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## “Who’s Responsible For This Mess?”

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Mom prepares lunch for four-year-old Billy. The little angel sits down at the table, takes one look at his lunch, and announces he’d rather go to McDonald’s. Mom says, “No.” Billy throws a fit. Mom holds her ground. “Eat your lunch,” she says. Mom steps out of the room for a moment, and hears a big crash. She rushes back in. Billy’s plate of food is on the floor. He’s sitting there like this. “What happened in here?” Mom asks. “I don’t know.” “Did you do this?” “It wasn’t me,” Billy declares, “But now can we go to McDonald’s?”

Just in case you’re wondering, Billy didn’t get a Happy Meal that day. Mom didn’t need to be a detective to figure out who was responsible for the mess in her kitchen.

When calamities occur in our lives, who’s responsible? A hurricane sweeps up the East Coast. A terrorist sets off a bomb. A drunk driver causes a crash. A boyfriend cheats on a girlfriend. A cancer diagnosis surprises. A friend struggles with depression. A family member has dementia. A company lays off workers. Who’s responsible for these messes?

Sometimes it’s easy to assign responsibility. Sometimes it’s not so easy. Sometimes we blame ourselves for the things that go wrong. Sometimes we blame others. At times we blame God, and at times we don’t know who to blame.

Today’s Bible story centers on this very question. Who’s responsible? Last week, we started the story of the prophet Jonah. In chapter 1, remember, God gives Jonah a command: “Go to the great city of Nineveh, in a foreign land, and preach there.” But what does Jonah do? He hops a ship

to Tarshish, in the opposite direction. He runs away from his assignment, runs away from God. But God sends a big wind, and a huge storm blows up. Everybody aboard the ship is scared and desperate.

And here's where this week's story picks up. The sailors want to know who's responsible for this disaster. They cast lots to pick out a scapegoat. The lot falls on Jonah, their passenger. "What's going on?" they ask him. "Are you the one responsible? What's your deal?" And Jonah tells them that he is a Hebrew, and that he's running away from God.

Then Jonah does an amazing thing. The sea gets rougher and rougher. So Jonah says, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea, and everything will be fine. I know it's my fault that this storm has come our way." Eventually, that's exactly what they do; and, just like that, the sea calms down, the storm disappears, and everybody on the ship realizes that you don't mess around with Jonah's God.

Now, we'll hear next week about the smelly, damp hotel room that Jonah stayed in for the next few days. But let's pause right here to see what we can learn from Jonah's story to help us deal with the messes, the problems, and the tragedies in our own lives. Because we all get beat up by the world's storms, don't we? We all end up overboard once in a while, like Jonah did.

Here are three really quick lessons from Jonah for you and me. See if you can remember all three when you get home today.

Here's lesson #1: ***Don't blame God for every mess.*** Lots of us do this. And in today's story, it's true, God did send that big wind and that threatening storm. But, you know, some storms just happen. Not every calamity is an act of God. God doesn't cause every big and little thing that happens to us.

The reality is, we live in a dangerous world filled with perils that are not God's doing. We live in a world that's seriously messed-up because of sin. And the sin which we humans -- not God -- brought in to the world has made this a far deadlier and a vastly different world than the paradise God created. So let's be clear. Lesson #1: Don't blame God for every mess.

Lesson #2 from Jonah's story: ***Be accountable, when you're responsible.*** Just as Jonah was running away from God, often we run away from taking responsibility for the things we've done. Some of the messes we end up in are not our fault at all. But, when they are our fault, we need to be accountable.

When I make a mess in my own life, I need to admit it, like Jonah did. When you botch things up in your life, don't drop someone else in the grease. Don't blame your parents. Don't point a finger at your friends. Don't drop your boss under the bus. Don't blame God. Don't sit there like little Billy, pretending you don't know what's going on. Lesson #2 is to be like Jonah, and be accountable.

And here's lesson #3: ***Look to see what God is doing in your mess.*** Even when everything's going wrong, God is always doing things right. Even when bad things are happening, God is still working and moving and blessing in good ways. As Christians, we need to deliberately, intentionally look to see what God is up to in our messes.

Runaway Jonah got himself caught in a deadly storm, and thrown overboard to drown. Pretty awful stuff, right? And, yet, God was doing something wonderful in all of this. As we'll see in the weeks ahead, God was bringing Jonah to a place where Jonah could be useful again.

In our lives, too, we need to learn to look for what God is doing in the midst of our tragedies, and in our storms. Because God is always at work, below the surface, weaving his designs, making good come out of bad, bringing redemption to our failures and healing to our hurts, in ways that we can't even begin to imagine. But sometimes, if we're looking, we can see what God is doing.

The ultimate example of this is to look with eyes of faith at what happened on Good Friday. What a calamity that day was! What a total disaster! Jesus of Nazareth – holy Jesus, peace-loving Jesus, sinless Jesus – was crucified, for no good reason. Except for God's good reason. And you were God's good reason. God wanted to forgive your sins. So he sent his Son to the cross, to his death, for your good.

Remember, when things are at their worst, God is still always there. God is still always providing. God is always doing right, even when things go really wrong.

Jonah's story teaches us three simple lessons about life's messes. Take these lessons home, and take them to heart.

***#1 Don't blame God for every mess.***

***#2 Be accountable, when you're responsible.***

***#3 Look to see what God is doing in your mess.***

Amen!