Matthew 3:1-2 In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”

 **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”** Those are the words of John the Baptist that have come down to us. How would you classify those words? In truth, they are not words that are hard to understand. As you look at them they are not words that are harsh or demanding. In fact, they are rather simple words but words I think you will agree, that are words of warning!

 Unfortunately, I think we, like many in the days of John, have a habit of taking words of warning rather lightly.

 We are warned that speeding will get us a ticket. Yet it is always a surprise when we see those flashing lights and have to pull over. Many of us become angry with the policeman because, “I wasn’t going as fast as the other cars!” Yet that is not the point. The warning of the law says that if you speed, you can get a ticket. It doesn’t say you have to be the fastest speeder on the road that day.

 Or for years, the Surgeon General has seen to it that there is a warning on every pack of cigarettes. The warning tells us that smoking will cause cancer! Yet as I look around at the world and see the vast number of smokers, it becomes clear that they don’t think the warning is meant for them! It’s just the way we seem to treat warnings.

 If you have kids, you are warned and warned to be careful of the many poisonous substances that are found in the average household today. Cupboard locks, special caps that take an engineering degree to get open and all sorts of yuckee stickers to place. I ran a quick check on the internet and learned very quickly that there are some 1.34 million cases a year of those 19 and younger poisoned by medicines alone. On average the Poison Control Center of our country gets 3 million calls a year seeking help with poisonings. Yep, we get warned. We hear the warnings but we somehow think it is about someone else and would never be a problem for us.

 Now, some warnings we respond to! Let a fire alarm go off and people tend to pay attention. Or perhaps it might be a tornado warning or burglary alarm and your attention is had. Those types of warnings we tend to respond to as good warnings but all too often the other warnings found in life we ignore. Human nature, I guess.

 Even in the midst of the church, warnings are often cast aside. The Word of God is presented, more specifically the Law of God is presented and we are warned that our sins could lead to damnation. Now, while we are sitting here in church we all feel bad that we are such sinners, yet when we get out of church we thoughtlessly and comfortably slip back into that familiar pattern of sin, as if what we heard in God’s law just isn’t that big of a deal. Seriously, many of us have a problem with warnings, even warnings from God’s Word.

 The text before us is one that tells us of a man and his message of warning. The man is John the Baptist. John is clearly labeled as **“the forerunner of the Christ.”** Let’s take a look at this man and his work. Our theme will simply be: **John, the Early Warning Prophet.**

 As we look over our text we can see that John was indeed a man who was different than most. Perhaps that was part of the appeal of John, the appeal that caused so many to go out and listen to what John had to say. Remember that John is actually born as a member of the Jewish priesthood. No doubt John had the finest training and was schooled in the ways of the priestly profession just like his father had been and just like so many others had been. And yet, John is different. Clearly by the time John begins his preaching in the wilderness he no longer lives like the majority of the people of his time.

 What was different? Although Matthew doesn’t mention it we find out in the Gospel of Luke that John was a Nazarite for life. Did you know that only two others in Scripture have that designation? Samuel the prophet and Samson the strong man judge of God were the other life-time Nazarites. Nazarites were not to have any strong drink. They were not permitted to eat or drink anything that was made from the fruit of the vine. Top all of that off with the fact that they were also not to have a haircut. Yep, all of this was just to make it clear that the Nazarite was a servant of the Lord God, and a Nazarite was different from everyone else.

 The other different thing about John was the fact that he was a prophet of the Lord. Even at the announcement of his birth to his father, the angel Gabriel said, **“He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth,for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous-- to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."**

 I think those words formed much of the life of John. When we find John in the wilderness carrying out his mission, John is dressed just like Elijah used to dress, no doubt something he was moved to do by the Holy Spirit. The other interesting thing about John was his diet. Locusts and wild honey. He didn’t eat the fine food of the day. He didn’t take and use the official food allotted to a man of the house of Levi. I think that somehow John’s diet was a visual message to the people who came to see him. And clearly all of this came together because Matthew has reported that John was preaching repentance and people from all over the land were heading out to see him. Yes, even the religious officials went out to see and hear.

And why not? For over 400 years the Lord has not sent a prophet to his people. The Lord has been absolutely silent, which is quite a contrast to the first thousand years. And now here is John. John, the connecting link between the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament is that part of history where God tells of the coming Savior and what that Savior would do for them. The New Testament is that part of history where God fulfills all of those Old Testament promises. Yep, John brings together the Old and New. John was the last prophet of Messianic promise and John was the first to begin to fulfill those promises. Matthew accurately cites the words of Isaiah, **“for this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying, ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”** You see, John was indeed special, yes, different because he was the prophet and forerunner of Jesus, the Christ. Surely then, the message of this prophet is one that we too should consider!

As I said before, the message of John was really very simple. **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”** Please note that first word. Repent is a word that means: “change your mind!” Now, just what do “religious” people have to change their mind about?

Well, please remember that John’s words are directed to the Jewish people of his day. These were a people who had lost sight of their religion, who had misdirected their hearts from the truth of God’s salvation and his Messiah. To them, the way of the Lord was obscure, the path of salvation had become crooked. You might say that these people were looking the wrong way for hope and comfort.

Isn’t that sad! Because in truth, the way of the Lord, the road from sin to salvation, is laid out by the Lord throughout the Old Testament. But by the time of Jesus the way was no longer well marked out as God intended. People, through doubts, unbelief, and self-righteousness had lost that true path of God and had begun laying out their own paths and ways. Those “human” ways always lead to the wrong place! John’s cry was, **“Repent!”** Change your mind about following your own path. Return to God and His Word. Let God show you the path and that path will be clear. It will become a path that is familiar, well-marked, and that is straight to the kingdom of heaven. The call is clear. Repent. Return to God. And I think we would all agree the call is urgent. To be honest with you, I think the words as urgent today as they were in the days of John. Not much has changed. People today are still trying to make their own path to heaven, rather than follow God’s path.

Of course, we can see the urgency of John’s words in his next phrase, **“for the kingdom of heaven is near.”** Just think of what is being said. For John, he was telling the people of the imminent fact that the Christ of God was soon to be revealed. That was his job, to be the forerunner of Jesus. To prepare people for the fact that the Messiah had arrived and to make sure that the people heard, believed and turned to the Messiah as their hope and comfort when He was revealed. These words are telling us that what was going on was going on now!

Now I have to tell you that John was not easy on the people who came to him. John was a preacher of the Law. Because of what John said and, I think, how he said it we hear, **“People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan river.”** People were confessing sin! These were Jewish people who had been taught by their religious leaders that as the special people of God they were above sin. They were a group who believed, “Hey, I’m okay, you’re okay, we are all okay!” They believed that they were loved of God simply because of who and what they were! But John has them repenting! John has them confessing sin and even getting baptized as a sign of their repentance.

And when the religious leaders themselves come out? When the religious leaders came out, those who had mislead with false hope and promises, John is not easy on them. **“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”** All I will say here is that clearly John has been given insight into the hearts of these leaders through the Holy Spirit. Make no mistake, John is clearly telling them that without true faith in God, evidenced by true repentance, they were headed for eternal hell.

As I contemplate how John preached such forceful law for the good of souls, I am lead to think of how many church bodies today have shied away from talking about sin and evil or even have taken the attitude that only good things are to be heard in the church today. By today’s standards, John would have been told what a horrid preacher he was. And yet John was preparing hearts. Think of it this way. Don’t plant until you prepare the field for the seed! That’s what the Law does, it prepares hearts for Jesus!

And yes, John did indeed point to Jesus. He says of him, **"I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."**

John does prepare for Jesus. John tells people he is coming. And don’t you find it interesting how Jesus is described? He gathers the wheat. He burns the chaff. Jesus taught that base message of faith this way, **“Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, whoever does not believe will be condemned.”** A simple message in every way.

I think John’s message is still a worthy one. We are still a people who need to repent, who need to turn to God and confess our sins. We do have sins. Those sins separate us from God in every way. But God is a game changer. God sent us a Savior. Get this, just because of Jesus, because He died for all of our sins and rose from the dead, we have this hope of God’s eternal heaven. All God wants is that we believe in Jesus. Believing in Jesus is a life changer.

Yes, Jesus is a life changer. Because faith in Jesus changes us. It leads me to hate sin and desire to live a life pleasing to God. That is called a life of repentance. The first fruit in keeping with repentance is repentance itself, the simple fact that we are sorry for our sins. Sorry because we grasp that Jesus had to die for them…and He did! Yep, Jesus is a life changer. Not because we have to change our lives but rather we can’t help but change when we grasp what Jesus is and has done for us. Jesus has brought us, sure and certain, eternal life and salvation by grace through faith alone.

John was the early warning prophet. His words still ring true. His words still point to Jesus. His words still cause us to hope and look to Jesus and his work of redemption. May God’s kingdom of heaven be yours in Jesus. May you be the wheat gathered into the barn, gathered by Jesus. Amen.