The Shade We Did Not Grow
Jonah 3:10–4:11
Matthew 20:1–16

Out here, you learn to notice shade. You can walk across a parking lot in Green Valley and find yourself unconsciously aiming for the one tree that casts enough shadow to make a difference. You did not plant the tree. You did not water it. You did not make the branches grow. But when the sun is beating down, you are grateful to stand underneath it.

Jonah has found himself some shade. And he needs it. He has marched through Nineveh announcing judgment. Much to his displeasure, the people listened. They repented. God saw them turn from their evil ways. And God spared them. That ought to be the preacher's dream. Jonah may be the only preacher in Scripture who holds a revival and gets angry because everybody responds.

He is furious. And Jonah finally tells God why. He says, essentially, "This is why I didn't want to come here in the first place." "I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love." Think about that. Jonah is angry with God because Jonah's theology is correct. He knows exactly what God is like. That is the problem.

Jonah knows God is merciful. He simply does not want God to be merciful to them. Nineveh is not some innocent little town Jonah happens to dislike. Nineveh represents Assyria, the empire that brought violence and terror to Jonah's people. Jonah's anger does not come from nowhere. There is history underneath it. There are wounds underneath it. And the Bible does not ask us to pretend those wounds were imaginary.

But then Jonah goes outside the city. He builds himself a shelter. And God causes a plant to grow over Jonah and give him shade. For the first time in this little book, Scripture says Jonah is happy. "Jonah was very happy about the bush." That may be one of the saddest sentences in the story. Nineveh repents. Nothing. Thousands of lives are spared. Nothing. A plant shades Jonah's head? Now Jonah rejoices.

And then the plant dies. A worm attacks it. The east wind blows. The sun beats down. And Jonah becomes angry all over again. God asks him, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" Jonah says yes. Angry enough to die.

And that is when God exposes what has been happening inside Jonah all along. Jonah cares deeply about the mercy that shelters him. He has considerably more trouble with the mercy that shelters someone else.

And before we judge Jonah too quickly, we may want to sit beside him for a while. Because there is something of Jonah in us. Most of us love grace when we need it. We love forgiveness when it is our mistake. We love patience when we are the one who has fallen

behind. We love another chance when it is our failure everybody remembers. We love a God who refuses to give up on us.

Then somebody else steps underneath the same mercy. And suddenly we begin measuring. Do they deserve that? Have they suffered enough? Have they apologized enough? Have they changed enough? Why should they receive what I had to struggle for? Jesus tells a story about workers standing in a vineyard asking almost exactly the same question. Some worked all day. Some worked only an hour. At the end of the day, the landowner pays them the same wage. And the people who worked longest are furious. Not because they were cheated. They received exactly what they had been promised. They are angry because somebody else received generosity.

That is a very different complaint. God's goodness begins to feel unfair when we start imagining that we earned the shade.

Jonah did not grow that plant. The workers did not own the vineyard. And you and I did not create the grace beneath which our lives stand. That is the truth at the heart of both stories. **Every one of us lives beneath mercy we did not grow.**

Somebody forgave you when they could have held the wound against you. Somebody gave you another opportunity. Somebody believed you could become more than the worst thing you had done. Somebody loved you when you were difficult to love. And beneath all of that, before you ever knew how to ask for it, was God.

God's mercy was already growing over your life. That does not mean wounds do not matter. It does not mean evil becomes harmless. It does not mean repentance is unnecessary. Nineveh does repent. The wrong is named. But Jonah discovers that the judgment of evil belongs to God, and so does the freedom to show mercy. Jonah does not get to decide where God's compassion ends. Neither do we.

And notice how the book ends. God asks Jonah a question: "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow… And should I not be concerned about Nineveh?" And then, nothing. Jonah never answers. The book simply stops.

Maybe because the question was never meant for Jonah alone. Maybe Scripture leaves a little empty space there for us. **Should God not care for them too?** The person you struggle to forgive. The person whose politics make no sense to you. The neighbor who irritates you. The family member who wounded you. The stranger whose life you cannot understand. The person you secretly believe should have known better. Should God not care for them too?

There is the ache of Jonah. He believes in a gracious God. He simply has not yet learned how to rejoice when grace travels farther than he wants it to go.

And Jesus Christ keeps taking grace farther. He sits at tables respectable people avoid. He touches people others have learned not to see. He forgives sinners. He welcomes outsiders. And finally, from the cross, mercy reaches even those who put him there. “Father, forgive them.”

That is how far the shade reaches.

And here is the good news: You are standing beneath it too. You did not grow it. You did not earn it. You cannot exhaust it. The mercy of God has been over your life longer than you knew enough to look up.

So perhaps faith begins when we stop asking who deserves to stand underneath the tree and simply notice how wide its branches have become.

There is room here. Room for Jonah. Room for Nineveh. Room for the workers who came early. Room for the workers who came late. Room for you. And, by the grace of Jesus Christ, room even for the person you were hoping God had forgotten.

The shade was never ours to begin with.
Thanks be to God.
Amen.