

In July of 2016 I had an encounter with a celebrity. In fact, he is the number one movie villain of all time; none other than Darth Vader of Star Wars fame! Here is photographic evidence. This encounter took place in the Big Easy; the city of New Orleans. A big group of us from First Lutheran were in town for the LC-MS National Youth Gathering. We were on our way to dinner early one evening when we saw Darth Vader, the Lord of the Sith, across the street from our restaurant and let me tell you, he is quite a dancer! He was dancing freestyle to the latest songs of the day and doing so quite impressively out there on that street corner!

The best part of this story though, is that someone in our group knew what a big Star Wars fan I am, so they asked Lord Vader if he would come over to the restaurant and introduce himself to me. Yes, in the summer of 2016, in I shook hands with Darth Vader in a restaurant in the French Quarter of New Orleans!

Ah, but of course, as you no doubt have figured out. the man I met was only an actor - sorry kids - an impersonator of the Darth Vader. He looked pretty convincing, but the sneakers and white socks, kind of gave it away, plus he was about a foot shorter than the actor who played Darth Vader in the movies.

He was only a pretender! He was not the “real” thing. But he did have some *real remarkable* dance moves, that I am sure would have impressed Fred Astaire, Michael Jackson, or Bruno Mars. This man was an actor. He wanted to be what he really was not.

So, why did I take this trip down memory lane and share it with you? It’s because in our Gospel lesson today we see another famous man suddenly appearing on the scene. Not Darth Vader, the greatest movie villain of all time, showing up in the French Quarter, but John the Baptist, about whom Jesus once noted, “ among those born of women there has arisen no one greater”

(Matthew 11:11).

John the Baptist was a strange man, yes, but he was the *real* McCoy. John was not an impersonator, but a true witness of Christ!

The Jews of Jerusalem wanted to know who that strange man was. Oh, John truly was a strange man. He wore clothing made of camel’s hair, he had a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey (Mk 1:6)! Besides, John preached repentance! “Make straight the way of the Lord” (v 23). John was indeed a strange man. Levites and priests came from Jerusalem

to meet this strange preacher. They were on a mission; they needed to find out who John was.

They had a straightforward question to ask him: “Who are you, John?” (see v 19). And John was plain and clear in his answer: “I’m not the Christ!” (see v 20). They kept asking; next, they wanted to know: “Are you Elijah?” John said, “I am not!” “Are you the Prophet, then?” John’s answer was even shorter. He simply said, “No!” (see v 21). John did not want to be the king of the hill; he did not want to be the center of attention.

If there’s something we human beings are good at, it’s trying to be the king of the hill. We love to be the center of attention. Like all impersonators wherever they may be, we like it when people notice us, when people gravitate toward us! You see, our sinful nature pushes us to be on top. Doesn’t matter the price; we want to be number 1!

Jesus’ disciples had the same problem. One day, Jesus caught them arguing about who was the greatest among them (Mk 9:34). In the world, Jesus said, you will find people doing that, but it must not be that way among you. Here, among his disciples, “Whoever wants to become great must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave” (see Mt 20:26–27).

That was John. He knew exactly who he was and what he was supposed to do. “I am not the Christ. . . . He [is the one] who comes after me, . . . the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie” (vv 20, 27).

John didn’t want to be what he was not! He was **not** an impersonator! He was not a pretender like that talented Darth Vader, wannabe. If the priests and Levites were on a mission, John had a mission of his own!

That was determined even before his birth. The elderly priest Zechariah, and his wife, Elizabeth, had given up their dream of having a child. Elizabeth was barren, and both were too old now to expect children. That’s what they thought! However, God had other plans for this couple.

Being a priest, Zechariah was working in the temple when the angel Gabriel appeared to him, saying, “Your wife will have a baby and you will name him John.” But the angel said more: “He will be great in the sight of the Lord. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit” (see Lk 1:13, 15).

Our Gospel today tells us that “[John] was a man sent from God” (v 6). John’s mission was about one thing: to be a witness—a word that appears three times in our text! (vv 7–8). He came to speak not about himself but about someone else. John was happy being what he was. Only a witness! He was a voice calling in the desert. A voice calling people to repentance: “Make

straight the way of the Lord” (v 23). And, finally, when Jesus came, John was humble enough to say, “He must become greater; I must become less.” Or, in a different translation, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (Jn 3:30).

John was not an impersonator; he didn’t pretend to be what he was not! He was never pointing to himself, directing people to him, but instead, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (1:29). I think we can imagine John saying, “Did you come to see me? Let me tell you whom you need to see: not me, but Christ, the Lamb of God! It’s all about **Him**! He’s the one who brings light into your broken lives, darkened by sin. He not only brings light, but He also brings life and salvation. He will suffer and die on the cross to forgive your sins. Behold Jesus, and not me!”

Behold Jesus, and not John! John the Baptist is an Advent man; he came as a witness; he came to prepare the way. But he didn’t want to **stay** in the way of anybody. With his testimony, he directs people to Christ, so that by believing in Him, all may have eternal life and salvation. This is good news, **joyful** news!

As I think about John the Baptist and his role—being a witness, directing people to Jesus—I wonder: Who was like John in **your** life? Who directed **you** to Christ? Who pointed to Jesus and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world”? Maybe it was your mother, your father, a family member, your teacher, a neighbor, a friend, or a coworker. Someone that didn’t want to be at the center but instead pointed to the center, directed you to Christ! If that person is still around, can I ask you a favor? Please, send that person a Christmas card and thank him or her for what he or she did for you!

John the Baptist is an Advent man! Have you ever thought about becoming an Advent person too? What about you becoming a John the Baptist to someone else? No, I’m not asking you to be an impersonator, someone who you are not! I’m just asking you to be what you **are**—a baptized and redeemed child of God, directing others to Christ! A witness for Jesus!

Be a voice out there in the world, a voice that speaks the Word of truth, a voice that calls to repentance and trust in the One who is coming. Direct people to Jesus. Tell someone that He’s coming. Tell people around you that the One who’s coming is not an impersonator but the real deal! He is the Son of God, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Christ is the Light, a Light that shines in the darkness, a Light that offers life and salvation to all people. Amen.