**Sunday, December 13th, 2020**

**Jeremiah 31:31-34**

Many years ago, the Denver Zoo acquired a polar bear.

The staff decided the polar bear should have the largest,

          and most naturally built cage of all the animals in the zoo.

So, the engineers and construction crew went to work to build an enclosure

          which was very large, and as natural as possible

          in its representation of the arctic landscape.

The polar bear was sedated and moved to the Zoo.

When it awoke it found itself in a small cage made of thick metal bars

          which had been placed directly in the middle

          of the giant enclosure which was still under construction.

The small enclosure was just large enough that the polar bear could take

          four good-sized steps before being halted by the cold metal bars.

The bear would take four steps in one direction,

          rear up on its hind legs as it slowly made a 180-degree turn,

          and then take four steps in the opposite direction,

          before rearing up again as it made another turn back.

All day long the bear would slowly pace back and forth in its cage.

Finally, the polar bear's new home was completed.

The bear was again sedated and the small cage of metal bars,

          which had been the bear's world for so many months, was removed.

The polar bear awoke, looked around, and got up on its feet.

Then it took four slow but steady steps before rearing up, paws high in the air,

          and turned around to take the four customary steps in the opposite direction,

          rearing up again as it turned and retraced its first steps, over and over again.

The polar bear was no longer caged, but it wasn't free.

Imagine how the Zoo Director felt.

He went to all that effort, but the bear was still trapped.

The bear was unable to recognize its freedom.

The Director gathered a group of patient and caring trainers

          to work with the polar bear and show it how to enjoy the large,

          natural appearing replica of the arctic tundra.

Sadly, the polar bear's story is frequently our story.

We repent and confess our sins, but often we remain trapped in guilt and shame.

We sometimes have difficulty forgiving ourselves,

          and even more often, we find it hard to forgive others,

          and so, we become trapped, and cannot enjoy the loving freedom

          God offers us as His beloved children.

For thousands of years, we humans promised to obey God.

And for thousands of years, we let God down more often than we lifted him up.

We did the very thing we promised we would never do.

Even the holiest of the heroes sometimes forgot whose side they were on.

Some of the scenarios in the Bible look more like the adventures

          of Sinbad the sailor than stories for vacation Bible school.

Even those who seemed closest to God fell short.

Remember Aaron, the sons of Jacob, David, mighty Samson,

          Adam and Eve, Moses, King Saul, Noah,

          and actually, all of God's people?

These are the chosen ones of God?

This is the royal lineage of the King?

These are the ones who were to carry out God's mission?

Why didn't God give up?

Why didn't He simply let the globe spin off its axis?

Because, even after generations of people had promised to obey Him

          and failed, He still loved us.

Even today, after we have failed so often He still waits for us.

It is inexplicable.

It does not have a drop of logic, nor a thread of rationality.

And yet, it is that very irrationality which gives the gospel its greatest defense:

          For only God could love like that.

We don't consciously and deliberately disobey God.

          We simply don't listen to him.

God has given his commands to us.

          But so often we fail to pay attention to them.

          Not because of willful disobedience.

          But because we do not truly love, and respect, and trust him.

Thousands of years before Jesus was called the Lamb of God,

          God promised forgiveness.

"Someday," God confided to Jeremiah,

          "These people will be my people and I will be their God

          For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

God choose Jeremiah to be one of His messengers,

          to be a Prophet to the people, to be a teacher of how they ought to live.

But Jeremiah was a reluctant messenger.

Like Moses, he offered God excuses and reasons

          why God should choose someone else.

“Lord, truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.”

But God chose him to carry His message to the people.

Jeremiah often felt frightened and insecure.

And he had good reason to feel that way.

He recognized the wickedness of Judah

He noticed their false gods and idols.

He knew what the false prophets were telling the people.

Jeremiah was threatened, beaten, and challenged by false prophets.

But God had given Jeremiah a message to be shared with the people:

          The story of God's never-ending love and forgiveness.

Jeremiah did not just preach doom and gloom.

He told the people to hope in God, who would restore them.

When he faced the people, he showed great courage,

          and carried out his task faithfully,

          even as he condemned the sins of the people and the nation,

          and struggled to get them to change their ways.

Jeremiah used stories and images as he searched for a way

          to express the astounding fact that the Israelites had traded the living

          God for the idols of their neighbors.

For instance:

Buy two identical plants in a nursery.

Plant one in a desert, and one by a river.

For a few days they will look alike.

But what happens after a few weeks?

Those who trust in human actions will end up like a shriveled bush.

While those who trust God

          will be like a tree that has its roots sunk deep beside a stream.

God declared: This is the covenant I will make with my people:

          I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.

          I will be their God, and they will be my people.

          No longer will they teach their neighbor,

          or say to one another, "Know the Lord,"

          because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,

For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.

It is our choice, we can live trapped in our own choices,

          or we can trust and live in the freedom of God's forgiveness and love.

AMEN