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*Reckless Love: Jonah*  
*His Flight*  
Jonah 1:4-16

So...this is the purse. The purse I told you about last week. Our four-year-old Rachel was about to run into traffic and my mom threw this purse and knocked Rachel off her feet! To save her! God did the same thing to Jonah; not with a purse, but with a storm. God called Jonah to preach to the bloodthirsty people of Nineveh but Jonah wanted nothing to do with it. He jumped on a boat and headed in the opposite direction. So God sent Hurricane Florence to stop him in his tracks. But as it turned out, for the pagan sailors on his ship, this wasn't a journey from Joppa to Tarshish; it was a journey from unbelief to belief...and they had LOTS of questions along the way. For fun...as I tell the story, every time you hear a question, like good students, raise your hand, OK?

But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. So the captain came and said to him, "What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish."

And they said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us." So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. Then they said to him, "Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?" And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, "What is this that you have done!" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them.

Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. He said to them, "Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you." Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. Therefore they called out to the Lord, "O Lord, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you." So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

Jonah may be the most reluctant evangelist in the Bible. He doesn't want to go to Nineveh. He doesn't seem to care about the pagan sailors on his doomed boat. And yet, by the END of the story, those sailors are converted by his witness! These guys were praying to every god they could think

of to save them. But when they encounter Jonah's god—the God with REAL power—they end up on their knees before him.

So...how did these pagans move from unbelief to belief...especially with the most half-hearted preacher you will find in the Bible? **It started with questions.** I attended Alpha for the first time last Wednesday...along with 109 other folks. It was fantastic. A meal, a powerful video and an opportunity for discussion. Do you remember the Alpha logo? A big red question mark. Alpha is based on the idea that no question is stupid and every question is welcome.

The sailors had lots of questions. Eight of them, fired like a machine gun from unbelieving but desperate men. Unbelieving people ALWAYS have questions. And they are often the same questions. In fact, we find some of the most common questions right here in this story. We may not have all the answers—we don't need to—but if unbelievers aren't free to question...they may never make it to belief.

So let's take a closer look at these questions. The captain asks the first one. The sailors are scrambling topside to save the ship and themselves. The captain goes below only to discover Jonah is fast asleep. His question is, "What do you mean, you sleeper?" Which translated means.... "Get your butt out of bed and help us!" Not really...but we all heard our dad's voice in that question, didn't we? Really, the first question being asked is, "Don't you care?" Don't you CARE that this ship is going down? Don't you care that we are going to die? Don't you care?" This may be the most important question unbelievers have for us. Do you really care about me? Am I just a spiritual project for you, or are you speaking to me out of genuine love and concern.

Part of the problem today is that many Christians really DON'T care about unbelievers. They've got theirs. They've got their salvation, their church, their familiar worship routines, their circle of Christian friends...and they really DON'T care very much for the unbelieving group they left behind. The heart of the gospel starts with a God who cares: "For God so loved the world..." If there are friends and family who don't know Jesus...who are sinking into spiritual death...and that doesn't grieve you...that's a problem! And you might want to confess that cold indifference and ask God to give you HIS heart for the lost.

The second question comes after the crew figures out that Jonah is the problem. "Tell us, on whose account this evil has come upon us?" Do you hear the core question? Why is there evil? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do bad things happen to me? Of course, we are never as good as we think we are and whatever befalls us is probably not as undeserved as we think it is. But this question...why has this disaster struck me...why am I so sick...why did my marriage fail...why do hurricanes wreak disaster... why do terrorists wreak terror...it is a question as old as humankind.

The next several questions are rapid-fire: "What is your occupation? Where are you from? What is your country? Who are your people?" The underlying question is what? "Who are you? Why should I listen to you or trust you if I don't even know who you are?" The Christian faith is a relational faith. God sent his Son to earth to reveal himself to us. Emmanuel was his name... "God with us." The ministry of Jesus was a ministry of relationship. He didn't just stand up and preach sermons. He lived with and among the people. They got to know him. Then to trust him. Then to believe him.

Some Christians drop Christian truth like spiritual cluster bombs, hoping to hit a few targets along the way. They let bumper stickers do their talking for them. But the real journey from unbelief to belief USUALLY occurs in genuine relationship. That's what LifeGroups are. Not just Bible study...but a Bible study in the context of honest relationship where we share who we really are. The struggles with our marriage; the struggles with our kid; the struggles with our health; the struggles with our job. If unbelievers see you are willing to be honest about who you REALLY are, even the bad stuff, they will be more likely to listen to you about your faith. Who are you?

Jonah answered their questions simply: "I am a Hebrew and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land." Then the men were terrified and asked a follow-up question: "What is this that you have done?" These pagan sailors are flabbergasted! This guy just said that he "fears" the God who made everything, including the sea. Yet...what is he doing? He is disobeying the God he claims to fear...and trying to escape...how? IN A BOAT...ON THE SEA! How stupid can you be? The underlying question here is this: Why are you such a hypocrite! You CLAIM to fear God but you are flagrantly disobeying him and bringing calamity upon us in the process.

One of the most painfully appropriate questions the unbelieving world levels at us is this one: why are you such hypocrites? You claim to believe in God yet you live your lives as functional atheists. Even worse, you disobey the teachings of your god and, in the process, bring calamity upon those closest to you. How many times my heart has been broken by supposed godly Christians who suddenly go off the deep end, abandon their families and pursue their "happiness" in another relationship. How many times our hearts been broken by respected Christian leaders whom we discover to be living a lie. Mahatma Ghandi once said, "I like your Christ; I do not like your Christians."

Then comes the last question. After the sailors realize Jonah is responsible for the evil that has befallen them, they ask, "What shall we do with you?" In other words, "If what you are saying about your God is true...that he is all-powerful and that he punishes sin and disobedience... and if we really are in peril because of it...what shall we do about it?" After Peter preached his great Pentecostal sermon, one of the men in the crowd shouted, "What must we do to be saved?" This is the ultimate question facing every human being. When we are honest about our questions and have come to grips with our brokenness in the face of a perfect and holy God... this really is the final and most important question. "What must I do to be saved?"

These are the questions of desperate, unbelieving men. Notice Jonah didn't answer all their questions. We sometimes feel obliged to provide answers for every question...and of course, we can't. Jonah couldn't either. But he offered something more effective than answers. He offered his life. The real answers to these questions are not found in Jonah's words; they are found in his sacrifice. Jonah says, "I am the reason for this calamity. Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you." In the end, the sailors are saved, not by Jonah's answers, but by his self-sacrifice.

Do you remember when the captain told Jonah to get out of bed and pray to his god? Of course, it was superstition. At that point, they would take help from any god who would offer it. But did you notice Jonah's response? He didn't pray! The captain begged him to pray...and he didn't. Some

commentators think this shows how heartless Jonah was towards these pagans. He didn't pray because he didn't care.

I have a different take. I think Jonah didn't pray...because he didn't need to pray. He knew what was wrong. He knew who was at fault. He knew what God's answer would be. And he knew what the solution was. Sacrifice. His sacrifice. If he didn't offer up his life...everyone on board would die. This was his fault. Jonah didn't need to pray another prayer to discover what God wanted him to do; he needed to act on what God had already told him to do.

I want to be careful. We need to be a praying people and if we act without the permission or power of the Holy Spirit, we will never accomplish anything. But when it comes to sharing our faith, too many Christians are paralyzed in prayer. They pray and pray and pray. "Oh God, please save my neighbor. Oh God, please bring my co-worker to faith. Oh God, please reveal yourself to my husband." They pray...and pray...and pray...and do nothing. The Christian gospel is a gospel of action. God put on flesh and came to earth to save us. The apostles were sent into the world to teach and make disciples and baptize. Jesus didn't say, "Stay in your homes and pray." He said, "Go!"

Again, don't misunderstand me! We SHOULD be praying for unbelievers in our lives. But there reaches a point...like Jonah...where we know exactly what we ought to be doing. We just need to do it! We need to stop praying and start obeying!

I'm exhibit one. We have been praying since we moved into our new home that we might be a witness to our neighbors. We had plans about delivering a jar of hot fudge to each home, hosting parties, blah, blah, blah. We've been in our house for six months... and so far, bupkus. All prayer; no action. Finally, my wife said, "This is ridiculous. We've got to do something. Our neighbor lady is alone. Her mailbox is falling over. Let's offer to repair it." Of course, she says that to me last Sunday afternoon. I'm tired. It has been a huge weekend. I don't WANT to love my neighbor on a Sunday afternoon. But my wife---MY captain---persists. And reluctantly, I tagged along.

Of course, the woman was touched. We fixed it for her and a day later, Cyndi found her wandering the neighborhood with a bottle of wine and a thank-you note, trying to track us down. She didn't remember our names; didn't know where we lived. But she was grateful...and it is the beginning of a relationship. Who knows where it will lead. Who knows what kind of spiritual fruit might result. But it started when we got off our knees in the prayer room and got on our knees by a broken mailbox.

Jonah didn't pray because he didn't need to; he knew what God required. Sacrifice. Of course, this is a prophetic glimpse of Jesus on the cross, dying to save us. But it is also a call to action! God may not require of us this ultimate sacrifice. But if we, followers of the one who sacrificed his very life, are not willing to sacrifice something for the lost; sacrifice time or money or convenience or comfort or our favorite pew or our narrow circle of friends.... if we are not willing to ACT on what we claim to believe... those unbelievers for whom we pray may never believe what we claim.