

“No Jesus without John” Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.””

Today is second Sunday in Advent and we keep waiting. And we keep reflecting on what we are waiting for. For the return of Jesus Christ. For the Last Day, the Day of our Lord, the day of great fear and even greater joy, for the restoration of all creations, when all the evil, and pain and sufferings will end, and when God’s chosen people will see their God face to face.

This is our ultimate hope and this is what makes our lives joyful, this is what gives us peace regardless of difficulties that we may experience now, for you know where you are heading. To your true home, to be with your true Father.

This our hope is firm and unshakable, and not because we are such great people, not because we have lived such perfect lives. Not at all! But because Jesus Christ, true man and true God has called you with His Spirit, He has made you a member of His Divine family, the Church, in your baptism, and He has promised that you will be with Him, forever.

Today in our Gospel reading we read about John the Baptist and how he begun preparing people for the first coming of Jesus Christ. Initially Luke mentions quite a few names: Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Anna and Caiaphas.

Who were they? Real people who lived and reign at the time when John begun his preaching. We know of them from other historical sources as well.

In the 1st century people didn’t say ‘this happened in year 29AD.’ Instead they referred to years of reign of their kings. Thus Luke didn’t write ‘in year 29AD’, instead he mentions 15th year of Roman emperor Tiberius and also several regional rulers and two Jewish high priests.

As we read this it serves us as a reminder that we are talking about historical events. We are not here to satisfy our private, subjective spiritual needs, but to look at history, at what the true God did in our history, in particular times and places.

Our ultimate hope is built on historical facts, on what God did in Jesus Christ, on Jesus' death and resurrection. As God raised Jesus from the dead, He will raise also you, to have new bodies and to live in His presence.

... the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

This is how Luke compares John with the prophets of the Old Testament. We often read in the Old Testament prophetic books, that the word of God came to one of prophets. How exactly it happened, we don't know.

In the case of John it was not about distant future anymore, it was about immediate present. He was preparing people for coming of someone, who already stood among them.

John “went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.””

The prophet Isaiah wrote these words seven centuries before John begun his ministry. And as Luke shows it, Isaiah was referring to John the Baptist. That he will be the one, who will prepare the way of the Lord.

Luke doesn't quote Isaiah's words fully. But there is somethings we need to hear. When Isaiah prophesized about coming of the Lord, he wrote, that “The glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” (Isa 40:5)

What words! Do you know what the glory of the Lord is? It is His presence. The presence of the holy God. What Isaiah was saying is that once the way is prepared, the Lord God Himself will come among us.

Remember, at the mount Sinai, once the Tent of Meeting was prepared the glory of the Lord indwelled in it. The same happened once the Temple was finished in Jerusalem by Solomon, the glory of the Lord filled the Temple. And the same was prophesized by Isaiah.

Once the way of the Lord is prepared, the holy God Himself will come, His glory will be reveled and all flesh will see it. This is what John was sent to do. To prepare the way of the Lord, the Holy God Himself.

Good question to ask at this point would be – how did John do it? How did He prepare the way of the Lord? By calling people to repentance. As Luke wrote John was “**proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.**”

John’s baptism wasn’t the same as our baptism in the name of the Triune God. John’s baptism didn’t deliver forgiveness of sins as the Church’s baptism does.

When you were baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, then all your sins were forgiven, the gift of the Holy Spirit was given to you and you were made a child of the Triune God, a member of Jesus’ family.

John, on the other hand, proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. To put it in different words John proclaimed the need for repentance, he called people to admit their sinfulness so that they would be ready to receive the forgiveness of sins, once it is offered through Jesus Christ.

Why would all of this be important for us? Because here we can see how God’s salvation works. If you want to be ready for Jesus, first you need to hear John. This is really important. Dr. Martin Luther realized that there are two ways God speaks to us, and one on them has to come first.

Luther named them “Law and Gospel”. How do they function? First, we need to hear God’s law, or we can say God’s eternal and holy will for our lives. His demands for our lives. His expectation for us. The Law is not something imposed on humanity, it is a very description of who we are created to be.

So, the Law comes first and when we hear the Law, then something rather unpleasant happens. Our sinfulness is revealed. Once we hear what God expects from us, we are accused, because this is not what we want to be and to do. Our sinful hearts rebel against our Creator, demanding our will to happen.

You can see it so well when we think about the most important commandments. Love your God with all your heart, fear to lose Him more than anything, be with Him, whenever He invites you to His Divine Service, read His word, listen to Him, and lead your life according to His will.

Do we do all of this? Do we even want to do this? Or we prefer to believe that you don’t actually have to do all of this... This is what the Law does, it shows how much our hearts are against our Creator’s will. He see our hearts, and what He sees will be revealed on the Last Day.

Once we begin to realize how much our desires, thoughts, words and action anger our Creator, how rebellious we are against Him, the Holy Spirit leads us to repentance, and only then we begin to desire God’s forgiveness.

Malachi wrote: “How can I endure the day of His coming?” He will be like a fire. If God sees my heart and if I am accountable for all my thoughts and desires, who can help me to stand in His presence? Who can save me from this purifying fire?

This is where God speaks His good news to you, His Gospel. Yes, you deserve God’s wrath, but because Jesus Christ, the Son of God, became man and took all your sins upon Himself, He can offer you the forgiveness.

This is what He desires to do. This is why He came, so that He could save you from God’s wrath. He offers to take your sins and count them as His, and in exchange He gives you His holiness and His righteousness.

If you accept what Jesus offers, something unbelievable happens. When God looks at Jesus on the Cross, He sees your sins, and when He looks at you, He sees Jesus’ holiness. This is such a wonderful exchange.

This is why John was sent to preach repentance, so that people would be ready to receive this wonderful exchange. This is why Jesus sent His apostles, so that they can preach the Law and the Gospel, so that all people from all nations could come to repentance and to rejoice in His forgiveness.

This is what the Church is about. We are here to proclaim God’s Law first, to bring people to repentance and when people begin to realize their situation, to deliver them the forgiveness in Jesus name.

What John did, is so important for us. Sometimes we are passionate to bring people to Christ, but we begin from the wrong end. We offer them the forgiveness and they don’t need it. And we wonder why?

For we are bringing them such a wonderful news, the forgiveness and eternal life, given in Jesus name. We try to be so nice and welcoming, but our efforts are ignored. Why? Because the Law and repentance has to come first.

People need to be aware of their state before God. If someone doesn’t realize their sinfulness, why would they desire God’s forgiveness? Sure, today’s society has made our task harder, for so many things which are contrary to God’s will are being accepted by society as a norm.

And I’m not even talking about the first three commandment. Disobedience to those with authority are called more modern relationships. Abortions - a choice. Sexual promiscuity disguised as freedom. Greed masked as competitiveness. Lies presented as eloquence. Coveting of what you don’t have, as great motivation.

We live in times where people are encouraged to be like gods, choosing their own good and evil. Of course, it doesn’t work, not even in a short term, but if your eyes are fixed on yourself, you can’t see it.

But for those few who repent of their sins, and long for God's forgiveness, for those these wonderful words are addressed as the greatest comfort: "The glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it."

To you it has already been revealed. In Jesus Christ. God revealed His glory in human flesh. So that you can know Him and His heart for you. God revealed His glory in sufferings of Jesus, and on the Cross. He revealed how much He loves His little rebellious creatures, and what He has done so that we can be with Him.

God's glory is revealed to you when you hear God's words of love, when you receive His forgiveness already here, and when you are united with Him by His Spirit. For you it is a reality already now.

Rejoice and take comfort in it, and know that the final Day of the Lord is near.

Amen.