

Stop and start

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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Every so often, usually between 5 and 9 pm on a Saturday night when I am lurching toward the finish line of another sermon (or grinding my teeth in frustration at the sermon that just won't come together), a terrifying thought pops into my head. All of a sudden it occurs to me what a laughable, horrifyingly presumptuous thing it is to get up in front of a group of people and presume to speak on behalf of or about God.

This sounds just a touch melodramatic or self-important, I know. But I don't mean for it to. I don't mean to convey the idea that people who prepare sermons somehow have a more important vocation than the person who swings the hammer or sets the bone or drives the cab or empties the bed pan. It probably has a bit of an odor of false humility, too. I can assure you that this, too, is not the case (at least no more than usual). This is not me saying, Yes, we preachers have such a weighty (and important) burden to bear. Could you please spare a thought for those of us who have to tramp up and down the mountain each week to receive a divine word for the unwashed masses. No, no, no, not at all.

It's not that I'm necessarily afraid of being wrong (although sometimes I am afraid of this, and I probably should be more often). It's not even that I'm afraid of being boring (which is far worse than being wrong these days) although this, too, is an occupational hazard when your job is to keep alive an old, old story that has been talked about by a great many people over a great number of years, and which a great number of your listeners already know very well. My kids (among others) unburdened me of the illusion that everything that comes out of my mouth is riveting and insightful quite some time ago.

I suppose the root of these Saturday night sledgehammers to the head is really nothing more (or less) than something like, *How on earth could anything so small ever say anything about something true or useful about something so big?!* This flash of vapor presuming to speak about the one who underwrites all of existence from second to second? This grain of sand talking about the one who flung the constellations into the sky, who thought up mountains and oceans and deserts and,

well, *everything*? This little finite, fallen, fragile creature who loves so intermittently, who believes so limply, who obeys so erratically, speaking about unspeakable things like divine love and forgiveness and mercy and *salvation*. . . . Absurd.

When all this comes rushing in on Saturday night, I usually end up thinking, *You fool! Do you have any idea what you are doing?! Do you have even the remotest clue of what it means to open your mouth and talk about God?! Perhaps you should just stop writing and stop talking! Perhaps just shutting up would be the best thing you could do for God tomorrow.*

The only comfort that I can take in these moments where it seems preposterous to say anything about God is that *God* has said something about God, and that that something looks and sounds like Jesus.

And so, when I have just about managed to talk myself out of talking about God, I think about Jesus. I try to imagine him looking over my shoulder as I assemble my wordy artifacts. I imagine him smiling or putting his arm around me. I imagine him standing beside me when I get up in front of people and presume to speak about him. I imagine him raising his eyebrows from time to time (um, well, not really, but nice try kid) or laughing a little. I imagine him forgiving me in advance for whatever combination of hubris, truth, error, and goodness might happen to come tumbling out of my mouth. I imagine him turning my words into something better than they are for those who hear. I'm sometimes even brave enough to imagine him saying something like, "Well done. You did your best. My church has heard far better sermons over the years, but it has also survived far worse. I'm proud of you for giving it a shot."

And then, as I am mentally collapsing into relief, Jesus says, "Oh, and don't forget that my voice has other ways of going out into the earth besides words."

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