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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Fourth Sunday in Advent (One-Year Series)

December 24, 2017

Text: John 1:19–28

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I have a confession to make.... I am not a prophet; I am certainly not Elijah; without a doubt I am not the Christ. But I am a sinner who needs the grace of God promised in the Holy Scriptures. I confess that in thought, word, deed, and nature, I am soiled and corrupted with sin. Before heaven and earth, I confess that I am a Christian, one who is saved by the grace and love of the crucified and resurrected Lord Jesus Christ without any merit or worthiness in me.

The Bible teaches us “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved” (Romans 10:9–10). Christianity is a confessing religion. Or to put it differently, the Christian faith is one that prompts its adherents to speak publicly about their love and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. With the mouth, one confesses and is saved.

Today's text from John 1 teaches us how Christians ought to make a public, Christian confession of faith in the Lord Jesus. Priests, Levites, and Pharisees went out to see what John the Baptist was doing out in the Judean wilderness. Who are you?, they asked. Vs. 20, “He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, ‘I am not the Christ.’” Notice the double positive confession accompanied by a negative confession. He confessed he isn't the Christ. He refused to deny that he wasn't the Christ; that noble vocation belonged to someone else. The Christ is the One “who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie” (vs. 27). John teaches us that true Christian confession always points away from ourselves as being anything significant to the One who is important: the Lord Jesus Christ.

Christians throughout the centuries have confessed – spoken publicly – their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Even when it cost property, prestige, even their own lives. Let me share a couple of historic examples of Christians confessing their faith.

I know this is the morning of Christmas Eve. And all the wonderful sights, sounds, and traditions of the Christmas season surround us. I think it will do us good to hear true stories of Christian faith and devotion. Aren't surrounded by innumerable Christmas legends? The Grinch, a drummer boy, Frosty, apocryphal angels named Clarence, an express train filled with children in pajamas, a very timely conductor, and a mysterious ghost-like hobo, all traveling to the North Pole, and so forth. Those are great stories. We enjoy them all in the Mars' home. But what I am about to share are real stories of real Christians confessing their faith unto eternal glory. For is not this weekend about confessing the Christ who was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary in the town of Bethlehem, adored by heavenly angels, and worshipped by shepherds and wise men?

Polycarp was the bishop of Smyrna, and a disciple of the apostle John. In the year 155 AD, the 86 year-old Polycarp was arrested and taken into the arena. Reports say that he heard a voice from heaven, "Be strong, Polycarp and play the man!" The Roman proconsul tried to persuade Polycarp to apostatize, saying "Have respect for your old age, swear by the fortune of Caesar..." "Swear," urged the Proconsul, "reproach Christ, and I will set you free." Polycarp declared, "86 years have I have served him and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme *my King and my Savior?*"

After unsuccessfully threatening Polycarp with wild animals, the Proconsul said, "If you despise the animals, I will have you burned." "You threaten me with fire," responded Polycarp, "which burns for an hour, and is then extinguished, but you know nothing of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. Why are you waiting? Bring on whatever you want."

The fire for Polycarp's execution was prepared. The reports read, "Ready to be an acceptable burnt-offering to God, (Polycarp) looked up to heaven, and said, "O Lord God Almighty, the Father of your beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, by whom we have received the knowledge of you, the God of angels, powers and every creature, and of all the righteous who live before you, I give you thanks that you count me worthy to be numbered among your martyrs, sharing the cup of Christ and the resurrection to eternal life, both of soul and body, through the immortality of the Holy Spirit. May I be received this day as an acceptable sacrifice, as you, the true God, have predestined, revealed to me, and now fulfilled. I praise you for all these things, I bless you and glorify you, along with the everlasting Jesus Christ, your beloved Son. To you, with him, through the Holy Ghost, be glory both now and forever. Amen."

And the holy Christian Church was strengthened by Polycarp's bold confession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ whom he called "my King and my Savior." He died in the arena confessing his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Lest you think such public confessions are only found among men, let me briefly share the account of Perpetua, a young, married woman of about 22 years of age with an infant child. She was arrested in Carthage in 202 or 203 AD. The governor Hilarianus of Carthage, North Africa, commanded Perpetua, "Offer the sacrifice for the welfare of the emperors." "I will not," returned Perpetua. "Are you a Christian?" asked Hilarianus. Her response, "Yes, I am." Perpetua, her servant girl Felicitas, and other Christians were taken to the arena where they suffered abuse from gladiators and wild animals. All were killed in the arena confessing their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

These saints of the ancient Church all confessed that they were not the Christ but ones who had been saved by the Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal salvation. All of them, in their unique ways, confessed with the lips and with their lives, "I am a Christian, one who bears the name of Jesus. He is my King and Savior." Can we not be strengthened and encouraged by their example? For we serve the same Lord Jesus who was born for us in Bethlehem.

John the Baptist was given the unique privilege to confess faith in Jesus by preaching a baptism of repentance and faith. He pointed people to Jesus. Even when everyone wanted to know more about who John was, he stubbornly refused to talk about himself. "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." In other words, don't worry about who I am. Give attention to the One who is greater than me.

And in the very next verses after today's reading, John makes an even bolder confession as to who Jesus is (John 1:29-34):

²⁹The next day (John) saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.' ... ³²And John bore witness: "I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him ... This is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' ³⁴And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."

Our day is one in which pastors and congregations are expected to be energetic, charismatic, and cutting edge. The Church is expected to attract winners and instill a winning attitude among all who attend. We don't see such a thing in John the Baptist, Polycarp, Perpetua, and the other early Christian martyrs. But what they did was confess faith in Jesus. Their confession was greater than any kind of positive thinking for they pointed to Jesus, the Lord and Savior over sin, Satan, and death.

John the Baptist pointed to Jesus. That is our noble calling and vocation as Christ's royal priesthood. In your homes, among your family, at work, with your friends, with all whom the Lord brings into your lives, confess Jesus Christ. During this Christmas season, wish people a Merry Christmas, by all means. But maybe we can do something more powerful. How about confessing, in word and life, that the Christ born in Bethlehem is my Lord and my King? For I am a Christian, one rescued from sin, Satan, and eternal death by the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is the greater One. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit unto life and joy eternal.

Jesus is Lord. That is our confession. Jesus is Lord. A blessed and Merry Christmas to you all!!

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.