Matthew 3:2-3 2“Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near!” 3Yes, this is he of whom this was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: A voice of one crying out in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight.”

Here is a question to ask you. Would you have gone to see and hear John the Baptist? Would you have listened to his message and become a part of the numbers that were baptized by him?

Now remember, John preached and baptized in the wilderness. There was no fine church building, no shelter from the elements, no climate controlled heating as you listened, and only the dirt to sit on. When it came to baptism, he did so in the Jordan River. It would have been cold and muddy. I don’t think he provided any towels to dry off with nor a change of clothes once you were done. Oh, and I don’t think his services were only one hour. When you went it was going to be the better part of a day.

His message was really the same message that is heard today in God’s churches, at least I hope so. That’s what we will do today. We will contemplate the message of John and what it was all about. Our theme will be: **THE CALL TO REPENT.**

It is clear that our text defines that John is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah that said that just before the Messiah of God was revealed a prophet would appear who would prepare the Messiah’s way. That is what John was doing, he was preparing the way for the Savior to be revealed. For that matter, John was aware of the fact that the Savior would be seen by him, would be identified by him, because as he said later in this text the one who was coming after him was greater than him and would bring a baptism that was a genuine means of grace for the people of God. John knew the Messiah, the Savior of God was on his way and that means that John was clear on what he was preaching and why.

So what did John preach? He called out, **“Repent.”** Such an interesting word. It is a word that at its base meaning says: “change your mind.” It was a call to start thinking differently, to begin to look at life and the world in a different way, especially your life and world. By the way, do you see the sadness in what John is preaching? I say that because true repentance is something that can only be because God has worked in your heart and mind to chase away the darkness and bring the light of the wonder of God into play. I say that John’s ministry was sad because in truth, John was preaching to a people who should have had the word of God and the right way of thinking to begin with. All their life the Jewish people had before them the truth of God’s Word, the messages of his Prophets, the daily visible reminder in the Temple and its sacrifices of what their faith was all about. They were a people who were supposed to be thinking God’s way in the first place, and yet here is John bringing them this message of “Repent.” Change your way of thinking! Get back to what God would have you be! How sad that such could be for a people surrounded by the wonder and revelation of God!

Isn’t that same sadness found in the church today? Should a Pastor today, the spokesman for the Lord, be in a position where he has to tell you to repent? Let me answer that question by sharing with you something I recently read. In my studies I ran across these words from Prof. Becker, written in his Commentary on Revelation. Needless to say, these words definitely caught my attention. He wrote, *“To repent” literally means “to change one’s mind.” In the strictest sense, repentance is the change of mind that takes place when a person no longer desires or expects to be saved through his own works, but wishes instead to be saved through the work of Christ. In other words, repentance is the change that takes place when one becomes a Christian. However, because Christians, too, still have the Old Adam, the ‘change of mind’ is wavering and imperfect. Repentance needs to continue and to be renewed in them every day. This need is especially acute where strong influences are striving to draw them away from the faith and love they have toward Christ. A lack of daily repentance may lead finally to a complete loss of faith” (pg. 48-49).*

Wow! There is a truth we need to contemplate. Repentance is not just a once in a while thing, but rather is a daily thing, a spiritual necessity that keeps our eyes and hearts focused on the truth of our salvation in Jesus. We are to practice repentance to keep our faith alive and well, because just like the people of John’s day we forget the wonder and marvel of God. We forget the gift found in Jesus and forget to treasure Jesus as our hope and foundation in all. I believe the first sign of our forgetting the call to repent is when we figure we can forget church, when church is not our habit but rather we have to break a habit to go to church. That’s the beginning to a dying faith! John called for repentance because faith had been allowed to die, die even among a people who were supposed to belong to the Lord. We too, call for repentance because we too allow faith to die in our hearts though we are indeed to belong to the Lord and be his grateful children.

Note the urgency of John’s message: **“Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near.”** The time of the Messiah had arrived. With the coming of the Messiah was the true revelation of the kingdom of heaven. I have to tell you, in the next year, John’s own life would be cut short. A couple of years after that Jesus would find himself on the cross dying for the sins of the world. After that, events would unfold that would cause the persecution of the new Christian faith and many who heard John and turned to Jesus found their lives brought to an end. In about 40 years the Romans would march on Jerusalem and level the city, thus destroying the Temple they had and it would never be rebuilt. The kingdom that Jesus brought changed the world. The message that Jesus brought changed the world.

What is this Kingdom? It is based on the fact that Jesus Christ is God and Lord, Savior and King, who rules eternally over all things for the good of his church and children. The Kingdom of Jesus is one of Grace. It is founded on the fact that God’s love brought this Savior to our world to become the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. This Kingdom of Grace is a reality because Jesus rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, lives and rules eternally. You might ask, “Where is this kingdom?” But in so doing it is clear that you have already forgotten a great deal of what our King has taught. Think of the parables where Jesus spoke of the King or the Master who went away for a long time, leaving his servants in charge. It is not a visible kingdom, but a spiritual kingdom based on the wonder and joy of the Gospel of Jesus. There will be a day, the great Day of Judgment when this kingdom will become visible. On that day, if you do not have Jesus in your heart it will be too late to be a part of it. That’s when the Kingdom of Grace becomes the Kingdom of Triumph. If you know when it is that God shall call you from this world or when Jesus Christ will appear again, then go ahead, ignore Jesus, cast aside his call and love, live your life like you don’t need him, but be aware that this will be to your own demise and damnation. The kingdom of Jesus is now. The time to hear and believe is now. It is why we celebrate the life and wonder of Jesus on a regular basis.

By the way, if you don’t believe that you can be cut off from this kingdom then what do you make of John’s words to the religious leaders of his day, to those who in truth rejected the plain and true revelation of God’s grace for a religion of work-righteousness? He said this, **“You offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8Therefore produce fruit in keeping with repentance! 9Do not think of saying to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones. 10Already the ax is ready to strike the root of the trees. So every tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 11I baptize you with water for repentance. But the one who comes after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12His winnowing shovel is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clean out his threshing floor. He will gather his wheat into the barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”**

Those words remind us that just outward living, pious lifestyle and religious fervor are not enough. For all of those things were true of these men John is speaking to. They strove mightily to keep the Law of God as they saw it. They worked hard at piety and religious perfection, going about with God’s name and God’s Word always displayed before men. But they were empty shells. Jesus would later call them “whitewashed tombs.” They did not grasp the truth of the law nor the truth of their sinful, horrid, really godless lives. They had no real repentance and no real fruits of faith in keeping with repentance. If you pay attention to John’s words it is clear that John tells them that the end result of what they were now doing would be that they were going to be burned up with the chaff in unquenchable fire. They were headed to eternal hell.

Please remember that Jesus is the Savior from sin. Sin is a reality and fact in this life and when God tells us that something is wicked and evil then it is something to be avoided. And when God tells us that here is what is good and right and you fail to do that it is sin. When God tells us that here is what we are to do and we fail to perfectly do what God commands that is sin. Devastating, horrible sin. We cannot indulge in our sin and still be followers of the Lord God. That is the whole point behind the call for repentance. To change your ways, your heart, and your thinking to the wonder and ways of God.

Recently in my social media pages a post has been circulating. It says this: *“Yes, Jesus hung out with prostitutes and drunkards and outcasts. Here’s the thing though—by the time Jesus was finished with these people, they weren’t prostitutes or drunkards or outcasts anymore. Jesus came to transform people, not to indulge them. Christianity is about surrender, not comfort. We are to align ourselves to his standard, not the other way around.”* Those are pretty profound words. Those words really sum up the point of repentance. But repentance is not your work and accomplishment, it is the Lord’s. The Lord grants you his Holy Spirit who wakes you up, helps you to see your sin and then grants you the strength and ability to work at resisting sin and temptation. More than that, the Holy Spirit leads you to grasp that when we fall short, when we fail to be perfect and holy, that Jesus is there to forgive our sin. But note how this works together. Jesus forgives our sins and at the same time Jesus calls on us to get rid of our sins. You can’t declare sin your right and privilege and still declare that Jesus is your Lord and Savior. The winnowing fork is in his hand and the burning fire is ready for the chaff?

John the Baptist served a great purpose in the salvation plan of our Savior. I believe every true preacher of God’s Word and of the gospel of Jesus does the very same thing. They give us the true message of God. That’s what you need to look for in God’s messengers, his true message. Messages about sin and the need to repent. Messages of your Savior and his dying for you to forgive your sins. Messages that to turn from Jesus, the very opposite of repent is going to bring your judgment. God lead you to the grasp the wonder of Jesus and the joy of His faith and thus be found with the fruits of repentance. Amen.