

“DOUBLE CONFESSION”
Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13
A Sermon by John Thomason
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Suppose someone asks to sit down with you for a face-to-face visit, and the conversation begins with the other person saying, “I have a confession to make.” I’m guessing that an opening statement like that one will immediately grab your attention and may also trigger your anxiety. What exactly is this person is going to confess? Is it a minor mistake, like forgetting to make a dinner reservation; or is it a major act of wrongdoing, like cheating on a spouse?

Either way, in our common speech this is what we mean by “making a confession”: it is an admission of misconduct and guilt. Sometimes people make confessions in personal settings – to their family members or friends, as in the hypothetical conversation I’ve just described. Or, sometimes people make confessions in legal settings – as in a police office or a law court. And then, people also make confessions in religious settings – for Roman Catholics, in a confessional booth to a priest; or for Protestants, in a sanctuary alongside other worshipers through a corporate liturgy.

More than any other time of the Church year, Lent is a season specifically designated for making confession. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, when worshipers are called to confess their sin and wear ashes as a sign of repentance. And then, on each Sunday in Lent, the opening part of our service includes a time for self-examination and confession. Even though this takes place in public worship, it’s expected that you will keep your personal inventory private. No one around you is asking you for details. But still, you are called to make confession during Lent. Confession is understood in this context to be a negative term, as an admission of sin and guilt.

And yet, here we are on the 1st Sunday in Lent, and there is not a single word in today’s Scripture lessons about confessing our sins. To be sure, all of the readings call us to confession, but they call us to a different kind of confession. They demonstrate that a confession can be a positive statement as well as a negative one. In the Bible and Christian tradition, the word “confession” can refer either to an admission of sin or to an affirmation of faith. A confession can say, “I fail; I fall short of the glory of God”; or it can say, “I believe; I have faith in God.” All of today’s Scripture lessons depict this second type of confession.

I find this fascinating, because you and I tend to associate Lent only with the first type of confession. Lent is a penitential season, so during Lent we focus on confessing our sins, right? But what these Scriptures suggest is that Lent calls for a double confession – not just an admission of sin, but an affirmation of faith. Yes, Lent is a time to “fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun” and say, “O Lord, have mercy on me”; but it is also a time to rise up on my feet and say, “Here I stand. This is what I believe about God.”

Let’s be honest: it is a challenge for many of us to declare what we believe. We may be just as uneasy about confessing our faith out loud as we are confessing our sin out loud. You and I are accustomed to confessing our faith only in liturgical settings, within the friendly confines of the Church. We confess our faith individually at the time of our Confirmation. We confess our faith corporately when we recite together the Apostles’ Creed. But beyond making these

ritualized statements, you and I may be speechless – either unable or unwilling to confess our faith in a public setting.

The reasons for our reluctance vary. Some of us aren't really sure about the content of our faith – what the Church believes as a community or what we believe as individuals. How can we confess a faith with which we are unfamiliar or uncertain? And then, even if we are clear about our convictions, we may regard religious belief as a private matter which we have no business imposing upon other people. We worry about how others will react if we share with them the specifics of our faith. And then, some of us may wonder why a confession of faith has any importance at all. Does it make a dime's worth of difference whether I believe in the Holy Trinity or the second coming of Christ? Do these doctrines really make me a better person and make the world a better place? Are confessions of faith just a bunch of words, or do these words have real significance and power?

So, with these questions in mind, let's turn to the three lessons for the 1st Sunday in Lent and see what they suggest to us about making a confession of faith.

The passage we read from Deuteronomy is part of a long speech by Moses just before his death. The people of Israel are on their last stop in the wilderness before they enter the promised land of Canaan. Moses gives the Israelites instructions for a covenant ceremony to be carried out once they enter the land and start producing food. They are to take the first fruits of their harvest, put them in a basket, take them to Jerusalem, and place them before the altar of God. And then, their actions are to be punctuated with words, with a confession of faith. All Israelites are expected to recite the same creed; but each Israelite is asked to recite it individually, not as a part of a group.

Now, what stands out about this creed is that it is not a list of doctrines in the manner of our Christian creeds; rather, it assumes the form of a narrative. The worshiper isn't asked to say, "I believe that God is omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient." After all, does this sound like the language of an uneducated farmer in ancient Israel? No, of course not. So the worshiper is asked to make a confession of faith in more down-to-earth terms, to remember and re-tell a story he or she has heard many times before.

The story begins with a bit of genealogy: "My ancestor was a wandering Aramean" (Deuteronomy 26:5), referring, of course, to Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. The story continues with the migration of the Israelites to Egypt, where they grow in number, become a threat to the Egyptians, and are subjected to slavery. At this point, the story of God's chosen people seems to come to a screeching stop. But the story doesn't end here; the most important part of the story still lies ahead. The Israelites cry out to God for rescue from bondage. God hears their cry, delivers them out of Egypt, and gives them the gift of a "rich and fertile land" (v. 10).

Now, what makes this story a confession of faith is that the key events recounted here – God's promise to the patriarchs, the exodus from Egypt, and the entrance to the land – are the work of the Lord. The worshiper is remembering and reciting all that God has done on Israel's behalf, including God's provision of land. The Israelites' new home is not something they have acquired by conquest; no, like everything else, the land is a gift from God. And so, the worshiper concludes his confession of faith with a personal prayer of thanksgiving. The Lord

has done all this, “so now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me” (v. 10a). The one who remembers what God has done responds with deeds and words of thanksgiving.

It strikes me that this ancient confession of faith can serve as a model for us today. When you and I are called to confess our faith, we typically refer to a checklist of doctrines and concern ourselves with right belief. Do I believe in one God in three persons? Do I believe that Jesus Christ is fully human and fully divine? Do I believe that Christ’s death atoned for our sins and reconciled us to God? Do I believe that God raised Jesus from the dead and guarantees to raise us with him? Down the checklist we go, hoping we answer each question correctly. Well, if this is what it means to confess our faith, it’s no wonder that some of us are so hesitant to do it. The truth is, we’re not sure what we believe or whether we believe the right things, so we leave these kinds of confessions to the theologians.

But what if a confession of faith is something more immediate, concrete, and personal than a set of doctrines? What if it means what it meant in ancient Israel? What if it simply means telling a story – God’s story, our story, and the story of what God has done for us? In confessing our faith, it is less important to define correctly who God is than to describe the difference God has made in our lives and to give thanks for that difference.

When you stop and think about it, this is how confessions of faith are framed in many of the hymns in our hymnbook. “To God be the glory, great things he hath done! So loved he the world that he gave us his Son.” . . . “This is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior all the day long.” . . . “I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see.” You and I love to sing these hymns because we could have written the lyrics ourselves. God has done in our own lives what God has done for the whole world. The story of salvation is not just someone else’s story; it’s our story. We have experienced for ourselves God’s amazing grace and the spiritual freedom that God’s grace produces. When you and I put this experience into words, we are making a confession of faith. It may not be perfectly crafted or eloquently expressed, but it is real and powerful.

However, you may still be asking: “Does my confession of faith have to be made out loud, in public? Why can’t I just keep my convictions to myself and avoid declaring my beliefs to other people? Actions speak louder than words, and I’d prefer to let my actions speak.”

Well, notice what the apostle Paul says about this in today’s reading from Romans. “God’s message,” he says, “is near you – on your lips and in your heart. If you confess that Jesus is Lord and believe that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:8b-9). Paul is saying that inward conviction and outward expression are inseparable. Faith involves what Thomas Ehrich calls “total engagement.” “Faith,” Ehrich says, “is a matter of head and heart, lips and life, expressing conviction and living that conviction. It isn’t just intellectual assent or liturgical practice. It’s giving oneself wholly to God.”

Let me ask you: have you ever noticed how easy it is to be critical of other Christians who “talk the talk” but don’t “walk the walk”? But what about those of us who “walk the walk” but don’t “talk the talk”? Are you and I justified in keeping silent about our faith, when our audible words could have a powerful impact?

During the rise of the Third Reich in Germany, the Nazi party attempted to unite all Protestant churches into a single national Church that would be an instrument of Nazi propaganda and politics. A resistance movement arose at that time which sought to maintain the Church's independence from the State and reaffirm the historic Christian faith. I've always found it fascinating that this resistance movement was called the "Confessing Church." Make no mistake about it: when people in that movement confessed their faith, they weren't just paying lip service to Christianity; they were risking their very lives to speak their truth. It was an act of total engagement. For some of us, keeping silent about our faith is a matter of personal modesty. But the story of the Confessing Church reminds us that keeping silence can also be an act of cowardice, that our verbal witness is terribly important, and that our confessions of faith can have awesome power.

If you have any doubt this, look finally at today's Gospel lesson, which is Luke's account of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness. A lot of interpreters and preachers focus on the temptations themselves and try to draw parallels with our own experience of temptation. What they often miss is the underlying issue, which has to do with the object of our faith. In each of the three temptations, Satan attempts to strike a bargain with Jesus: "If you worship and serve me," Satan says, "I will give you everything you could possibly want or need." In each instance Jesus responds with faith in God and the confession of that faith. And in each instance Jesus makes his confession of faith by quoting Scripture. "The Scripture says, 'Man cannot live on bread alone.'" (Luke 4:4). "The Scripture says, 'Worship the Lord your God and serve only him!'" (v. 8). "The Scripture says, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" (v. 12).

Do you hear that refrain? "The Scripture says . . ." "The Scripture says . . ." Now, we all know that Scripture can be used inappropriately, to oppose obedience to God and undermine the purposes of God, as the devil demonstrates by quoting from one of the psalms. Even the grossest errors may be blessed by some misused biblical text. But that fact should not cause the people of God to shun the use of Scripture to enlighten and discipline faith. The Church, armed with the Spirit and with the Scriptures, will not be overcome by evil but will overcome evil with good.

Friends, during this Lenten season, let us confess our faith – telling God's story and our story, telling it openly and courageously, trusting in God to make our confession a source of power for us and transformation for the world.