daily Readings: Consultation on Common Texts*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005.

- 📖 Ramshaw, Gail and Mons Teig. *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Keeping Time, The Church's Years*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009.
- 📖 Ramshaw, Gail. *A Three-Year Banquet: The Lectionary for the Assembly*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004.
- 📖 *Lectionary for Worship: Study Edition: Year A, Year B, Year C*, Augsburg Fortress, 2007, 2006, 2008.
- 📖 Hoyer, Christopher George. *Getting the Word Out: A Handbook for Readers*. Minneapolis. Augsburg Fortress, 2013.

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