

# By Way Of Introduction

Presented By Pastor Scott Walters on 12/09/18  
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Who is Steve Higgins? (Jimmy Fallon's sidekick/introducer). It seems as though most every late night show host had a sidekick. Jay Leno had Kevin Eubanks and David Letterman had Paul Schaffer. Some of you are old enough to remember the Johnny Carson Show. The show had a ritual opening. "Welcome to the Tonight Show starring Johnny Carson," then a listing of tonight's special guests and then, "Heeere's Johnny." All said by Ed McMahon.

When Johnny Carson retired, someone asked him about the secret of his success in show business, and Johnny said something like, "I was lucky enough to get introduced to the great Ed McMahon."

Johnny was serious. A good introduction is everything. A friend of mine was in Toastmasters and he said that one of the most difficult of all speeches in the speech of introduction. "It's easier to make a 30-minute speech than to make a two-minute introduction to present the 30-minute speech."

Wow. Good introductions have the difficult task of getting an audience excited about the speaker who is to come, to warm them up, to get them to trust the speaker, and to do it all in just a few minutes and in a way that doesn't call attention to the introducer.

The worst introductions are those that take too much time. I went to Boswell's a few years ago to hear Joan Walsh make a presentation, based on a book she wrote. I suppose because she grew up in Shorewood and graduated from the UW-Madison, there was a special interest for a few that came that evening. Ten minutes into the introduction, and we hadn't even made it to Joan's first high school date.

A good instruction to a speech is a speech that doesn't seem to be a speech; a speech in which the person making the introduction must point to the speaker without becoming the speaker.

The best introduction that Dr. Norman Vincent Peale said he ever received was to an association of realtors during a downturn in the housing industry.

The Association President stood up and said, "This has been the worst year in real estate that I can remember. I know all of you and know that you're trying to put on a happy face on your pain. That pasted-on smile you're wearing tonight doesn't fool anybody. The man you're about to hear knows you. And what he says is going to be the best news that you've gotten all year. I give you Dr. Norman Vincent Peale."

Dr. Peale said he couldn't fail after an introduction like that.

I mention all of this because this Sunday's Gospel, as always on the Second Sunday of Advent, is John the Baptist – the preacher who introduces the preacher, Jesus. The Christian year always begins with John who gets us ready to meet Jesus. You can't get to Christmas; you can't get to Jesus, without first hearing John the Baptist's introduction.

But we didn't come here today to hear John the Baptist. We came to hear Jesus. John says upfront that he is not the main event. He is the "forerunner." He's the opener before you get to hear Lady Gaga or Tony Bennett in concert. He is the Ed McMahon 'teaser' for Caron. All four Gospels begin the story of Jesus with the story of John. You can't get to Jesus until you first hear John.

It pains me to say it, but John the Baptist breaks most of the rules for introductions that would be suggested by Toastmasters. John's introduction of Jesus is delivered in a histrionic scream: "YOU BUNCH OF SNAKES! WHO TOLD YOU TO TRY TO ESCAPE FROM HELL FIRE? His ax is in his hand; he will cut you down to the root! He's going to separate the good seed from the trash and then cast the trash into

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the fire! I'm not worthy to tie his shoelaces, he's so great. You'd better get washed up and ready. Strip off those fine clothes and come down here into the water and get baptized. You've been warned!"

During John's intro, you could see respectable people quietly moving toward the exits. As they moved, John screamed, "I'm talking about you! Don't say to yourselves, 'we've got Abraham as our Daddy,' I tell you, you better turn around, get washed, get right, repent. God can raise up a family out of the stones in this river, if God wants."

Why would anybody have stayed for the sermon after an introduction like that? Talk about an intro that ruined the speech!

Is John crazy? Begin a sermon with, "You aren't right. God demands that you be transformed, born again, done over. You better, or there will be hell to pay" - and watch the congregation slowly edge its way to the door.

I saw a preacher on TV who on Sunday evening preached to 16,000 people in a auditorium. His sermon began with, "You are good! You mean well. You want to live a happy life, but those negative naysayers keep dragging you down." He then advised us to get up each morning, look in the mirror, and say, "I will have a good day! I do believe in me!"

And although he didn't mention 'God' in his sermon (what on earth could God do for a congregation that's capable of doing all that?), 16,000 people listened to what he had to say gladly.

Based on that preacher and his flock of 16,000 strong, why would anybody have listened to John the Baptist? And why do all the Gospels demand that we not hear Jesus until we first hear John?

John the Baptist intruded, stood up, and told the contented, self-satisfied religious folk that they, especially they, needed to change, that their religious pedigree was no guarantee to escape the judging gaze of God. More than that, he told them they could change.

Most people? Most people are sort of happy with their lives at present. They're not taking much responsibility for the fate of the world just now, not too troubled over the war on climate change. So, John the Baptist is probably not their idea of an effective preacher.

But I bet there's someone here today under the shelter of this church who's almost dying to hear John preach; somebody wise enough to know that you need to change; somebody faithful enough to believe you can change; somebody open to the pruning necessary in order that some new, life-giving branch may spring forth.

But I bet there's someone here not content with things as they are; somebody in the wilderness; somebody willing to tolerate a preacher who tells the truth no matter what the congregation thinks.

Now, you're about to hear the most difficult, demanding, bad news that ever was called 'good.' You're about to have your world rocked, tables overturned, demons put on the run, and the dead raised.

Ladies and gentlemen, you're about to hear one of the most offensive preachers that has ever mounted a pulpit, so offensive that the government tortured him to death in an attempt to shut him up. He's your good news and salvation.

Heere's Jesus!