

“Going Overboard”

Series: Summer Getaways, Week 8. Jonah and an Ocean of Avoidance

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When the invitation came, I should have said, “No.” I was invited to a Bachelor Party. Me? The minister? At a Bachelor Party? Turns out it wasn’t that type of Bachelor Party. They were taking the groom on a fishing trip off the Jersey Shore. So I accepted the invitation. Eighteen of us set sail that day for a five hour tour...a five hour tour.

The weather started getting rough
The tiny ship was tossed
Just eight people fished that day
The rest of us were lost.

Up and down the deck swayed riding the crest of fifteen foot waves straight into a nor’easter. Several faces turned green. Most laid down in the cabin and prayed for a quick death. A few fished. Me? Well, I figured if they were going to pull those fish out of the water, maybe I should lean over the railing and put something back in. What I put in the water probably equaled all the fish they took out. In fact, I felt I was going to turn inside out. Between my rather generous offerings, I sat down next to Gary Lesslie who became my Sidekick in Seasickness. We were as sick and weak as new born kittens. At one point Gary said to me, “If you try to walk on water, I’ll follow you.”

But the final shame came when I staggered into my house, white as a ghost carrying a ziplock bag of fileted bluefish. Lisa took one look at me and asked, “What happened?” When I finished telling my seafaring tale of woe did I receive any compassion? No! She just laughed at me. “What’s so funny?” I asked. She replied, “You just experienced my whole nine month pregnancy in one day.”

I now know just how Jonah felt. Until that day, I never understood why, in the middle of a raging typhoon, Jonah said to the captain, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea.” (Jonah 1:12) That day Gary and I were lining up to go overboard.

Jonah is a prophet and prophets have a very tough job. You have to deliver a message of bad news to an audience that almost always wants to “kill the messenger”...literally. Most prophets hear the Word of God, slightly resist, and then obey. Jonah hears the Word of God and goes the other way. God tells him where to preach and even gives him the content of the sermon (something I occasionally pray for on Saturday night.). The Lord says,

Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me. Jonah 1:2

God says, “Go east to Nineveh.” Jonah gets on a boat headed west to Spain. God says, “Go” and Jonah says, “No.” Jonah deceives himself into thinking he can run from “the God of heaven who made the sea and the land.” (Jonah 1:9) So the Lord sends a storm to turn him around. Friends, don’t be deceived, you can’t run from God. Sooner or later you will run into God. That’s the first lesson from Jonah: If God says, “Go,” don’t say, “No.”

God is calling everyone in this room to deliver His message. Unlike Jonah, God is calling us to tell not bad news but Good News. We have a message of grace, salvation and unconditional love. We can tell people Jesus came to love us, to give His life for us, to give us abundant life here

and eternal life hereafter. God says “Go and tell that message.” And still, like Jonah, we run the other way. Why? For one thing, we think nobody wants to hear it. We live in a religiously diverse, increasingly agnostic age and, frankly, no one wants to talk about religion. That is not true. People are talking about spiritual issues all the time. Why? Because storms hit everyone. In those moments the sandy foundations of their lives are shaken and they need Someone solid to help them stand. There are three key moments when people are open to spiritual help:

1. Transition – such as marriage, new baby, college, getting or losing a job, retirement
2. Tension – such as stress, worry, anxiety, pressure, fear
3. Trauma – such as disease, divorce, death

Storms happen and these are the moments when people cry out to God.

As the storm rages the sailors cry out to a multitude of gods. Notice, they are a religiously diverse group desperately seeking whatever help they can get. And where is Jonah? Asleep down below. Do you see the picture? Our family, friends and neighbors are caught up in countless storms. They are desperately seeking spiritual help and where is the Church? We are asleep in the Light! The captain shakes Jonah awake and says,

How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish. Jonah 1:6

Jonah knows why this is happening but he keeps his mouth shut until the sailors roll the dice which reveal he is the cause of their suffering. Finally Jonah can hide it no longer.

He answered, “I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land.” Jonah 1:9

Now an amazing thing happens. They should throw him overboard for causing all this trouble. That is Jonah’s suggestion. Instead, they try to save his life by rowing with all their might. Even when they finally give up, they beg a God they’ve never worshiped before to forgive them for killing an ‘innocent’ man. Notice, these pagan, heathen, idol worshipping sailors are more righteous than Jonah. And after the prophet goes overboard, they kneel and make an offering to the one true God they met for the first time in that moment, the one who made heaven and earth, land and sea.

Remember brothers and sisters, just because people don’t believe in Jesus does not mean they are bad or evil. When you share the Good News about Jesus you don’t have to judge people or prove they are wrong. When it comes to salvation, we are all in the same boat, facing the storms. We are no better than anyone else. The only thing we offer is The Way out. Why would you keep that from someone who is going under?

When Jonah falls into the raging sea God provides the first air-conditioned fully submersible cruise ship to bring the prophet back. In the belly of the big fish he has time to get honest with God. Why did he run? Jonah was afraid. Nineveh is the super power of the day. Those guys play rough. Jonah knows they will not listen for one second to a puny prophet from puny Israel. They will chew him up and spit him out. But Jonah is in awe of the wrong king. He fears the king of Nineveh when he should fear and revere the King of heaven. Just to prove God has a sense of humor, He sends a big fish to chew Jonah up and spit him out on the beach.

What’s your Nineveh? Who around you needs to hear the Good News? With whom are you afraid to share your faith? In your bulletin is a little card called “Invest and Invite.” Instead of

asking, “What’s in Your Wallet?” this card asks, “Who’s in Your Wallet?” There is space for three names. Take a moment and think of three people you know who do not go to any church. We are not trying to steal from anyone else’s flock. There were thousands of people in Nineveh and there are thousands of people in our area who go to no church. The fastest growing religious preference is “non-affiliation.” Please note, that’s non-affiliation *not* non-belief. Many are spiritual seekers who have no connection with a fellowship of believers. You don’t have to go far to find your Nineveh.

You just need to stop fearing them. Write down their names on the card and before you say a word, pray for them. That’s what Jonah does during his three days in the belly of the big fish. While he prays about his fears he makes a discovery.

Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the Lord. Jonah 2:8-9

In the middle of a storm people discover how powerless the gods of popularity, possessions, positions and pleasures are. Salvation comes from the Lord alone.

In the first half of the story, Jonah hears the Word and fails to do it. In the second half he makes the other common mistake of most believers: he does the Word but fails to hear it. When he finally arrives in Nineveh, it takes him three days to walk through the whole city as he shouts, ‘In forty days Nineveh will be toppled and turned upside down.’ Surprisingly, all the Ninevites, from the great king down to the lowest shepherd, repent. They cover themselves with scratchy burlap, sit in ashes and fast to show God they are sorry. They are so thorough they even cover the cattle and sheep with burlap and make them fast. Nineveh must be a really sinful city if even the livestock have to repent. God is so moved by their change of heart he has compassion on the city and does not destroy it.

Now you think Jonah would be thrilled. The whole capital city turns around and believes. He is the most successful prophet in history. Even Jesus can’t get Jerusalem to listen to Him. But instead Jonah is furious. “You forgive them God? Oh I hate when you do that!” Jonah doesn’t really want them to repent. After being drowned, swallowed and spit out, he feels he deserves to see a little fire and brimstone for all his troubles. While he sits and sulks, the Lord gives him a little object lesson. In one day, God grows a vine to shield Jonah from the burning Middle Eastern sun. But by the next dawn, a worm chews through the instant shade. Now Jonah is truly enraged.

But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?” “It is,” he said. “And I’m so angry I wish I were dead.” But the LORD said, “You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?” Jonah 4:9-11

Jonah does God’s Word. He tells the people to repent. He doesn’t hear God’s Word. He does not believe God truly wants to save them. Jonah says

I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Jonah 4:2

Jonah knows this. He does not understand it. Nor does he realize God wants us to be that way too. The story of Jonah pierces our hearts. The pagan sailors repent and believe. The wicked Ninevites, the enemies of God's chosen people, clean up their act and put their faith in God. Only Jonah the prophet, one of the chosen people who has the right theology and a right relationship with God, is wrong. It always starts with love. Without love, the prophet Jonah is a sulking, stew of self-pity sitting in the sun. You can speak the Good News with the tongues of men and of angels, the Apostle Paul says. But if you do it without love you are just an irritating, loud, noisy annoyance. Telling the Gospel of Love must begin with the love of God for all people. Be ready, at any time, to share that love.

I hate to be late. I won't say that I'm always on time, but I still hate to be late. Some years ago when Lisa and I were on vacation we were late for a plane. It was my fault. I miscalculated the time it would take to eat breakfast, check out, drop off the rental car, go through security and... we missed it. This wasn't so serious. We were just flying from one island to another. The airline people were very nice. They got us on the next flight – about thirty minutes later. Lisa and I couldn't sit together but it was a short flight so we said, "Fine."

While I was kicking myself for being late and grumbling to myself about not sitting with Lisa I noticed the woman next to me in the window seat was also late. "Didn't make the last flight huh?" I asked. "No," she said. "Didn't allow enough time. Glad I made this one. I have to make a connecting flight back to Australia." "Here on vacation?" I asked "Well. Sort of. I spent it with my mother." "That bad?" I laughed. "Oh I had a wonderful time with her. It was just shorter than I planned." I sensed there was more to the story. So I listened. And after a while she told me.

"You see, I had to help arrange my step-sister's funeral. She's on my father's side. You see, she was separated from her husband, deeply in debt and then she took her life." The whole story came pouring out. There was a terrible break down of relationships and this woman whom I'll call Julie, flew across the Pacific to step in and bring some sanity to the situation. "By whatever powers there are in the universe," she commented, "I was the one called on to make the arrangements." After the funeral she joined her mother for the remainder of her originally planned vacation. But in all that time she didn't want to talk about it to her mom. She talked the entire 30 minute flight and when it was over Julie said, "I'm sorry I bent your ear the whole time. It just came out of me. This is the first time I've said anything to anyone about it." "That's fine," I replied. "You needed to talk about it. Julie, do you mind if I pray for you and your family?" "I'd really appreciate that," she said.

We walked off the plane, I introduced her to Lisa and then we went our separate ways. "You know I was really complaining about missing our flight," I said to Lisa. "But I think God had a different plan." When God says "Go" don't say "No." You never know who will be waiting for you.