

# LIVING HOPE - "SALVATION BY SEA CREATURE"

## Ordinary Time

Jonah 1-4, a retelling

A Sermon Preached by  
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University Congregational United Church of Christ  
Seattle, Washington 98125  
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Scripture:

### **Jonah 1-4, a retelling<sup>1</sup>**

When God called Jonah to go to the city of Nineveh, to tell the people there that God was angry with them, Jonah didn't want to do it. He got onto a boat going the other direction instead!

But then the sea rose up, and a great storm scared all the sailors. As it raged on, the sailors began to suspect Jonah was the cause of their trouble. They asked him, "Who are you? Where do you come from? Why has this storm come upon us?"

And he told them, "I am a Hebrew – I worship the God who made all the sea, and the dry land. You should throw me into the sea; I've disobeyed my God, and this storm has risen up because of me."

The other sailors were scared to throw Jonah in, but they did what he asked, and the storm stopped right away.

And under those calm waters, God sent a big fish to swallow up Jonah. Jonah stayed in the belly of the fish for three days.

From that fish's belly, Jonah prayed to God. He said,

I call to you when I am in trouble, and you answer me.  
I call out from these depths, and I know you hear my prayer.

Then God told the fish, "That's enough. Deliver Jonah to the dry land."

Again God told Jonah to go and share God's message with Nineveh – and this time, Jonah did it. He walked across that large city, crying out they had forty days to change their ways. He warned of destruction to come if they continued in ways that weren't God's ways.

But they did change! They listened to Jonah, and every person and animal turned to God, dedicating themselves to goodness.

God saw the change and celebrated it.

But Jonah was angry. He pouted, then yelled at God, "I knew this would happen! You made me come here to warn them to turn to you, and they did, so now everything will be fine! I knew that you were full of grace and mercy and would not really harm them. Why did I even have to come?" God asked Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about this? You just showed up here. But this is a long-standing city, full of people and animals, too. Don't you know that I care for everyone in it?"

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<sup>1</sup> Retold from The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). 1989.  
Adaptation by [unknown – provided by Pastor Amy Roon].

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Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz

Prayer:

Gracious God,  
Amidst all of the stories that we're living and we're telling to ourselves,  
Amidst all of the stories that we get lost in  
And, yes, the stories that we need to put down,  
Help us today to hear a new story  
To be invited into it  
And perhaps find a way to live into the new lives  
That you're calling us to live.  
– Amen

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Perhaps one of the hardest experiences of life is to face that there are things that we cannot change.  
Perhaps, one of the hardest experiences of life is to have to face the reality that the job is over.  
Perhaps one of the hardest experiences of your life has been to face the relationship is over  
or the money is gone  
or life is this way and, no, not the way I wanted it to be  
And there is nothing I can do about it.  
And we're powerless to change.

One of the hardest things about life is facing that the bike tire is still flat; the casserole is still burned;  
that even though you've moved across the country to Seattle, Washington, Donald Trump is still  
President. There are realities that we cannot change and do anything about. We know well how to  
fuss and fidget. We know well how did not like it and want things to be different. But there are things  
in life that we can not change. And in those moments of our lives there is something that we can  
not see, even though, it's also true. And that is that when we have to face that there are things that  
we cannot change, there is more grace in that room than you can imagine, more grace in that room  
than you can even let in at that time. What we cannot see when we are facing things as they are that  
are real, that we cannot change is this: This is the wide open opportunity for your new life to happen.  
Won't you step into it?

For Jonah, life had changed. That's all that it means when it said, "The Word of God came to Jonah."  
The circumstances changed. All of the verbs, all of the ways that Jonah was used to making living, in  
whatever it was, changed when God said to Jonah, "Go!" And whatever his old job was and his  
comfortable life was, it all changed when God said, "You have a new job. You are to be a prophet."  
And Jonah, perhaps like you and me, did not like to have to face what he did not want to face, to do  
what he did not want to do. Reality had changed.

Jonah like me – and perhaps like you – knew what to do: He ran.

How do you run from reality – I mean the realities in your life – how do you run away from what is  
true and how ARE you running today? We run in so many different ways. We run in saying there must  
be one more way to fix it. There must be one more thing to try. There must be one way I could get  
out of this. There may be one more way I could dream it wasn't true. There might be one more way I  
could numb myself out from facing this. Jonah is the patron saint of everybody who doesn't want to

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surrender and he is still preaching to us today. "Don't give in," Jonah said. "Don't give in to what is real."

And so Jonah runs. Takes off. Finds a boat. Nice.

Finds that there's a big storm on the boat. Not so nice.

Finds on the boat that there're very competent sailors and they want to do something about the storm.

Jonah wants to do something to just end the story. And Jonah is that that point in his life when he does not want to face what he has to face that he is willing to even throw his life away. "Throw me overboard." And at last they do – until the big whale eats him up.

You know when we all are running away from reality, from facing what we cannot change, from looking it in the eye is where we all end up. The story is true. We all end up in the belly of a whale. When all there is is us, stuck back in on the imprisonment of ourselves, and our own woe and our own complaining and our own "Oh! We do not want it to be this way." And there is Jonah in the whale in his stinky smelly self. And he goes on. And he goes on. And he goes on. And he fills up most of the story with this song that goes on and on and on, about how it is for him and how, yes, he'll give in to what he needs to do and how things need to change.

Years ago when I started dating Tsuneko, she has an elderly Japanese friend Shia who said to Tsuneko, "You be careful! Those whites, they just talk and talk and talk!"

She nailed me! Just nailed me! Oh, my gosh! So good at the talk and talk and talk. "Oh, I'm ready to surrender! Oh, yes, my life's changed! Oh, yes, I'm different." – So good at the talk, talk, talk!"

The whale has enough of it and says to Jonah, "Enough talk." Spews him out. Phtoo. Now, Jonah says, "Alright." Dusts himself off. "I'll go do, live the new life I'm supposed to live. And go do it." So he wanders around in Nineveh, saying, "Doomed! Doomed! You're all doomed! Doomed!"

And people asked, "Are there any other options? Is there a door number two?"

"Doomed! Doomed! Doomed! You're all doomed!"

When the answer is "doomed", what the heck do you do? When that's the reality in your life and mine, what you do? Just, "Doomed." This is where the people of Nineveh are just brilliant. They're just brilliant! There is no second option. They go, "Well, we're doomed. What else could we do? Let's just stop doing it. Whatever we were doing, let's just stop doing it. If we were addicted to violence," as they seemed to be, "You know, let's just stop that. In fact, let's just go and cut up burlap bags" – just a bunch of burlap bags – "and put 'em over our heads." So they do. The whole city of 'em, they just put burlap bags on their heads. They put 'em on their babies' heads. And they put 'em on the kittens' heads. And they put 'em on the cows' backs. They put 'em everywhere. And even the king, he takes off his robe and he puts a burlap bag over his head. He says, "We're going to change. We change. We're going to change." They surrender. When there is nothing else to do, when there's no

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hope of anything being different, the Ninevites choose the most radical amazing imaginative choice, they just surrender.

Have you ever surrendered in your life? I mean, surrender to what is real? And what's happened? Well, in the story this happens: everything happens. I mean, everything happens! 'Cause now there's room for everything. And God, who is so hell-bent on God's capacity for judgment, changes! Surrenders! And instead gives in to his freedom for forgiveness.

Beautiful story. A wonderful story about surrender and the possibilities for all of us that could happen in it. And everyone surrenders in the story.

Well, everybody but Jonah. Jonah does not surrender! Again, being the patron saint of all of us who will not surrender, will not give in, says, "I am so mad. I hate this! I knew this was going to happen!"

And Jonah goes and pouts.

Do you like pouting? I happen to quite love pouting! I love my moments of feeling SO sorry for myself, SO sad that things are this way and not the way I wanted them to be, SO feeling sad and miserable.

And that's exactly what Jonah does. He goes out and plunks himself in the middle of the desert and says, "Woe! Woe! Woe is me!"

Now, you know, I do think that there is a place in our lives for pouting and there is a time in our lives, yes, for pouting. But I also believe that God wants more from you and me than just pouting.

And being the God of compassion, God has compassion on poor, pouting Jonah who doesn't want to face the way things are, the way things have changed. And God in God's compassion goes and makes a tree. Ah. Jonah is now the happy guy in the desert. Happy guy the desert pulls out a lemonade, pulls up a chair sits under the tree. Life is good!

And then his life happens. God puts a worm into the tree. But that happens, too. Worm comes into the tree. Tree dies.

Jonah is miserable. Jonah is unhappy. Jonah wants to die. There is no possibility. Jonah is full of complaint. Jonah doesn't want to surrender and give in.

Where were you on Monday morning at 10 o'clock?

For me, I was outside with what looked like everybody in Seattle looking, waiting to see an eclipse. Or, like me, you were standing under trees saying, "Look at those amazing shadows." Or you were just looking around to everybody else who were on the parks and on the corners of the streets who had emptied the stores. Everybody! All of our Monday morning productivity gone to hell! And we were all out there doing what really mattered: We were watching this amazing phenomenon of what is.

And what is is this: we got to, in that hour, in that little bit of time, to see how life is.

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There was light.

And then there was dark.

And then there was light again.

There was a tree that grew and gave us great shade and, oh, how wonderful it was.

And there was a tree that died in your life and mine how sad we have been.

Some people say that "hope" is rooted in our capacity to deny reality. In other words, the truly hopeful ones among us are those with the best imaginations. They're are the ones that imagine, "Oh, it could be different; it doesn't have to be this way. You know it really isn't this way." . . .

And I think that's absolutely wrong. I think that hope is not rooted in the denial of reality, but that the ground and the wellspring of hope is in reality.

And I mean this reality. I mean the realities in your life. And in mine.

And I mean this: I mean just take account of yourself today. I mean everything that you are, right? In your beauty that you hopefully know. In your brokenness that, yes, you hopefully know. In all that you long to be, oh, yes! You know, we wouldn't be this – I mean you wouldn't be you and I wouldn't be me and we wouldn't be here together – unless all that other stuff happened. You know, there's been sunshine in your life and in mine. And I know that because you're sitting here; you're alive today. And there's been heartbreak in your life and there's been dead trees in your life – and I know that, as well, because you're sitting here and you're alive today, as well.

And you know what? All of us have survived. I mean, the reality is, people have survived. We've not survived without our bruises and without our breaks. But we've survived – and we're here today. We have learned something about surrender. We've learned something about stepping into the new. We stepped in here today.

But there's also this:

There's that reality of that tree.

There's the reality of that eclipse.

There's the reality of what is all around us and right here.

It's how creation works.

It's how God works.

It's that there is light.

There is darkness.

There is light that will come again.

There is life.

There is death.

There is new life.

There is a new life that will come again – but only if we're willing to surrender into it, I mean – In the kind of fullness of life that is there before all of us

You know before all of us today – I mean right here right, now this morning –there really is a choice. On this step along the way for you and for me, are we going to step into despair? Or are we going to

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step in the hope? And Despair says, "The present? The present is all you got." And Hope says, "Go out dancing – I mean dancing into the dark corners of your life. Go out dancing there and discover the new life that is before you."

*Liz Gilbert:*

The man walked into the church office looking for a pastor to pray with him.

He couldn't wait until tomorrow.

He didn't want to call the pager.

He was in pain and he needed someone now.

And there we all are: holding onto realities that we do not want to face needing somebody to step in and help us face them together.

*I said, "I'll pray with you."*

And there we are, perhaps. Are you willing to put down everything that you're not – all the credentials that you do not have – to step into what this moment requires, this moment requires, you to be and do.

*He was mad.*

*Mad at everything.*

*Mad at God.*

*Mad at himself.*

*Mad at the drinking he could not stop.*

Perhaps one of the hardest things in life is facing the things that we are powerless to change.

*He said, God must be punishing him.*

*I said I have some different ideas about God.*

*I said, "I believe that God is all about love a love for each of us no matter who we are, no matter what we've done."*

*I told him, "I know God loves you no matter what."*

Am I willing to surrender? Are we? ... to the present reality of who we are into all [the newness] that God calls us to be?

*I took his hands in mine. I began to pray.*

*[Silent prayer.]*

Amen

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Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew from [www.universityucc.org/Sermons/2017/9/20/2017](http://www.universityucc.org/Sermons/2017/9/20/2017)