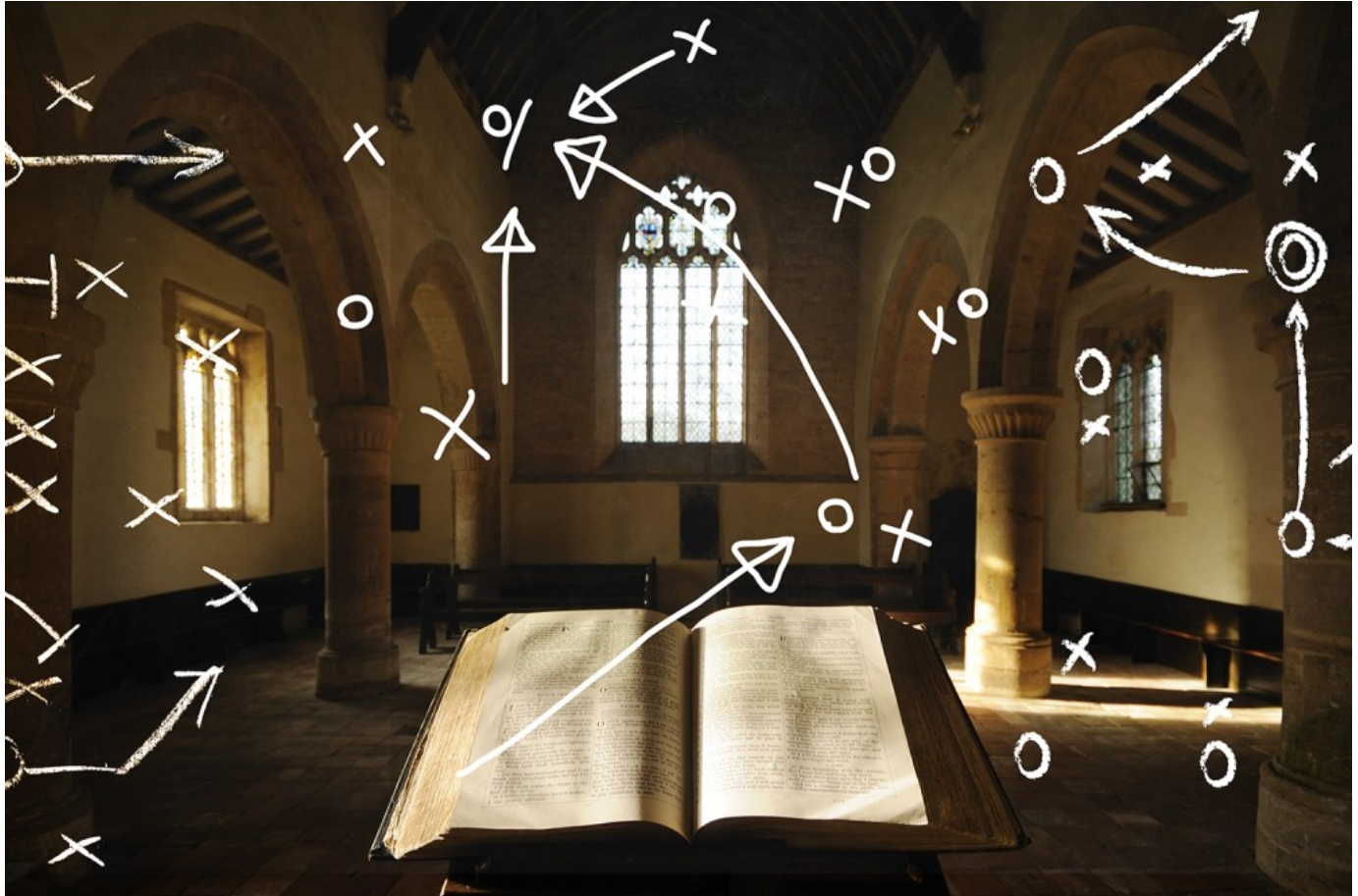


## Why I came back to the lectionary

My job as a preacher isn't to change the game. It's to run the plays well.

by [Julian DeShazier](#) in the [April 2024](#) issue



*Century illustration* (Source images: Getty)

I stopped using the lectionary for a while. Then I went back, and it saved my life.

The plain reason I stopped using it was that I wanted to be original. I have nothing against the lectionary or the church seasons and colors, in fact I love them. I love how the lectionary helps place us in the context of an ongoing story and superimposes the cycle of life onto the calendar year. It puts us in the Bible and the Bible in us. Plus, during weeks when sermon preparation feels like the least urgent part of my pastoral call, I know that I still must prepare something for

Sunday—though *must* we? that's another topic—and I find in the lectionary a good friend at minimum and sometimes manna from heaven. The moments I have been doing too much or too little are prime for lectionary partnership.

But I also come from the world of hip-hop, which teaches that copying someone else's style ("biting") or doing what everyone else is doing can get you an immediate and permanent seat on the bench. "Keep things fresh" is a mantra that courses through my body. Instead of always preaching about joy two Sundays before Christmas, why not do a series or something interesting? Do we have to talk about death in late March? Everyone's doing that. And shouldn't I be talking about things that are interesting to these specific people, not what might have been interesting to someone else years ago?

These were the thoughts—OK, the anxieties—swirling in my head until finally I gave up on the lectionary. It felt stale to me, running the same old play, cooking the same recipe. I likened myself to a pastoral Patrick Mahomes, running around and making up plays on the fly. Imagine all the people in the stands watching me, in awe of how I got to *there* of all places, inspired to grow closer to God as a result.

How many problems can you spot in that metaphor? Exactly.

But for a while, the practice of going off lectionary worked well! The only people who even noticed were the ordained folks in the room, more prone to sit back and critique rather than help, so there were no practical issues. In fact, the opposite: people kept joining, we had some memorable sermon series, and not only was I not bored, I was having fun! But we weren't connected to the story or the tradition.

And then a crisis swept through our church—one in which I found myself unable to speak with any kind of dynamic anything. My creativity as I knew it was shut down, to the point that I found myself in my mid-30s considering retirement (so, a football player after all). I went to a trusted mentor with this crisis and told them about the playbook metaphor and needing to keep it fresh. They replied by saying what someone who's been pastoring for a long time knows deep within their body: "It's called a playbook for a reason. These are the things that work. Recipes become recipes by trial and error and finding the things that work. Tell the story. The story works."

This convicted me deeply. Here I was trying to be the GOAT of spicing things up, thinking I was following the bread trail of some truly visionary geniuses who came

before me—*How do they come up with that?* I would think as a child—when what I really needed in that moment was to hear the story again, to place myself in it, and to let it speak to me.

It is a story of God's love and our relationship to such a remarkable thing. It is a story about extraordinary birth and vulnerability and fragility and death and loss and life and creativity and community. It is a story about every available human emotion, and it occurs within the structure of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. Ordinary Time, too, and the story has something to say in the seasons when our lives are anything but.

In that particular darkness of my life, I needed my situation to be understood by God, even experienced by God, and it saved my life that December to remember that it was hope I was looking for so desperately. And there in the lectionary, the first Sunday of Advent: hope.

Each of us has rabbit holes in our life—places where we can concentrate for days on end without thinking of anything else—and we need the reminder that we are not gods ourselves but must rely on God, whose story we are part of. The lectionary, at its best, can cure us of a certain idolatry or whim to go off on our own. We are a part of something that transcends time and is relevant every year. The lectionary, the sacraments, the traditions: they are faithful reminders that our current lives are part of a testament that has been shared by billions of Christians around the world and across time. They remind us, in our seasons of despair, of what comes next. We should be hearing about resurrection all the time, and the lectionary makes sure we hear about it at least once.

The lectionary isn't a perfect tool. But that's where my job comes in: it's not for me to make up stuff that makes people go "Wow!" It's my job to run the play well. It's my job to tell the story faithfully and ethically, and we have a tool that, whatever its limitations, helps us keep the story straight. Besides, it's challenging to find something new to say on Palm Sunday, when everyone knows it's about Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. Prepare the recipe, and make it yours. Make it ours. It's there for a reason.

And this millennial, who is chronically bored with everything, is grateful for that.