**Mark 1: 14-20 Jonah 3: 1-5,10**

 **Jonah and the whale. The images that come into my mind when I hear about Jonah and the whale, are the black trash bags that were used in the fellowship hall during VBS. Trying to shape the bags into a whale, using box fans to keep the bags inflated and the children entering the belly of the whale to hear the bible story of the day. Or more recently, Carol, the pre-school teacher for our little ones, fashioned a whale out of a blue tarp that was hung over a cardboard train with the big eyes and tail. The children sitting in front of the whale trying not to look at it in fear as a picture is being taken. We all have our memories of being taught this story in Sunday School and accepting the story as told to us. But now as adults, we think of this story as strange, even funny. Swallowed by a whale? Repenting cows! What are we to make of the book of Jonah? Out of the blue, Jonah is commanded by God to become a missionary to the worst, most-hated people in the world, at least as far as Israel is concerned: the Ninevites. The Assyrians were Israel’s enemies, and the capital of Assyria was Nineveh. Jonah would rather die than talk to the Ninevites about God. Why would Jonah want to be part of God’s reaching out to the Ninevites? So God sends a fish to swallow Jonah and spit him out on the shore of Nineveh. Evidently, God was serious when God commanded Jonah, “Go! Preach to Nineveh!” Our lesson from the O.T. takes up where the Lord came and ordered Jonah a second time to “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.”**

 **So Jonah reluctantly gives in to God. He goes to Nineveh, but he goes with a lousy attitude and preaches the shortest and worst sermon in history. It is a one sentence threat saying that in 40 days Nineveh will be history.**

 **And wonders of wonders, in response to the worst sermon by the most reluctant preacher, the Ninevites repent. The whole city, even the cattle, repent, and God also repents of the threatened judgment.**

 **Jonah’s response, “I knew it! Your forgiving nature is exactly why I didn’t want to come here. These people don’t deserve your forgiveness. They should be wiped off the face of the earth. So I am just going to sit here, pout, and hope to die. So there!” At this point, God, rather than doing to Jonah what Jonah wanted, to just die, God provides shade for Jonah, but then allows the comforting vine to die. God, then engages the prophet in a conversation about what real grace might look like. The story ends rather abruptly, without any indication that Jonah has come around to God’s way of thinking.**

 **Has this ever happened to you? Has God ever asked you to bring His word and healing to someone you despised? Jesus commanded us to forgive our enemies. That is a command that is very much at odds with the ways of the world; it’s very different from our own human inclinations. Sometimes the hardest step down the path of forgiveness is simply to talk to our enemies.**

 **“They haven’t spoken to each other in years”, yet that is exactly what God ordered Jonah to do. What would we do if we had been asked to preach to someone like the Ninevites? We are like Jonah-raised in the faith, around people who look and act just like us. What if we insisted that we will only take the message of God’s love to those we think are “worthy” of it? What if we long for God to punish those who harm us?**

 **We need to search our hearts in these matters. And it would be better if we didn’t need to end up in the belly of a big fish to do so. But the good news is that whether we are like the pagans in this story, or like the prophet of the Lord, God’s love and mercy are the same. God sent Jesus, not for some, but for all. Forgiveness, reconciliation, transformation isn’t just for those who “deserve it”, but for those who know they don’t deserve grace and could never hope to earn it. the good news is that God gives second and third, and forth and so on chances. And when we say, as Jonah, “No way, I’m not going!” or “I’m not going to do that!” When we refuse to follow God, well, God’s love will follow us all the way, not to punish but to save us. Ultimately, God invites all to the heavenly banquet. And far from us to be the bouncers or gatekeepers. We are called as disciples to carry the invitations. Let us do so with joy and gladness. Where is the Nineveh that we are neglecting? In what ways do we hinder God’s kingdom? Who have we left out from our table when we eat and drink in Jesus’ name? Those are among the questions that are raised among us by this ancient story of Jonah, the reluctant missionary, a story, as it turns out, is also a story about us.**

 **Jonah knew how much grace God was capable of offering, even to his bitter enemy. We know how much grace God is capable of because we have witnessed a Savior dying on the cross. And because we know how much grace God is capable of, we must not attempt to escape from offering that love even to our enemies. God has called us out of His love for us in Jesus Christ to go into the world and make disciples.**