Sermon Series: The Reluctant Prophet
Sermon Title: Not for Prophet

Text: Jonah 1:1-16 -- Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, 2 "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me." 3 But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord. 4 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. 5 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. 6 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." 7 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. 8 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?" 9 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." 10 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. 11 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. 12 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." 13 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. 14 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." 15 So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. 16 Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

Introduction: There is an old Christian song (I'm not sure exactly how old) called "Hornets." It recounts the stories of **Moses, the Canaanites, and Jonah** and ***how God got them to say or do what he wanted them to, even though they were unwilling at first***. The song gets its title from a verse that explains how God promised to send **hornets to drive the Canaanites out of the Promised Land so that Israel could receive it** (**See Exodus 23:28**). The verse I would like to focus on this morning regards the Prophet Jonah, whose story is told in the Old Testament. **The words go like this**: **When Jonah was called to the work of the Lord, the outlook was not very bright; He never had done such a hard thing before, so he backed and ran off from the fight. But God sent a big fish to swallow him up, the story I'm sure you all know; He did not compel him to go 'gainst his will, He just made him willing to go**. **The chorus then says**: **He does not compel us to go (no, no); He does not compel us to go; God does not compel us to go 'gainst our will; He just makes us willing to go**.

That's a pretty helpful way for me to launch into a new four-week preaching series that I'm calling **THE RELUCTANT PROPHET**. Of course, I'm talking about **Jonah**, the man chosen by God to take a message of grave warning to the people living in Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire. "**Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me** (**Jonah 1:2**)." **This was the first time in Israel's history, by the way, that one of its prophets was sent outside of its borders to call out a Gentile city**. Sure, others had prophesied against other nations, but never had one been commanded to go to one of those places to present God's message. UNFORTUNATELY FOR JONAH, HE WAS COMMISSIONED TO GO!

If you're familiar at all with his story, you know that Jonah was not excited to answer the call of God. He didn't particularly care for the Assyrians and was probably not at all opposed to watching as God poured out His wrath upon them. **I'm sure he wondered why God was even taking the time to warn them of judgment.**

Wouldn't it be better if He just carried it out? How could He show any kind of love, that IS what you'd have to call it after all, in that He was giving a second chance to the enemies of Israel? WHAT HAD THEY DONE TO DESERVE IT?

That last question is a pretty good one for us to consider for a moment. **DOES ANYONE REALLY EARN/DESERVE GOD'S *CHECED*?** That's **the Hebrew word** Jonah uses later in **chapter four** to describe God's attitude toward the Assyrians. **It denotes His loving-kindness, mercy and pity**. The answer to the question is "**no**." People do not deserve God's loving-kindness, at least not according to the Bible. **What we earn is God's wrath for our sin and rebellio**n. **Listen to these words from Ephesians 2:1-3 -- And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, 2 in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. 3 Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest**. **SO, WHAT THE APOSTLE PAUL IS SAYING IS THAT WE DESERVE WRATH. What we receive, however, is His mercy and loving-kindness – Ephesians 2:4-5 -- But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ**. **Mercy is best understood as not getting something bad (His judgment) that we did earn.** THE REASON WHY GOD IS MERCIFUL TO US IS THAT HE LOVES US IN SPITE OF ALL THE WRONG THINGS WE DO. THAT'S A DIFFICULT IDEA FOR SOME PEOPLE TO WRAP THEIR MINDS AROUND. I KNOW IT WAS FOR JONAH. In our time remaining, **let me point out to you three observations about God's loving-kindness for mankind**.

You cannot EXPLAIN it (**Jonah 1:1-2 -- Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me**). God's love often makes no sense to us. He loves the unlovable. **In this case, He was declaring His love for the people of Nineveh, much to the dismay of Jonah**. A city originally built by the great-grandson of Noah -- **Nimrod, son of Cush** (**See Genesis 10:11**)**. Nineveh was a prominent city in the Assyrian kingdom inhabited by over 120,000 people who were known as evil and wicked. Here's what one of the other prophets, a man named Nahum, said about them: Nahum 3:1-4 -- 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!**

At first glance, we would think that Jonah would be delighted to take the message of their impending destruction to them. It's only when we read the actual story and realize that, implied in Jonah's message, is ***the opportunity for repentance*** that we understand his hesitation. **He simply could not fathom the love of God for a people who were such flagrant perpetrators of the worst kind of crimes against humanity**. WHAT KIND OF THINGS AM I TALKING ABOUT? The emperor of Assyria, **Shalmaneser III**, was well known for torturing his enemies. It wasn't unusual for him to cut off the legs and one arm of his victims, so the Assyrians could shake the person's hand in mockery as he was dying. They forced friends and family members to parade with the decapitated heads of their loved ones, elevated on poles. They pulled out prisoners' tongues and stretched their bodies with ropes so they could be flayed alive and their skins displayed on city walls. They burned younger victims alive. HOW IN THE WORLD COULD GOD SEND JONAH TO THESE PEOPLE AND WARN THEM OF THEIR IMPENDING DOOM **UNLESS** THEY REPENTED? THEY DID NOT DESERVE EVEN THE SLIGHTEST AMOUNT OF MERCY OR GRACE.

I wonder how many of us are just like Jonah. It makes sense for us to love those whom we deem as lovable. But to love those who are evil and who are bent on wickedness…well…that seems beyond the realm of possibility. Sadly, even Christians often forget that **we are who we are** only because of God's grace (**1 Corinthians 15:10** – The Apostle Paul says --**But by the grace of God I am what I am**). We somehow tend to

think of ourselves as more deserving of God's love than the next guy, while the truth is that we are no better than anyone else, according to **Psalm 14:2-3 -- The Lord looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one**. LISTEN: **God loves us, not because we deserve it, but because it is His nature to love** (**1 John 4:8 – God is love**). **This was a difficult concept for the Pharisees to grasp during the lifetime of Christ**. They could understand God's love for them because they were righteous. But how could God love sinners? That's why Jesus told the parable of the Prodigal Son in **Luke 15 – to demonstrate that God loves those who rebel against Him. In fact, you might say that Jonah was a little like the prodigal because he, too, was taking his stuff and running as far and as fast as he could from God. THIS BRINGS ME TO MY SECOND OBSERVATION ABOUT GOD'S LOVING-KINDNESS.**

You cannot ESCAPE it (**Jonah 1:3-7 -- But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord. 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**). Try as Jonah might, he was unable to flee from the task to which God had called him. **God loved the people of Nineveh, and by the sheer force of His sovereign will, Jonah was going to preach to them**. What did Jonah do to avoid answering the call of God? He decided to run as far away as possible. That's why he boarded a ship for Tarshish, which was likely on the western side of Spain. **If the people of Nineveh were going to be allowed to repent, that message wasn't going to come from him**! Yet God's CHECED pursued the messenger even as he fled. WHAT DID HE DO? He sent a great wind on the sea, resulting in a violent storm that threatened to break up the ship. When the sailors questioned the source of the storm, lots were cast and it fell to Jonah. **That's when 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." That's when the sailors became exceedingly afraid. Let me stop here and point out what we can learn SO FAR from Jonah's experience on the ship about God's loving-kindness.**

- **God's loving kindness means that He will bring suffering to some for the benefit of others**. The sailors were put through a harrowing experience, a storm so fierce that they believed they would all perish. Why? **So that Jonah might be brought to repentance and obedience and take God's message to the people of Nineveh, who would perish, too, without the prophet fulfilling his duty**. Interestingly, the Apostle Paul attributed his suffering to the same thing (**2 Corinthians 1:6a -- If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort**).
- **God's loving-kindness means that He will use anything to achieve His purposes**. **In this case, the sailors cast lots to find out who was responsible**. This was common for people in the Middle East, even for the Hebrews who believed that God would overrule the lot (**Proverbs 16:33 -- The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord**). God can not only use an exercise of casting lots ito bring about His will, but He can also use a hurricane or the act of a terrorist or anything else to do the same thing (**See Romans 8:28; Genesis 50:19-21**).

  In his book ***The Treasure Principle,*** **Randy Alcorn** shares this story: **In 1990, he was the pastor of a large church, earning a decent salary and considerable book royalties**. He participated in a peaceful, non-violent protest at an abortion clinic. As a result, he was arrested and sent to jail. Ultimately, the clinic won an 8.4 million dollar judgment against him and the others. They were ordered to pay the funds to the clinic. **He told the judge that he would pay anything he owed, but he couldn't give it to support**

abortions. Then he learned that his church was about to receive a writ of garnishment demanding that they surrender one-fourth of his wages to the clinic. **He was forced to resign his position and take a job at minimum wage**. **Did he curse God for his misfortune and suffering? No -- As a matter of fact, he declared that it was one of the best things that ever happened to him**. **Randy saw God take his understanding of God's ownership of his life to a new level**. He came to understand in a new way that everything he had was the Lord's. In fact, when the 10-year lawsuit had expired and Randy had the opportunity to earn more than the minimum wage, he rejected a raise, saying, "**God provides for us faithfully**." CLEARLY, GOD USES SUFFERING AND ANYTHING ELSE TO ACHIEVE HIS PURPOSES. (**Review: You cannot EXPLAIN God's loving-kindness; You cannot ESCAPE God's loving-kindness**.)

You cannot EXHAUST it (**Jonah 1:11-16 - 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. 12 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." 13 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. 14 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." 15 So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. 16 Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows**). **God not only loved the people of Nineveh and His rebellious prophet, but he also loved the sailors who worshipped other gods in ignorance**. When they discovered that Jonah worshipped the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land, they became very afraid. They rightfully deduced that this was occurring because he had run away from the Lord. Jonah instructed them to throw him into the sea, and it would become calm again. **Reluctantly, they did so. Their prayer tells us something about the transformation that was taking place inside of them**. **They prayed to the God of Jonah for forgiveness, obeyed the command of His prophet, feared God, gave thanks, and made religious promises to Him. It sure seems like they had come to exercise faith in the God of Jonah**! **God's love had redeemed what might be referred to as the secondary characters of this story**. That's the beauty of God's CHECED. He loves everyone! In fact, it is what sets the Christian understanding of God apart from every other religion. **GOD DISPLAYS LOVING-KINDNESS TO EVERYONE**: **You cannot EXPLAIN it. You cannot ESCAPE it. And you cannot EXHAUST it**.

Conclusion: At a comparative religions conference, the wise and the scholarly were in a spirited debate about what is unique about Christianity. **Someone suggested that what set Christianity apart from other religions was the concept of incarnation, the idea that God took human form in Jesus**. But someone quickly said, "**Well, actually, other faiths believe that God appears in human form**." **Someone else asked, "What about resurrection**?" The belief that death is not the final word, that the tomb was found empty. Someone slowly shook his head. Other religions have accounts of people returning from the dead. Then, as the story is told, **C.S. Lewis** walked into the room, tweed jacket, pipe, arm full of papers, a little early for his presentation. He sat down and took in the conversation, which had by now evolved into a fierce debate. Finally, during a lull, he spoke, saying, "**What's all this rumpus about?**" Everyone turned in his direction. Trying to explain themselves, they said, "**We're debating what's unique about Christianity**." "**Oh, that's easy**," answered Lewis. "**It's grace**." The room fell silent. **Lewis continued that Christianity uniquely claims that God's LOVE comes free of charge, no strings attached**. No other religion makes that claim. After a moment, someone commented that Lewis had a point; **Buddhists**, for example, follow an eight-fold path to enlightenment. It's not a free ride. **Hindus** believe in karma, that your actions continually affect the way the world will treat you; that there is nothing that comes to you not set in motion by your actions. Someone else observed that the **Jewish** understanding of the law implies **God has requirements for people to be acceptable to him,** and in **Islam,** God is a God of Judgment, not a God of love. You live to appease him. At the end of the discussion, everyone concluded Lewis had a point. Only Christianity dares to proclaim GOD'S LOVE as unconditional and unrelenting. **An unconditional love that manifests itself in the offer of grace and mercy for all**.