

“I tell you the truth,” Jesus would later say, “among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist.”

Unparalleled praise from our Lord and Savior, “Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist...” Not Abraham, not Moses, not David, not Solomon, not Elijah, not Peter, not Paul, not Bart Starr, Aaron Rodgers, or Vince Lombardi, not Abraham Lincoln or George Washington, Jesus reserved this unparalleled praise for John the Baptist – this never had a haircut, living in the wilderness, bug and honey eating, camel skin wearing, John.

I don’t know about you, but when I hear praise like that coming from the lips of my Lord and Savior it makes me perk up a little bit. It makes our Gospel reading for today just that much more intriguing. What is it about this John the Baptist that Jesus found so impressive to label him the greatest man ever born?

Well, when you take a good look at what the Bible records for us from the life of John the Baptist (which isn’t a lot) one thing really jumps out – John was not one to mince words. He obviously had been off wandering in the wilderness snacking on grasshoppers while sowing a camel skin tunic when they did the lesson on political correctness, tolerance, and polite conversation. He didn’t beat around the bush. He was a straight talking man through and through. He proudly and bravely preached a straight-talking message from his God for his God.

Matthew tells us that two groups of people came out to see what the fuss was all about – the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

For us to understand John’s mission and Jesus’ ministry we need to understand a couple of things about these two groups:

They are both sets of Jewish religious leaders, but they are very different. They were both powerful and incredibly influential at John’s and Jesus’ time, but in different ways.

The Pharisees were local religious leaders. They would have been in charge of the local synagogues. What they said was, “Here, we have a set of rules that we’ve written – rules that will make sure that you don’t come even close to breaking one of the rules God has given us. If you follow these rules you will stay right with God.” So, the Pharisees thought they remained in God’s good graces because of what they did.

The Sadducees were different. These were the movers and shakers from Jerusalem, that religious and political hub of the entire area. These were the guys who were running the government. They were primarily secular, they

didn’t believe in much (the butted heads with Pharisees constantly) but one thing they did believe was that God was right with them because of who they were: “We are Israel, of course God is happy with us.”

If you ran into these two groups today, what would be like?

Maybe a Pharisee is that person you meet that thinks he is better than everyone else, that his worldview is right, and that he has the moral high ground on every issue because he is committed to a more just, peaceful, and verdant world – and God will probably like him because of it.

And the Sadducee would be one of those policy makers in Washington, who never goes to church, but election time comes and he starts making appearances at local churches so that people will vote for him.

Neither one of them feel they need to repent of anything at all. Both of them are convinced that they are doing just fine on their own, thank you very much.

But straight-taking John had a message to share from God, for God.

“You brood of vipers! You think your nationality makes you right with God? You think walking into a building at the right time and following a few man-made rules makes you right with God? This is not repentance, and where there is no repentance there is no forgiveness, and where there is no forgiveness, there is only judgement and hell.”

He says, “I’ll tell you what you look like: you look like that tree on the apple farm – the one that hasn’t produced fruit in years. And here comes the farmer with his ax. I wonder who he is coming for...”

Maybe it’s not all that surprising that this straight talk would one day land John in jail where he would eventually lose his head because he refused to mince words.

Straight talk – I think that is an attribute that, at least on the surface, we want to approve of. Not many people like hanging around with someone who is constantly beating around the bush, who refuses to say how they really feel but then gets offended and mad when you didn’t read their mind. We know how frustrating it can be to try and communicate with someone who won’t say what is really on their mind. We tend to praise those in our lives who just say it how it is.

On the surface, we want to approve of straight talk, but I don’t think any of us really like it when someone is completely open and honest *all* the time?

When you go up to someone and ask, “Do you like my new haircut?” You’re really not asking for straight talk.

I don't think anyone in the history of the world has ever said "yes" when asked, "Does this make me look fat?" And certainly the person asking that question wasn't looking for straight talk when they asked it. They were looking for a "yes man", someone to build up self-confidence, not tear it down, they were looking for someone to tell them what they wanted to hear, not the truth, not straight talk.

On the surface we compliment straight talk, but deep down we all harbor reservations about straight talk because straight talk, when consistently applied, can be uncomfortable at best and at other times downright hurtful.

If the people in my life were completely open and honest with me all the time, I think I would be in for a rude awakening.

It would be a truly humbling thing if the people around me, who know me best, and work with me on a daily basis were completely straight with me all the time. It would be uncomfortable and at times hurtful because of a simple truth about us human – we tend to be very bad at self-assessment. We tend to blow up our perceived flaws into much bigger mountains, and we tend to minimize our actual flaws. So, consistent straight talk is uncomfortable because it makes us realize we aren't as great as we tend to think...

Which gets us right down to the reason we have this aversion to real straight talk – our sinful hearts really don't like straight talk all that much because straight talk has a tendency to remind us that we are not nearly as good, kind, worthy of love and respect as we tend to think we are. Straight talk is a humbling thing because other people tend to see our sinful pet sins a lot more clearly than we can.

So, we tend to have reservations about straight talk, and we don't always like it when we hear it. We are bad at being on the receiving end of straight talk, but the Bible makes clear that straight talk is exactly what we need.

When God says, **"The LORD looks down from heaven on all mankind to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one,"** he wants us to see what he sees when he looks at us.

When God describes the human race as wicked, **"that every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood,"** he's talking straight – every single thought you have ever had has been evil – corrupted in some way by the sinfulness you inherited from your parents.

When God leads Isaiah to say, **"All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags,"** he's making clear that

even the best things you do are still inherently sinful because of the selfishness that courses through your veins.

And our hearts find that kind of straight talk uncomfortable at best. Be honest, have you ever found yourself uncomfortable or even angry or offended when Pastor Adams or I stood up here and preached some straight talk from God? If it hasn't happened yet, I guarantee you, if you are listening, at some point I am going to make you uncomfortable and maybe even offend you with straight talk – and if I don't then I'm not doing my job.

Which really leads me to my next point: we aren't all that comfortable being on the receiving end of straight talk, but we are not all that much better at giving straight talk. We, like John the Baptist, have been commanded by God to not only hear straight talk *from* him, but share straight talk *for* him.

I guarantee you that every single one of you has someone in your life that needed straight talk from you, for God, but didn't get it... someone who needed to hear that a life lived apart from God, his Word, his Church, is a life leading straight to hell; someone who needed to hear that the gossip or slander they were slinging was directly against God's eighth commandment; someone who needed to hear that the life-choices they were making were not just "different yet equally valid" but sinful and wrong.

And yet *way* too often we keep straight talk from God to ourselves because straight talk is often just as uncomfortable for the giver as the receiver... because it might hurt us too if our friend, coworker, or family responds in the way people often do in the face of real straight talk.

On the surface, in casual conversation we tend to applaud and approve of straight talk, but when the rubber meets the road, none of us are very good at consistently receiving it; none of us are very good at consistently giving it.

And I think this gives us some insight into what Jesus found so praiseworthy in John the Baptist: straight talk was an area where John the Baptist excelled where so many others fail.

John's message was simple and to the point: Repent. **Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.**

This is straight talk from God and for God through the lips of John the Baptist.

You are not the people you should be, and if you want your meeting with the Kingdom of Heaven to be a good experience, it starts by understanding just how thoroughly sin corrupts everything you are and everything you do, and how justifiably angry that sin makes your God.

But that's only part of the straight-talking message that John came preaching in the wilderness. Repent, *because the kingdom of heaven is near*. Repentance as the Bible often uses it, as John uses it here is a two-step process. It is not *just* understanding how much and how often we have failed our God and being sorry for that, it is sorrow over sin *and* trust in the kingdom of heaven.

The biggest reason Jesus found John so laudable... it was the job that God had given him: **A voice of one calling in the wilderness, "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him."**

John's straight talking message from God and for God went beyond the failures of the human race, it pointed straight at God's solution for the failures of the human race.

John was so special and so important because his mission was so special and so important. He was the one man in this history of the world that God chose to point to Jesus, Emmanuel (God with us) and say, **"Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."**

John's straight-talking message from God and for God was this: You need God. Here is your God, come to save you.

And repentance, friends, is trusting that both of those are true. You need forgiveness and you have forgiveness because of a man who came after John, whose sandals John didn't even consider himself worthy to carry – the God-Man Jesus who came to suffer and die for you.

That is the straight message John preached. He preached it loudly, and bravely... no matter how uncomfortable it got.

Friends, as we celebrate the season of Advent (that Latin word that means "coming"), as we prepare our hearts for the coming of our Lord, as a baby in a manger and at the end of time, let's take a good hard look at the greatest man ever born of women, let's take a page from his book and learn again the importance of receiving straight talk from God and sharing straight talk for God because that straight talk from God, his Word, his Bible, is the only thing in this world that can prepare us and those we know and love to meet the coming of the kingdom of heaven with confidence.

Amen.