

A Questionable Call

Jonah 1:1-6

Jonah is not only one of the best-known stories in Scripture, but actually in all the world, because of the whale. Nearly every kid in Sunday school is told the story of Jonah but, for some reason, we usually stop teaching about Jonah beyond elementary school. Maybe it's being swallowed by a whale and surviving seems incredible, or maybe it is because Jonah's story hits a little too close to home.

Jonah's story is our story. It is the story of everyone who has ever questioned God's call for his or her life. It is the story of anyone who has ever resisted God's plan. Jonah's story is for anyone who has ever cried out in the dark, "Lord, I give up!" Jonah's story is for anyone who wants a second chance. Jonah's story is for anyone whom God has asked to swallow a whale of a task.

Jonah's story is also Jesus' story and it so very important we know His story too.

Jonah's story begins with the words: **"Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah, the son of Amittai" Jonah 1:1.** Let's ask to start, "Who was Jonah?" Jonah was a real man, an historical figure from the 8th Century BC who is mentioned not only in the book that bears his name, but also in 2 Kings, Chapter 14. Jonah was not one of the great prophets. Unlike Elijah he did not face down the 400 prophets of Baal on top of a mountain. Unlike Isaiah he did not predict in astonishing detail the coming of Jesus Christ. Unlike Elisha he did not raise anyone from the dead. What great work did Jonah do before the Word of the Lord came to him? He encouraged King Jeroboam to reinforce Israel's border along a thirty-seven mile stretch of land. (Hello?, Hello?)

Hey not every prophet can call down fire on God's enemies or heal someone from leprosy!

Jonah came from a place called Gath-hepher. Gath-hepher was a small village about five miles from Nazareth, where Jesus grew up. We pick up Jonah's story with the word of the LORD coming to Jonah, in the middle of nowhere. Jonah was a pretty average guy and that is what makes his story so appealing, because I think it means we each can expect the word of the Lord to come to us—average folks. Of course, the word of the Lord is different than any other word. Today, we are surrounded by words—texts, emails, social media, reports, TV, radio. We cannot escape words, simple information. Very little of it affects us directly. We can take it or leave nearly all of it without consequence. Most words are designed to inform, not elicit a response.

The word of the Lord is different. God's word demands a response. The word of the Lord requires us, always, to do something. We must either comply or deny. We must defer or dissent. Submit or subvert. The word of the Lord demands a yes or a no—not maybe, not "we'll see," not a "that's interesting" response. The Word of the Lord that came to Jonah was a doozy. **"Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me"** (Jonah 1:2).

Now Jonah gets criticized for being disobedient to God or fearful or parochial or even racist for denying God's call. And some that but may be true.

He was also really, really sensible.

For a lot of really good reasons, traveling to Nineveh would have sounded disastrous to Jonah as he whiled away the lazy days at Gath-hepher. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria. At that time in history the Assyrians were the unquestioned leaders of the globe. Their empire stretched over most of the known world. When the Assyrian empire collapsed in 612 BC, they had been in power for over 500 years. More than likely Jonah was called sometime around 750 BC, when Nineveh was at the height of its power. Why the people who were the unquestioned leaders of the world would listen to a nobody

from a backwater town with a name that sounds like a cow (Gath-hepher) is a legitimate question. To put this into perspective, Jonah going to Nineveh would be like a bumpkin from the most backwater town you can think of, picture the Beverly Hillbillies, walking into the center of Berlin in about 1942, stomping their feet, and demanding that the Third Reich lay down their arms. Or slathering a tabby cat with barbeque sauce and turning it loose at the Westminster Kennel Club.

The Assyrians were not nice people. Assyrian kings used to decorate the walls of their palace with the skins of their enemies. They conquered people then sealed them alive in the walls and columns of their buildings. When the Assyrians conquered a region, they left behind a very distinct calling card: pyramid-shaped piles of human heads. Because Assyria's reach extended far and wide, the chances that Jonah had come across one of those piles of skulls was pretty good. The prophet Nahum, writing at about this same time, described Nineveh like this: **"Woe to the bloody city, all full of lies and plunder—no end to the prey! The crack of the whip and rumble of the wheel, galloping horse and bounding chariot! Horsemen charging, flashing sword and glittering spear, hosts of slain, heaps of corpses, dead bodies without end—they stumble over the bodies!"** (Nahum 3:1-3) Perhaps we can't blame Jonah for not wanting to get pinned up on the King's wall like a Justin Bieber poster. Nineveh sounded like a suicide mission and you could even question the purpose. What possible reason would a just and righteous and holy God have to save the wicked Ninevites?

Yet God called Jonah to this Mission Impossible.

Guess who else He is calling.

We all have a Nineveh. We all have that thing to which God has called us that simply sounds impossible, implausible, impractical, and even undesirable. The word of the Lord comes to us in whatever backwater we find ourselves and commands, "You, arise, go and do." And it sounds crazy. It sounds impossible, impractical, and frankly not like a lot of fun. But the word of the Lord cannot be resisted. The word of the Lord does not return empty. The word of the Lord does not wither and fade like the grass. Jesus is relentless in His purpose and unswerving in His call. The great mistake a lot of us make is believing our Nineveh is a luxury, our Nineveh is something that is optional or only good if we want to really be a super-Christian. That's wrong. We were made for our Nineveh and we will always feel incomplete and undone without it. Are you familiar with the phrase. BHAG? Its an acronym for Big Hairy Audacious Goal. An author named Stephen Collins coined the phrase in a book a lot of us have read called *Good to Great*. Here is how he described a BHAG:

A BHAG is a true BHAG is clear and compelling and serves as a unifying focal point of effort—often creating immense team spirit. It has a clear finish line, so the organization can know when it has achieved the goal; people like to shoot for finish lines. A BHAG engages people—it reaches out and grabs them in the gut. It is tangible, energizing, highly focused.

In my experience, God rarely deals in BHAGs. He does deal with BHAMs---Big Hairy Audacious Mission's.

A BHAM is not like a BHAG. BHAM's and their endgame are rarely clear. Usually God just shows us our next step—a single step. The finish line is opaque at best. BHAM's often don't unify—think about how the disciples tried to dissuade Jesus from going to the cross or how God's people in the wilderness savagely criticized Moses. Often a BHAM will be something we must do alone, at least for a while. And we may not be compelled by the vision but simply compelled to finally have some peace from God's relentless pursuit to bend us to our will.

BHAM's look a lot like Nineveh.

What is your Nineveh? What is your BHAM?

I can tell you one of my first. Being a pastor was my Nineveh. I did not want to do it. It did not sound practical or desirable. I watched my seminary classmates go on to be pastors in some burg I had

never heard of while I worked on my Ph.D. and I thought, “What a bunch of suckers!” But it was God’s call and it came again and again and again. And until I submitted, until I gave the Father the answer He wanted, I was stuck...stuck in the same place in life, stuck in my same battles and mistakes, and stuck in the same place in my faith. God calls us to our Nineveh for the sake of the Ninevites, but He calls us to our Nineveh for our sake as well—so He can reveal His character and we can revel in His purpose and power and grace.

Are you stuck? What is your Nineveh? Unfortunately, our first impulse when God calls us to our Nineveh is to run. Jonah ran too. Unlike Moses, Gideon, Jeremiah, Mary or countless others in the Bible Jonah didn’t protest or debate with God over his new prophetic assignment. He just made a break for it. **“Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD”** (Jonah 1:3). Jonah did not just run from His assignment. Jonah fled from the presence of the Lord. He ran from God Himself.

And that’s not so uncommon because we cannot run from our Nineveh without running from the one who sends us there. Jonah fled to the seaport town of Joppa or Jaffa just south of modern-day Tel Aviv where he bought a one-way ticket for a Mediterranean cruise. Now we don’t know exactly where Tarshish was. It could have been as far away as Spain. But we do know that it was in the exact opposite direction of Nineveh, which is now in the extreme north of present-day Iraq.

Jonah 1:3, **“So he paid the fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.”**

Here is the thing about running from God: it costs a lot. There is a cost, there is a fee, a fare that we must pay when we run from God. Running from God costs us peace. It costs us purpose. It costs us pleasure. It costs us relationships and relevance. In the end running from God costs us everything. **When we run it does not take long to find out a simple truth—we cannot outrun God.**

Psalm 139:7 makes it really plain:

Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence?

Not long after Jonah boarded the boat, he fell into a deep sleep down in the cargo hold. The Hebrew word used here for sleep is the same one used in Genesis chapter 2 where it says that God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam so that he could remove his rib to create Eve. You have to love the detail of the story. Jonah was running. He had traveled 80 or 90 miles, most likely on foot and during the heat of the year when ships sailed, over very hilly and rugged terrain and this may have been his first chance to rest for days. Jonah was exhausted from trying to run from God and when he got onto the boat he simply collapsed.

Is there anything more tiring or unnerving than being on the run from someone or something? My worst dreams are the ones where someone is chasing after me and I am running to get away. Of course, one of the more popular playground games growing up (I don’t think schools allow kids to play it anymore) went by a variety of names, but this morning I’ll call it “Kill the Man with the Ball.” The name says it all. One person held on to a football and ran with it. Twenty-five angry pubescent boys chased him with the hope, really, of causing permanent injury. I can still remember the absolute surge of adrenaline picking up the ball as it went squirting from a pile of twisted and mangled bodies and running for everything you were worth, hoping that you might be the one who somehow got away. But it never happened. Eventually the mob caught you and left you bruised and bleeding on the green grass.

Have you ever run from God? Are you running from God now? You know, of course, that like so many playground games, no one ever successfully runs from God. Nevertheless, running away from God is something we human beings are pretty experienced with doing. Adam

and Eve tried to run and hide from God in the Garden of Eden after they sinned. After Peter denied

Christ three times, he ran and hid. We run from God when we are wrong and He is right. We run from God when we don't want to face up to reality or deny His Lordship or His grace in our life.

The 4th Century Church Father Gregory of Nazianzus put it like this:

“For God alone of all things cannot be escaped from or contended with; if He wills to seize or bring them under his hand. He outstrips the swift. He outwits the wise. He overthrows the strong. He subdues rashness. He resists power.”¹

Gregory knew something about running from God because the day after he was ordained a priest and given a congregation to pastor, he skipped town and went to live with a good friend hundreds of miles away. He returned, however, on Easter Sunday of the following year and went on to become one of the greatest leaders and theologians the church has ever known. But it took him going to his Nineveh, hearing God's BHAM for his life.

We may run from God, but God is always running after us. The Lord has pursued His call upon your life since before the beginning of time. And through the cross upon which Jesus died, God has demonstrated just how far He is willing to run. The Holy Spirit is like a bounty hunter. He specializes in tracking down those whom He has bailed out of the eternal prison of sin and who are still on the run.

Indeed, Jesus said it was His job, **“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost”** (Luke 19:10). Adam, Eve, Peter, Gregory all found out that you cannot outrun God. God will catch you. Being caught by God can be an absolutely terrifying prospect. But it is in truth a wonderful and splendid reality. Before we are caught by God, nothing scares us so much, I think, as the prospect of it, but nothing delights and fulfills our soul as much as actually being caught by God. It did not take God long to catch Jonah. **“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”** (Jonah 1:4-5).

When this terrible storm hit and the ship threatened to break apart, everyone on the ship called out to their own god. Have you ever gone through a storm in life and received advice from everyone about how to weather it? Sometimes the advice is good. But a lot of times it isn't. Everyone calls out to their own gods to deliver themselves from the storm. Some people's god is denial. They deny the storm even exists. Other gods become work or alcohol, sexuality, relationships. Some go into a purely defensive posture and they hunker down in the hold of the ship and hope the whole thing doesn't sink.

We are in a storm now aren't we? With the events at the Capitol this week, and around the country for the past few weeks, the past nine months and longer—we have been in a storm. And it feels like the whole ship may just break apart. And everyone is calling out to their god.

Who is your God? Who are you calling out to?

When we are caught up in the storms of life, there is only one God to whom calling out does any good, He is the Lord of the storm and His name is Jesus Christ. **“For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved,” Romans 10:13.** He is the Lord of any storm we might face. The terrible storm that battered Jonah's boat did not arise by chance. It was the Lord's storm. He hurled the great wind upon the sea. The Bible tells of another time God demonstrated His control over the wind and waves. Jesus and the disciples were crossing the Sea of Galilee and a great windstorm arose

and the waves broke over the sides of the boat and it began to fill with water. But Jesus stood up and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace, be still." And they were. Sometimes, in the interest of stopping us from running, God brings storms into our life. Sometimes, in the interest of revealing to us His glory and majesty and giving us peace, God calms the storms in our life. Sometimes God's **"way is in the whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet"** (Nahum 1:3). Sometimes He says, "Peace, be still," but make no mistake, He is the Lord over every storm and He uses them to work His unchanging purposes and unflinching plans for our life, to demonstrate His outrageous love and His amazing grace.

And He is the Lord of the storm we are in now.

Amazingly, Jonah was so tired from running that he slept through the storm. It took the captain of the boat coming down from the storm into hold, incredulously finding Jonah fast asleep, waking Him up saying, **"What do you mean, sleeper? Arise, call out to your God! Perhaps He will give a thought to us, that we may not perish!"** Jonah 1:6 That word, "Arise," likely jolted Jonah from his slumber. It was the very word that the Lord spoke to Him before he uttered those dreadful words that sent him running, "Arise," the Lord said, "Go to Nineveh." Whether it was arising from a deep sleep or arising to a deep and eternal purpose, by now Jonah had to have known that God was not simply going to give up. Jonah knew he had failed to run from the God whose pursuit is perfectly persistent. Paul, likely thinking of Jonah, quoted a hymn of the early church to the Ephesians: **"Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead and Christ will shine on you."** Ephesians 5:14

When I was on the run from God, doing anything I could to avoid my Nineveh, my BHAM, I was actually working part-time in a church...merely to pay the bills. I did not want to be there long term. I was walking out the door one day considering what else I could do to make money, when a grandmother sitting in the church parlor politely greeted me and said, "I am praying for you."

I asked her curiously, "For what are you praying?"

And that kindly, southern, genteel, elderly grandmother said, "I am praying you will wake up and see you are supposed to be a pastor. I can see it. Everyone here can see it. And we don't understand why you seemingly can't. Is there something wrong with you? Because that's the only thing here that makes sense to me!"

That subtle 2X4 to the head woke me up.

And within a few weeks, I was back on the road to Nineveh. And every blessing, every good thing I have in my life can be traced back to that submission to God's call.

Are you so tired from running that you have simply fallen asleep? You are asleep and dreaming that a life without a Nineveh, but also without purpose and peace, powerful relationships, and relevance is the life you are intended to have. Sleeper, awake! Arise and Christ will shine on you. How do I know? How do I know that God has not forgotten? How do I know that God has not simply given up? We know because God's call is irresistible, His pursuit relentless, and He will work His unchanging purposes and plan for our life despite our flight. Jesus wants to wake you up, welcome you home, and send you to your Nineveh.

¹ *Gregory of Nazianzus, "Flight to Pontus," found in the Church Father Series 2, Volume 7 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999) 2.108.*