

Advent 4
John the Baptist Teaches Us to Confess
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John the Baptist confesses and, in his confession, he teaches us how to confess. To confess means to speak the same. John repeats back the same message that God gives him to speak. And we, by repeating the words of John the Baptist, confess Christ. John the Baptist speaks the truth. So, when we speak what he speaks, we too confess the truth.

John confesses and does not deny, but confesses. Of course, whenever you confess, you deny something. By confessing to be a voice sent by God to prepare the way of the Lord, John must confess himself not to be the Christ. Yet, the priests and Levites sent by the Pharisees were not satisfied with this answer. “Are you Elijah?”, they ask. John certainly comes in the spirit of Elijah, so that even Jesus Christ calls him Elijah, yet, John answers, “No.” He is not Elijah sent down from heaven. “Are you the Prophet?” they then ask? John is neither the Prophet promised by Moses, whom God would raise up from among the Jews (Deuteronomy 18:15-18). That Prophet is the very Christ, whom John has already said he is not. Nor is John like the prophets of the Old Testament, who longed to see that which they prophesied, yet died before its fulfillment. John is preparing the way of the Christ who is come, who has arisen, who stands among the people! John is a voice preparing his way!

But these priests and Levites are not satisfied with this answer either. They despise John for being a voice. “If you’re just a voice and you’re not someone important like the Christ, or Elijah, or one of the prophets, then why are you baptizing? Why do you have so many people coming out to hear you?” John answers in a way saying, “Yeah, you’re right. I am just a voice. I baptize with water. But pay attention to the one whose way I prepare! He is much greater than I am, and he is already standing among you!” John of course, is speaking of Jesus Christ, true God, who has joined our human race in fulfillment of the prophecies.

Yet, the priests and Levites should not despise John for being a voice, because he is the very voice sent by God to prepare the way of Christ our Lord into our hearts. John says he baptizes with water. That’s a way of saying, “Yes, I am only a tool, like a hammer or saw.” Yet, John is not saying that his

Baptism is nothing. Rather, Jesus himself indicates that John's Baptism is from heaven (Matthew 21:25). So, while John is just a man baptizing with plain water, his Baptism is from God himself! Likewise, John is just a man, not the Christ, Elijah, or one of the prophets of old back from the dead. And he is speaking in ordinary language that even the tax-collectors, sinners, and soldiers can understand. Yet, his words are from heaven! And his message raises valleys and lowers hills to prepare the way of God's Son.

And this is indeed the way it always is. Those who consider themselves wise and important despise the voice God sends out into the world for its meager appearance, so that Isaiah the Prophet himself declares, "Who has believed what he has heard from us?" (Isaiah 53:1) Yet, those who *do* believe the voice God sends declare, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" (Romans 10:15; Isaiah 52:7). Why? Because, this good news grants forgiveness and eternal life to all who believe it! The voice is despised by those who cannot look past the man wearing camel's hair and a leather belt, eating locusts and wild honey. The voice is ignored by those who will not consider it the voice of God. Yet, Jesus says to his disciples, "The one who hears you hears me." And God himself made John the voice crying in the wilderness. This is why the Prophet Moses rebuked the people of Israel by saying, "What are we? Your grumbling is not against us, but against the LORD." (Exodus 16:8)

And so, we should not only *listen* to this voice from God, but we should repeat the words this voice proclaims, that is we should confess what he confesses to us. We should make his sermon our personal confession. St. John the Baptist and all of Holy Scripture, teach us to confess two things: 1). something about ourselves and 2). something about Christ.

First, what do John and Holy Scripture teach us to confess about ourselves? That we are sinners. Scripture tells us that John told his hearer to repent. Now, the word repent has a broad and a narrow meaning. I spoke about the broad meaning of repent last week in my sermon. The broad meaning of repent has two parts: first, sorrow over sin and second, faith in Christ. The narrow meaning of repent, however; only includes the first part: sorrow over sin. When John preaches this narrow repentance, he is telling his hearers to confess something about themselves, that they are sinners. That is why St. Matthew's Gospel records that John's hearers were confessing their sins to John in the Jordan (Matthew 3:6).

This is what Scripture consistently teaches us to confess about ourselves. Psalm 32 states, “I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,’ and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.” This is what Scripture tells us to confess about ourselves. And this is what the Voice, who prepares the way for the Lord tells us to confess. In this way, the way is made straight for Jesus.

Isaiah says that the Voice will raise valleys and flatten mountains and hills to make way for the Lord (Isaiah 40:4). Yet, this is spoken as an analogy. The way of the Lord is the way to our hearts. And the valleys are raised and the mountains flattened when we are brought to repentance, that is, when we confess that we are sinners.

Now, it is not true that all sins are the same. Some sins are worse than other sins. Some sins have worse consequences, cause more harm, drive you further from repentance, harden your hearts, and so forth. Everyone knows this. This is why you get a ticket for illegal parking, but you get put in prison for armed robbery. Yet, all sins are the same in one respect. They all separate you from God and bar you from heaven. “You must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.”, Jesus tells us. (Matthew 5:48). The Law of God makes no distinction, but declares that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. And St. James tells us that whoever keeps the whole law, but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. (James 2:10) This is what it means for the valleys to be raised and the hills be made low. We are all on the same level ground. God has imprisoned everyone under sin, so that he may have mercy on all (Romans 11:32; Galatians 3:22).

Before the judgment seat of God, it doesn't matter who is a better or worse sinner. Quibbling about that is like fighting to get on the bow or stern of the Titanic while it is sinking. No, we are all sinners. None of us can save ourselves. We all need a Savior. That is why John the Voice was sent from God first tells us to confess about ourselves that we are sinners, so that we know we need a Savior.

Now that we have confessed ourselves to be sinners, who deserve nothing but punishment, John teaches us to confess something about Christ. The very next verse after our Gospel lesson, the Evangelist writes, “The next day [John] saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.’” (John 1:29) Now, you see why it is so important that you first confess

about yourself that you are a sinner before you then confess who Christ is! If you do not confess yourself to be a sinner, then this Christ will be of no help to you. Yet, since you confess and the Voice has taught you that you are a sinner, then what this Voice teaches you to confess about the Christ is the most wonderful message your tongue can declare!

Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus is the Lamb of God, that is, he is the appointed sacrifice, who makes atonement for our sins. He takes away the sin of the world. Which sin? The sin of the world. All of it. Whatever sin there is in the world, Jesus takes it away. So, are you a sinner in the world? Then, Jesus has taken your sin away! He bore it as he went to the cross. His dying took it away forever. Now, through faith in this Lamb of God, you are free from the eternal consequences of your sin. You have no fear of hell. You are forgiven and redeemed.

The voice is not finished with his task by only teaching you to confess that you are a sinner. He must also teach you to confess about the Christ, that he takes away your sins. This is why the Prophet Isaiah proclaims, “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.” This is the instruction God gives to John, the Voice in the wilderness, to make straight the way of Christ Jesus into our hearts. And this is the instruction God gives to every voice he sends to proclaim the Gospel. Our hearts are not prepared to receive Christ simply by confessing about ourselves that we are sinners. Our hearts are prepared to receive Christ when we confess about *him* that he takes our sins away.

“Cry to her” our God says, “that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.” God’s warfare against us is over, because his wrath is taken away. Our iniquities are forgiven. We have received double for our sins, meaning, not only has the price of our sins been paid on the cross, so that we do not have to suffer the punishment for them, but we also receive the reward as heirs of the Kingdom of God. All this is communicated to us sinners by the words, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” This is why we not only confess our sins each and every Sunday, but we confess these same words of John the Baptist, “O Christ,

thou Lamb of God that takest away the sin of the world, have mercy upon us!" This is the confession of those whose hearts have made way for the Lord. This is the confession of those who are saved. Amen.