

Advent 2C, 2012

Text: Luke 3:1-14

Title: Brutally Honest

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Some people always speak their minds. Some people don't even try to be polite or to be careful with their language. Some people know what is right and wrong, black and white and they aren't afraid to tell you. Just try to stop them.

People like that are actually hard to find these days.

Most of us are taught that nothing is absolutely true or false, that nothing is completely black or white, that everything is grey. People say things like, "this is what I think, but you can believe something else and we can all get along" or they might "this is what is true for me, but it might not be true for you."

I'm guilty of this myself. I can be very cautious with my words to a fault, trying to please everyone, trying not to offend anyone.

John the Baptist doesn't have this problem. John the Baptist doesn't seem to care what people think or how they will react. He is not a people pleaser.

People show up to be baptized, they are coming in droves to see him and what does John do? What does John say? He insults them- You bunch of snakes! You're just trying to save your skins, aren't you! If you don't change your ways, if you don't turn your life around God's going to cut you down like a dead tree and throw you in the fire.

Wow. When's the last time you heard a sermon like that? When's the last time you showed up at church and the pastor called you a snake? When's the last time you heard someone take hell seriously?

Like it or not, that's what the people of John's day needed to hear. John couldn't sugar-coat it. He couldn't dance around the topic. "You're a sinner who is destined to damnation, and if you don't do anything about it, you'll end up in hell." That's John's message.

John doesn't say, "You're a pretty nice person. You've made a few mistakes, but we all slip up, it's no big deal." No. That's no John at all.

John doesn't say, "This is what I think is right, but you're free to live your life however you want."

John is sent to call all people to repent, to get ready for Jesus. That's John's role- to show you how bad you are, and how much you need Jesus. The only way that you realize that you need a savior is when you realize how hopeless your situation is.

Imagine that you own a business. And even though your business is failing and you're going deeper and deeper into debt, your accountant keeps telling you, "Don't worry. Everything's fine, it's no big deal. You've got plenty of money," when you really don't have anything in the bank at all. You don't realize how bad things are until the repo guys show up to take everything from you.

How would you feel about your accountant at that point? It would have been better if he had been honest with you and told you that you were in trouble, so you could have made some changes and avoided losing the business.

Or imagine that you go to your doctor when you're not feeling well. And she tells you, "Don't worry, it's no big deal, just get some rest and take it easy for a few days," only you're dying. By the time you realize that everything's not okay and it is a big deal, there's nothing more that can be done. How would you feel towards your doctor?

That sort of doctor, that sort of accountant does you no good. You need people who can be brutally honest with you, even when it comes to things that you don't want to hear.

This is John. Brutally honest. You're a sinner, and if you don't repent, you're going to hell.

Sin is a big deal. Hell is real. People actually go there.

It's not a happy thought, but it's the truth. And that's what John is there to deliver.

It's not John's message. It wasn't John's idea. It doesn't start with John. It starts with God. Notice how our Gospel lesson starts. After Luke sets the scene, giving us the precise time when all this happened, he says, "The Word of God came to John."

It starts with God's Word. John didn't decide to go out preaching his own thoughts and ideas. He doesn't have his own version of the truth. John preaches only what comes from God.

If you listen to John, you are listening to God.

If you refuse to listen to John, you are refusing to listen to God. If you refuse to listen to any faithful preacher, you refuse to listen to God Himself. That's all that preachers are there to do- to speak God's Word to you.

God Himself condemns you for your sinfulness. That's God's Word. Not John's word, not my word, not any other preacher's word. It's God's word.

Confession is simply agreeing with God. "God, you've said that I'm a sinner, and I know you're telling the truth."

Thankfully, though, this message of repentance was not the only message John was sent to preach. He was proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Just as John boldly called the people to repent, he boldly forgave their sins.

Just as boldly as John pointed his finger at the people and called them a bunch of snakes, so boldly did he point to Jesus Christ and say, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

When it came to pointing out people's sin, John did not waffle. And when it came to pointing them to Jesus, he didn't waffle either.

He didn't say, "I think Jesus could possibly be the Savior," or "Jesus might be bearing your sins," no he boldly pointed to Jesus and said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

Those words are for you, too. God not only calls you to repentance, but he forgives your sins. And He continues to do so through pastors today.

The pastor doesn't say, "I think your sins might be forgiven," but "I forgive you all your sins." No waffling, no qualifying, but straight and to the point. You are forgiven because of what Jesus has done for you.

And so before we approach the altar, we all sing together, "O Christ thou Lamb of God, that takest away the sin of the world, have mercy upon us." We confess along with John and the whole Christian church that we are sinners, but in the Lord's Supper Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God takes our sins away, has mercy on us, and grants us peace. This confession of faith points to Jesus as the Lamb of God as He feeds us with His body and blood.

Today Katie joins in this confession. For over eight years she has heard God's voice calling her to repentance and forgiving her sins. She firmly believes and confesses along with John the Baptist and the whole Christian church that she is a sinner in need of forgiveness, but that Jesus Christ has died for her, and gives her forgiveness with His body and blood here in the Lord's Supper. Today we welcome her to receive these gifts with us in faith.

Twenty years ago today, Debbi Hochgesang and her daughter Dory came to this place and heard here God's voice condemning them as sinners, but also forgiving their sins and granting them salvation. For twenty years they have served here in this place in joyful response to God's word and we rejoice with them this day.

We thank God today for faithful servants like John the Baptist and so many others who call us to repentance, but then point us to Jesus Christ as the one who bears our sins for us and dies in our place.

The day is coming when Jesus will return. As we hear God's Word, both law and Gospel, Jesus gets us ready so that we receive him with joy and gladness when He comes.

Amen, come, Lord Jesus.