

## **“Repent and bear fruit!” Mat 3:1-12**

**In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea,<sup>2</sup> "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."<sup>3</sup> For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.'"<sup>4</sup> Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.<sup>5</sup> Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him,<sup>6</sup> and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.<sup>7</sup> But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?<sup>8</sup> Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.<sup>9</sup> And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.<sup>10</sup> Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.<sup>11</sup> "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.<sup>12</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."**

We live in this beautiful time. In the time when we can appreciate how faithful our God is. How wonderful are His deeds. He gave this promise that He Himself will save humanity from sin, devil and death. He kept sending His prophets to remind about this promise, to keep our hopes alive, and when “the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman ... so that we might receive adoption as sons.”

Two millennia ago He fulfilled His promise. But then He gave another one – the promise about His return on the Last Day, about restoration of entire creation in its goodness, about new heaven and new earth, which He has prepared for those whom He has chosen from before the creation of the world. For you, for His adopted children. Now we live with this hope and assurance that whatever our God has promised, He will also deliver.

Today we heard the apostle and evangelist Matthew describing for us the ministry and the message of John the Baptist. We usually think about John the Baptist as one who went before Jesus and prepared people for His coming. That’s true, but that’s not all. Relevance of John’s message applies not only to its immediate context, to those to whom he spoke, it has much to do also with us.

We’ll see that what John was preaching he was preaching also to us. He has some harsh words to say, and I’m afraid that today we’ll get our share. I’d propose that today we try to answer two questions. First, *what* was John the Baptist preaching to us, and *how* can we live up to his demands. *What* was he preaching to us and *how* can we live up to his demands.

When Jesus gave His testimony about John, He said that John the Baptist was more “than a prophet. This was he of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.' Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.” (Mat 11:9-11) This testimony alone should urge us to pay a careful attention to what John was preaching.

So, what was John preaching? “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” We hear these words and probably they don’t make our hearts suddenly run faster. But should they? Yes, if we could hear them in a way John’s audience heard them, they could make our hearts beat faster. “Repent” and “kingdom of heaven” – these two beg for an explanation if we want to hear the message of John as others heard it.

*What do we imagine when we hear word ‘repent’?* What kind of associations do we have? Repentance of our sins. Realizing that we have done wrong and regretting it. May be even confessing. But this is not what ‘repentance’ meant in John message or for his audience. We could summarize the meaning of this word as ‘turning from unbelief to belief, from dead idols to living God’. 2x

John wasn’t just urging “Guys, please, understand that you have done wrong, you have sinned against the Lord, please, regret it!” No, what he was demanding was a total change of life. Reorientation of life. Putting true God in the very center, and all the other things in periphery. He was preaching the 1<sup>st</sup> commandment.

Urging to live a life for which God has created us for. Trusting in Him, acknowledging that we receive everything from Him, bearing good fruit, serving people in our lives with all we have and know. This is what John meant saying ‘repent’. He required to reorient our entire lives towards God and our neighbor.

Now, about ‘*kingdom of heaven*’. What do we picture when we hear the word ‘kingdom’. Usually it could be some kind of geographical territory, country, state, where certain king rules. This is not what John meant and this is not what is meant by kingdom of God in the Bible.

Much better translation would be a ‘reign’. Active reign of God. For John’s listeners, as it should also be for us, coming of the Kingdom of God, or coming of the reign of God, was associated with His real, historical coming. Coming to be present among us.

When the Jews, who were brought up reading the Old Testament heard about the active reign of God they had quite certain picture in their mind. From their own past. About an event which scared their fathers till death. The one, which they still remembered with shakes even one and half millennia later.

Yes, we are talking about the grand theophany at the mount Sinai. When the mountain was covered with thick clouds and when the Lord descended on it in a pillar of fire. When entire nation of Israel saw it, and heard it, and plead to Moses: “You

speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.” (Ex. 20:19)

This was the active reign of God. That was His coming as John’s listeners pictured it. God coming to us, in history, with His might and power. Visibly, experientially. Amidst of us. Now we can see why this would require repentance, and reorientation of our entire life.

If God, the Creator and Ruler of the Universe is coming and will be here soon, if His active reign is at the hand, we are to be ready, we are to live for Him, namely, living for our neighbors. We need to be ready, we need to repent, to change our lives.

It applies to everyone. It applied to everyone who came to John. Even national and religious leaders Sadducees and Pharisees came to John to receive his baptism, but what did they get instead? Quite harsh words.

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our father,” for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.”

We may wonder, how did John dare to say it?! It sounds so offensive and so threatening to those who heard it. Right? How did he dare to say it? Perhaps they could become his followers, but what he did, scared them away. Who would like a preacher like John in their church today!

He had no tolerance, he had no tact, he didn’t know what people liked. It seems he wasn’t even interested in what people liked. He spoke unpleasant things. He spoke like believing that God really is angry about our sins, and that He is coming to judge His creation.

But, in fact, all preachers should be like John. To deliver clearly and without hesitation the message of the Lord. Repent and bear fruit! And don’t presume that there is any reason this message doesn’t apply to us.

Those who came to John, were pious people. Living much more in accord with God’s law than we do. Besides, they were descendants of Abraham, children of promise. God Himself had made covenant with their forefather.

And what did John say, this tactless preacher? Don’t even think about it! Don’t try to justify yourself, don’t make any excuses, don’t put your trust on to anything else, but repent and bear good fruits of repentance.

We could think about many excuse for us. O, yes, we can. Many of us are born in Christian families, many are raised as Christians, we were confirmed, we come to church, we do many good things. Or others could say, we have lived decent lives, we have helped so many, we have been exemplary people, faithful in marriage, honest in relations with others and so on.

Why would John rebuke us so aggressively? Who he thinks he is? The Lord Himself said that - John is more than a prophet. The one sent by God, to call us to repentance, to prepare for Jesus coming. We can't but listen to him carefully.

We better think about why can people today get so upset if someone shows them their sins? Why? Because our culture for quite a while has revolted against true God and everything related with Him. It hasn't stopped indoctrinating everyone that you are gods ourselves.

That everyone is qualified to decide for themselves what is good and what is bad. You don't need God. Don't dare to tell them that there are someone higher than they. Don't dare to tell them that what they do is sin and God is angry with them. Don't.

Don't dare to tell them what God has, in fact, sent you to tell them. Jesus bother James wrote: "If anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death." (Jam 5:19-20) What a gift, salvation. No, don't you dare!

And you know what, - when we hear these talks often enough and long enough, we start to believe them. That's what has happened. So many churches have forgotten the message of repentance and the Gospel of forgiveness.

Instead they have accepted what Satan through hostile, secular culture is imposing. Accept every sin, tolerate it, embrace it! Don't dare to call sin a sin. Don't be so unloving, be loving, meaning... let your brothers sin and wander into death, don't try to save them.

Instead of calling to repentance, then we have a call for acceptance (acceptance of sin, of course). Instead of the Gospel of forgiveness, we have other gospel - 'gospel' or tolerance. But as apostle Paul said: "There is no other Gospel."

It is not a pleasant thing when someone calls you to repentance. No. You know it and I know it. Then we are reminded that we are not gods, that there is someone higher than we. That we are accountable. This is what people today dislike the most. Being reminded that they are not gods and that there will be consequences to their actions.

But just think for a while. Let's try to see things as they are. If we are told by a doctor that we have a terminal disease and if you don't take proper action, you are going to die, and then, then you are offered a treatment that can help you. What would be our reaction? Would we be offended and begin to rebuke the doctor saying - how to you dare to be so unloving?!

It doesn't make sense. Right? But this is exactly how we often react when we hear the message of John the Baptist addressed to us today. What do you think, how did John feel when he had to say all these things to many people, who came to him?

I bet it wasn't easy. It is never easy. Wouldn't he prefer to tell them – you all are just fine, you are so exemplary people that God probably is happy with you. Don't worry. Wouldn't it be much easier?

We need to decide whose disciples we want to be – Jesus or secular culture. Should we listen to secular culture when it says to us “Shush!”, don't preach repentance! Is this culture going to baptize us with the Holy Spirit and fire on the Last Day? No.

We should not listen to the world when it says “Shush”, we need to respond with “repent and bear good fruit”! We are the voice of God. We, God's people. You are the voice of God for others, whom you meet in your life. “Repent and bear good fruit!” If we don't speak truth, if we don't call sin a sin, if we don't urge people to reorient their lives, who will? There is no one else. We are the last line of defense, if you will. You are...

Besides, Jesus begun His ministry with exactly the same words: “The time is fulfilled, and *the kingdom of God is at hand*; *repent* and believe in the gospel.” (Mar 1:15) He came with the same message - ‘repent’. Reorient your life! Bear the fruit! Jesus didn't bring other message saying – it doesn't matter who you are and what you do, that's fine, God is pleased with you anyway. No, - repent! Bear fruit!

When you don't like this message, think for a while – why is God saying it to you? Does He want to humiliate you? Does He want you to feel bad? None of these.

God didn't just send John to call us to repentance. He came Himself. Creator become one of us, so that He can deliver this message to us in a way that we can understand His true intentions.

That is - to save us from death, to bring us into His eternal kingdom. He knew that the wages of sin is death, and that we all are going to die eternally unless we repent and are saved. That's why He came Himself. In person.

He came to us to speak not just with words, but with His deeds. He came to show how great is a power of sin over us, and to reveal how much He loves us. When He came to us, as a man, He delivered Himself into our hands. He allowed our sin to show its ugliness to full extent.

What did we do with the one who brought us truth and healing... you know what we did. We betrayed Him, we humiliated Him, we made Him suffer and then we killed Him. This is what sin wants to do with God. With God who comes to give His life in exchange for ours. That's why we need to hear: “Repent and bear good fruit!” This is what John the Baptist is telling to us.

Even more – “now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” We all are accountable before our Creator. We are like His orchard. Every tree that doesn't bear



good fruit, that doesn't live according its purpose, will be cut down and thrown into the fire. And it is simple. If you don't fulfill the purpose for which you were created, then why would your Creator preserve you?! Why? There is no reason.

We tend to think about the Last Day, about the second coming of Christ as something distant. It may still be distant, it may take decades, or centuries before it happens. But for us it could happen any minute. Literally. We'll encounter our Lord when our life is over. We never know the day and the minute. That's why we can't postpone our repentance. It has to be done now.

If there are things we are guilty of, we need to ask for forgiveness, today. If there are broken relationships, which we can help to restore, we need to do it, today. If there are people that have sinned against us, we can go and tell "I forgive you", today. These are our good fruits. "The axe is laid to the root", there may be no tomorrow, we need to reorient our lives today, we need to bear these fruit today. Each of us.

But then the question remains. *How can* we do it? How can we repent and reorient our lives so that God is in the center? How can we forgive and ask for forgiveness? How could we even want it?

We can't on our own. We are too much interested in ourselves, we want us to be in the center of our lives. Only when we find what God the Father has done, it can change us. For He has put us, He has put you in the center of His life. How?

Listen what John said: "I baptize you with water for repentance... but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." God's glory and His reign still have to be revealed and it will happen when Jesus returns in divine glory. But we have already been baptized with the Holy Spirit.

When you are baptized in the name of Triune God, you are baptized with the Holy Spirit. You receive the Holy Spirit. Sometimes we think, that the Holy Spirit is something you get once and for all. Something we can possess. No, He isn't a thing. He is a person. He is God. When you receive the Holy Spirit, it is not just receiving some kind of gift. He is God coming to you.

When the Holy Spirit comes and abides with you, you are received in the communion with God. With the Father and with the Son. Then you are put in the center of God's life. You are included in divine fellowship with the Father and the Son. This is how God Himself enables you to reorient your life. He does it for you. He came in person to deliver you message of repentance, He commanded you to reorient your life, and when the Holy Spirit dwells in you, He Himself changes you heart.

He helps to see our sins and to repent, He helps to reorient our lives and to bear good fruit. With His help everything is possible. Repent, and bear good fruit. Today. Amen.