

BE READY

What would you think if I preached sermons the way John the Baptist did?
“You brood of vipers! You have snake DNA in you! And here you are, in this sanctuary, thinking that by coming here you’re getting on God’s good side.

“If you fear God and want God to be pleased with you, then repent! You must live a different kind of life—a life that shows you are worthy to be called God’s children.

“And don’t think that, just because you come from a good Christian family and have been going to this church for years, you’ve got it made. The Lord doesn’t care about that in the least. God could take a pile of rocks and make as many members of the First Congregational Church of Scarborough as God wants!

“No, what God is looking for is results. God will know you are His people and His children by the fruits you produce!”

Whew! That was kind of fun.

But is that the kind of preaching you want to hear every Sunday?

For some people, perhaps. Although there are other churches in the area where they could hear that kind of message on a regular basis, and the preacher would probably preach it much better than I ever could.

But for most of you, I’m sure that kind of preaching would cause you to tune me out very fast.

I’d be curious to ask our newest members, would you have made the decision to join our church if, the first time you entered this sanctuary and worshipped with us, you heard me preach that way.

The preaching style of John the Baptist had its fans. As this morning’s reading from Matthew records, “People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by [John] in the Jordan River.”

Different strokes for different folks, right?

I guess some people need a little fire and brimstone in the sermons they hear; perhaps for motivational purposes.

Maybe they need to have the fear of God instilled in them before they're willing and able to repent, live more faithful lives, and act the way God's children are supposed to act. If you need that kind of sermon, I apologize. It's just not the way I operate in the pulpit. Or, more recently, down here.

However, I believe there's some truth and wisdom to be found in a John the Baptist kind of sermon.

Well, if you can get past the harsh rhetoric and bombastic style.

I heard a story about a man who went to the funeral of one of his relatives. It was held in a small, Independent Baptist church in North Georgia. The time came for the service to begin. The family entered the sanctuary, and the preacher started to preach.

The preacher got really worked up and started to shout, "Time is up for Sam. He might have wanted to do something different with his life, but it's too late now. It's all over for him. He doesn't get another chance.

"But it's not too late for you. People drop dead every day. Why wait? Today is the day. Repent! Make your life count for something. Give yourself to Jesus! You never know what tomorrow may hold. Repent!"

Everyone left the church a bit stunned. Most of those in attendance had never before heard a sermon like that at a funeral service. And I'm sure a lot of them thought that if they were lucky, they would never hear one like that at a funeral again.

The man who was a relative of Sam the deceased got into his car, more than ready to go home. He didn't much feel like attending a reception after that blunt-force, hit-them-over-the-head-with-a-hammer-type funeral message. He started the car, then turned to his wife and said, "That was terrible. If I was a minister, I would never do that to a grieving family. That had to be the most manipulative, inappropriate, tacky funeral sermon I have ever heard."

His wife responded, "You're absolutely right. Of course, the worst part is, what that minister said was true."

Ouch.

For the most part, I don't know the personal history of how you became Christians; I don't really know about your religious upbringing and how you came to be members of the First Congregational Church of Scarborough. But somehow, in some way, you heard God call to you, maybe through your parents, a family member, a friend, a Sunday School teacher or a pastor or priest.

Whether in your religious background you were called a brood of vipers, or a beloved child of God; whether you came to God with feelings of guilt and remorse for past sins, or joy and relief that your past sins have been completely

forgiven; whether you had the fear of God put in you, or the fear of God driven out of you and replaced by the grace and love of God; here you are.

Here we are.

Long-time members, and members for less than one day; weak and strong; well-off and financially challenged; with a faith that can move mountains or a faith that hardly registers on the Richter scale.

Here we are. Watching. Waiting. Hoping and praying for the Messiah to come.

John the Baptist was the forerunner, the preview of things to come. He is the one who prepares the way.

And Jesus . . . he is the way, and the truth and the life.

And at its core, the simple message John the Baptist preached in his abrasive, painful way was, be ready.

Be ready, because the Messiah, the Christ, is coming. Only God knows when, but he's coming.

And Advent is our time to prepare, so we can be ready to meet him. Amen.