**Sunday, February 21st, 2021**

**Jonah 3:5-10, 4:1-11**

Imagine if you can:

It is 1942.

A devout Jew experienced the atrocities occurring throughout Germany.

He escaped to the United States and was living in New York.

One night he awoke from a terrible dream.

In his nightmare, God came to him, and told him to go back to Germany,

          find Adolf Hitler, and tell him that God loved him,

          and everything Hitler had done would be forgiven,

          if he would simply repent,

          if he were truly sorry for all he had done.

So, the Jew got on a train, and went to San Francisco,

          and then got on a ship to Antarctica.

He wanted nothing to do with the whole plan.

He did not want to face the dangers for a Jew in Germany.

But he really, really, did not want Hitler to be forgiven

          for all the horror he brought to the Jews.

Jonah had witnessed the abuse and horrors

          the Ninevites brought upon the Israelites.

He did not want them to turn to God and be forgiven.

He wanted God to punish and destroy them.

Why should he warn the Ninevites about God's judgment?

They tortured and abused everyone, especially the Israelites.

They deserved to be wiped out.

The last thing Jonah wanted was for his enemies to receive God's blessing.

He was told by God to go to a place he didn't want to go,

          to deliver a message he didn't want to deliver,

          to warn a people who were trying to destroy his people.

So, he ran – as fast and as far as he could away from what God wanted him to do.

He went to Joppa and boarded a ship.

God stirred up a storm.

Jonah bailed out of the boat and ended up in the belly of the whale.

When the whale spit Jonah out,

          he reluctantly went to the hated city of Nineveh.

He preached to the people there.

He warned them of God's impending judgment.

The Ninevites repented, as Jonah knew they would.

And God relented, as Jonah knew He would.

God forgave the Ninevites for all the evil they had done.

And Jonah fumed, furious over the turn of events.

To Jonah, this all seemed very wrong, and he was very angry.

He was so angry he would rather die than live.

He sulked outside the city wall.

He made a shelter to protect himself from the terrible heat.

God provided a leafy plant to provide more comfort to Jonah

          in the blistering heat of the desert sun.

And Jonah was very happy about the plant, and treasured it.

But the plant died the next day.

The scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head, and he grew faint.

He wanted to die, and cried out:

           “It would be better for me to die than to live.”

But God said to Jonah:

          “Is it right for you to be so angry about the plant?”

And Jonah answered: "It is. The plant made me very happy.

          I am so angry I wish I were dead."

But God responded:

   “You have been concerned about this plant, which lasted for only one day.”

          But I have been concerned

          for the one hundred and twenty thousand people who live in Nineveh."

We humans can be so difficult.

But God can be so patient.

This is the story of Jonah and the Ninevites.

But it is also our story.

We, like Jonah, often do not want our enemies forgiven.

We want them punished for all the bad things they have done.

Jesus taught us: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

But that is not easy.

It is nearly impossible.

Loving our enemies is no easy task.

And we often wonder:

          How can it be right?

Consider the Nazis, the Ku Klux Klan, dictators like Saddam Hussein,

          Murderers, and rapists, and child abusers.

Can we really love them?

We often do not really want them to turn to God.

We don't want them to be forgiven.

We want them to be punished.

We love God.

But we often put limits on God's Mercy.

And we can easily become angry.

The book of Jonah tells the story of a man

          whom God instructed to love his enemies in Nineveh.

And it is our story, also.

Jonah grieved for a plant which lived only one day.

How often do we worry and fret about the meager possessions we have?

While God is concerned with people, all the people.

We tend to forget those people we are angry with, are our brothers and sisters.

God is the Heavenly Father of everyone.

He loves us all, and He wants us to trust Him, and love each person.

The book of Jonah is more than a fascinating account

          of one man's futile attempt to run away from God.

It is the story of God's love for even the most unlovable,

          despicable people we can imagine.

The most significant truth of this story is that God is concerned about everyone.

God's thoughts are not like our thoughts,

God's ways are not like our ways.

The heavens are higher than the earth,

          so His ways are higher than our ways,

          and His thoughts are higher than our thoughts.

If we are to truly live God's way,

          we need to let the anger go,

          we have to find ways to forgive one another, and also ourselves.

When God saw what the Ninevites did,

          how they turned from their evil ways,

          God had compassion on them and did not destroy them.

Mercy triumphed over judgment.

The awesome grace of God was beautifully displayed.

This is just as much a story of God's mercy and grace to Jonah,

          as it is a story of God's mercy and grace to the people of Nineveh.

And it is the story of God's love, and mercy, and grace, for us.

The book of Jonah raises the question:

          Do we dare to put limits on God's mercy and forgiveness,

          for others, and for ourselves?

AMEN