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Reckless Love: Jonah
His Preaching
Jonah 3:1-10

Several of our leadership team were in Indianapolis this last week for a conference on church-planting, something our denomination is emphasizing. I flew there with my friend, Tommy Allen, pastor of the EPC church in Kent. After arriving at the airport, we fired up our Uber app and typed in the name of our church destination...and voila! A little red Toyota was on its way. After a long drive, we arrived at a huge church in the middle of nowhere. Our driver circled the building. Finally, she dropped us and we started wheeling our suitcases around the campus until, at last, we found an open door.

We asked the receptionist, "Where is the church-planting conference?" She said, "There is no church-planting conference here." WE SAID, "Is this Traders Point Church?" SHE SAID, "Yes it is...but we have four campuses. You are looking for the downtown campus!" So...we summoned ANOTHER UBER car and made **another** long trip back where we had just come from! FINALLY ...after a VERY circuitous route, a lot of wasted time and frustration, we arrived where we were supposed to be in the first place.

Sound like any prophet you know? We are studying Jonah. God called Jonah to go to Nineveh. Instead, Jonah jumped aboard a ship headed the other direction. God stopped them with a storm, Jonah admitted that this was all his fault, the sailors tossed him overboard and the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah and save his life. For three days and nights, Jonah sat in a belly-full of gastric juices, contemplating how much easier it might have been if he'd just obeyed the Lord in the first place. But God had Jonah's attention now! After his three-day whale layover, disobedient Jonah was ready to go wherever God wanted him to go. We pick up the story in Jonah 2:10:

And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you." So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

The book of Jonah starts with these words: "Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai, saying, 'Arise, go to Nineveh that great city, and call out against it...' He did just the opposite. Why? Think about this way. Imagine the Lord appearing to a New York rabbi in 1942 at the height of the power of the Third Reich and he says, "Shlomo, I want you to go to Berlin and preach!" How eager do you think Shlomo would be for that assignment? And how receptive would Hitler and Goering and Himmler and Goebels be to his message?

THAT was how Jonah felt. Terrified at the prospect...and horrified at the possibility! Terrified because it was suicidal...and horrified thought that God might offer forgiveness to these awful people. So, Jonah ran the other way. But after a very circuitous route, God got him back to point A ...and the opening verse of chapter 3 ECHOES the first verse of the book. "Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time..." You

picked up on that, right? "OK, Jonah...enough of this foolishness. Let's try this one more time, what do you say? I'm God; you obey me!"

I want you to think of the greatest second chance you ever had. Raise your hand when you have one in mind. Mine is easy. In 2003, my family was vacationing in Sun Valley. We went ice skating; I slipped, fell on my face and suffered a brain swell. I ended up in intubated and tied down in ICU. The doctors described my condition as "grave." So...when I was out of the hospital within two days, everyone viewed my recovery as miraculous. I did, too. I have no residual symptoms to this day...to this day... to this day.

In the weeks that followed my accident, I began to reflect upon this second chance I had been given. And one thing I decided was...I was not spending enough time with my children. I was a pastoral work-a-holic. So...I stopped scheduling early morning church meetings and started walking my kids to their bus stop. That accident was a wake-up call...it was a second-chance...and I didn't want to squander it.

This was Jonah's second-chance. And THIS time, he obeys the Lord. God says, "Arise and go..." and Jonah "arose and went" to Nineveh (yeah)...and preached the most half-hearted sermon ever preached! In Hebrew, there are only five words. In English, eight. An eight-word sermon: "Yet 40 days and Nineveh shall be overthrown."

Maybe the shortest sermon ever preached. And I know what some of you are thinking! "Wow...8 word sermons! What must THAT be like? Lucky Ninevites!" Stop it!

What parent here has NOT said something like this? "You are not going anywhere until you've made your bed." They might make their bed...but it will be the lousiest bed-making job in the history of linens! God said, "You are going to Nineveh to preach!" Jonah knew it was pointless to run away... so he'd give his sermon, all right. But he wasn't going to put much effort into it!

But at least he obeyed. And look what God did; even with that half-hearted obedience:

And [Jonah] called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish."

One commentator describes this as the greatest revival in the history of the world. From an eight-word sermon! "Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown." Take a look at that word, "overthrown." It has two meanings in Hebrew. It can mean "destroyed... wiped out!" Like this guy in the picture. "In forty days, God is going to wipe you guys out!" said Jonah.

But the Hebrew word for "overthrown" has a secondary meaning: turn around! Repentance. The Ninevites understood both meanings of this word. They understood that, in 40 days, they faced judgment and destruction for their evil ways. AND they understood that there was still a chance that if they changed their hearts, changed their ways, changed their direction...that Jonah's God might change his mind.

"Yet forty days and Ninveh shall be overthrown," Jonah said. And the next verse is amazing: "And the people of Nineveh believed God." Just like that. Just that simple! These awful, bloodthirsty people...believed God.

The Holy Spirit took Jonah's off-the-cuff, half-hearted sermon...and stirred the hearts of these evil people to repentance! He fasted as an act of repentance. And they put on sackcloth for the same reason. Sackcloth was a rough, scratchy material woven from the coarsest goat hair. It was used to make sacks...like burlap. But when you wore it, it was a sign of repentance.

That's what the people did? But what would the king think? Again, it is an astounding work of the Spirit. When the king received word, he did four things: He got up from his throne, took off his royal robes, clothed himself in burlap...and then sat down in a pile of ashes. The ultimate act of humility and repentance. And he doubled down; he decreed that his people would NEITHER eat food NOR drink water! Think about that. How long can people go without drinking water? And this decree wasn't just for his human subjects. Every beast...every donkey and cow and sheep... would ALSO be withheld their food and their water. I used to live near a big cattle ranch. When they were hungry...you could hear them bellowing from a mile away! Even the beasts were crying out mightily to God.

But there's more! As a further sign of repentance, even the beasts would be clothed in sackcloth. It's hilarious! Can you imagine sheep and goats standing around in their burlap overcoats saying, "What in the world is going on here?" But that was the response stirred up by the Spirit of God with a sermon of 5 Hebrew words. And the people's desperation was summarized in verse 9: Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.

Who knows? Who knows? I know things look bad...I know that Nineveh...stands under God's judgment...for all the evil we have done. But who knows. Maybe if we say we are sorry. Maybe if we humble ourselves before this great God. Maybe if we turn from our evil and violent ways...who knows? Maybe God will relent.

And guess what? He did. Verse 10: When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

One of the greatest revivals ever. All because of 5 half-hearted Hebrew words spoken by a reluctant but obedient servant of God.

You may be surprised to discover how reluctant I can sometimes be to share my faith. You see me up here in front of hundreds of people, preaching every week...and you assume that it comes easily for me. But actually, I am a more introverted person than you know. And I have enough insecurities that I don't want people writing me off because they think I'm a religious nut. So, honestly, I don't speak as easily or often about Jesus as I ought to outside this pulpit. I'm not proud of it, but it's the truth.

But God has been working on me. Alpha has been working on me. Jonah has been working on me. So...I've been trying to be more aware. And more obedient. And more courageous. While we were in Indy, we went to the famous Graeter's ice cream shop. We were waited on by a very friendly and vivacious woman. But as I paid, I asked how she was doing and she paused and said, "It's been a rough couple of weeks."

That was my moment of decision. Do I say, "I'm sorry to hear that," and take my ice cream? Or do I take the bait? I took the bait. "Why has it been hard?" "Because two weeks ago, I lost my grandson." And then the tears came. "I'm not supposed to cry in the ice cream shop." "You can cry in front of me. How old was your grandson?" "Nine. He died of an asthma attack." Then the tears began to flow. I reached out and took her hand and said, "That is just awful. I am so sorry! I am going to pray for you and for your family, is that okay?" "Yes, please." "The peace of the Lord be with you." And then I sat down to eat my butter pecan ice cream.

I didn't lead her to Christ. I didn't pray with her right there...maybe I should have. But I tried to pay attention to what the Spirit was doing...and I tried to speak on behalf of the Lord Jesus. I wish it weren't remarkable enough to mention...but it is...honestly; it's the part of my Christian witness that God is working on.

It is fascinating to me that God chose to work through 5 half-hearted words spoken by a reluctant prophet to bring about revival. God could have done it all by himself, couldn't he? And yet, he chose...he still chooses...to work through his followers, both the enthusiastic AND the reluctant; both the articulate AND the tongue-tied; both the passionate AND the indifferent. When we stop running; when we stop dodging...when we allow God to swallow us up and deposit us where he wants us...and go where he tells us...and speak what he orders...no matter how we might feel about it...apparently the Holy Spirit is able to use those words to turn the hearts of people. And he WANTS to!

Most of you would claim to be followers of Jesus, I suspect. Most would claim Christ as Lord. So answer me this: when was the last time you spoke 8 words of witness for your savior? As I thought about it, I began to make a list of possible eight-word sermons. If you are reluctant to share your faith in Jesus...could any of these micro-sermons be a starting point?

- I am your friend and I love you.
- Is it okay if I pray for you?
- God loves you more than you love yourself.
- The way you treat your wife dishonors her.
- When you drink you become a different person.
- Celebrate Recovery is a safe place for you.
- MOPS might be a perfect group for you.
- Alpha might answer some of your good questions.
- Jesus is the way, the truth, the life.

Those are just ideas. The point is, if you are obedient, even if you are reluctant, the Holy Spirit can take your few words and do miracles with them. When was the last time you spoke eight words of witness for your savior? Has God placed someone on your heart? Has he placed a message for them on your heart? Maybe before you leave tonight/today, you write down your 8 words ...and then ask God for the opportunity and the courage to speak them...and then watch what happens.

Who knows...who knows...who knows what the reckless love of God might do through you?