

Going off script

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Each week when I preach, I write out a whole text, but I don't bring it with me into the pulpit. I have found that, if I know well the biblical texts and the sermon that I have written, a few bullet points are enough to keep me on task. That way, I can connect with the congregation, react to them, listen for the Holy Spirit, and adapt the sermon as I go along.

Sure, it's risky. Occasionally, I'll get to a point where I cannot remember what I intended to say next—a sign that I'm slavishly tied to the text—but eventually I find my way back. Worse, every once in a while I will say something I did not intend—something that, if given the chance to take it back, I would. Several months ago, when rattling off a list of empty, idolatrous practices, "going to church" popped out of my mouth, and I wanted to say, "Wait, I didn't mean that!" but it was too late. Sure enough, one person told me that was her favorite part of the sermon. (Sigh. Of course it was.)

Going off script can be dangerous. Preachers say things that they regret. Candidates make promises that they can't keep. Parents use words that they hope their children won't remember even though they know that they always do. And, in Sunday's Gospel lesson ([Luke 9:51-62](#)), Jesus makes a comparison that he surely did not intend. A would-be disciple approaches Jesus and says, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home," and Jesus responds, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Um, Jesus? What were you thinking? Why didn't you stick to the script? We practiced this. I know that you are doing something special, and I know that you believe that there is an urgency to your movement, but you can't say that. You can't compare yourself with Elijah if you're going to call him out like that. You can't tell these people that the greatest prophet in Israel's history was wrong. As your messianic campaign manager, I'm pretty sure you're going to need to walk that back. Let me get with some people to formulate a strategy, and we'll come up with a plan. We can fix this.

But, of course, Jesus did mean it. Gospel accounts aren't transcriptions of Jesus' conversations. They have been filtered through the oral and written traditions, telling and retelling, writing and rewriting, always guided by the Holy Spirit, until what we have in Luke is surely what God is giving to God's people. Even if Jesus didn't mean it or, depending on your hermeneutical perspective, didn't say it, the Gospel writer gives it to us as an intentional, provocative proclamation of Jesus. And its total shock value shouldn't be lost on us.

In the reading from [1 Kings 19](#), the Lord tells Elijah that he has selected Elisha to be "prophet in your place." When he finds him plowing behind a dozen oxen, Elijah throws his mantle over his successor as symbol of the selection and a sign of the beginning of the transfer of power and authority. In other words, the choice has been made. Elisha could not have missed the meaning of that act. He accepts this appointment, leaving the oxen and running after Elijah, but, before they continue on their journey, he asks Elijah to delay: "Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you." It's a reasonable request. Presumably Elisha had familial duties to uphold. Once he is given permission by his new master, he takes the oxen and slaughters them and boils their flesh with the wood from the yoke that held them together behind the plow—signs of the finality of this prophetic appointment--and gives the stew to the people. Then he leaves to follow Elijah.

And there's nothing wrong with that ... unless you're preparing to follow Jesus. "Follow me," he says to someone, but that man asks leave to go and bury his dead father. "Let the dead bury the dead," Jesus says, offering a shocking reply that calls into question everything his contemporaries knew about filial obligations. Another offers to follow him but asks leave to go and say goodbye to his family, but, simultaneously invoking and questioning the tradition of Elijah and Elisha, Jesus replies, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." Can this be? Did he mean it?

Yes, Jesus meant it. Yes, it's difficult. Yes, it's shocking. Yes, it throws everything we think we know about duty and honor and family into question. And that's the point. Following Jesus can't be a secondary priority. The kingdom that he is ushering in doesn't have room for uncommitted participants. This week, as I prepare to preach, I'm looking for ways in which contemporary Christians like me find excuses to delay our commitment to the kingdom. What is our plow? And how does even the most logical, reasonable, honorable intention still get between us and the kingdom?

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