



"It Is Well"

Scripture – Mark 4:35-41

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, June 20, 2021

*When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.*

To grasp the true intensity and conviction of these words, we must know the story that led to their writing. In the 1860s, Horatio Spafford was a senior partner in a successful law firm and a Presbyterian elder. He and his wife, Anna, were active members of a Presbyterian congregation in Chicago.

The city was growing, so they invested heavily in real estate along Lake Michigan's shoreline. Then, in 1871, the Great Chicago Fire reduced the city to ashes and wiped out most of their investments.

Two years later, they planned a European vacation for their whole family, but at the last minute, Horatio was detained by a business matter. Anna and their four daughters set sail for Paris. Horatio would catch another ship in a few days to meet them.

One week into the voyage, in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, at two o'clock in the morning when all of the passengers were asleep, a British vessel accidentally slammed into them in the darkness.

The ship that Anna and her girls were on, sank in 12 minutes. The British ship was damaged, but remained afloat and picked up survivors. Anna was found unconscious on a floating piece of the ship, but all four girls drowned.

The British ship was badly damaged, but soon a cargo ship heading toward Great Britain took the survivors to Wales. When they arrived, Anna sent a telegram to Horatio to inform him that she had survived, but their daughters had not.

He quickly arranged to set sail to be reunited with his wife. At one point in his "voyage, the captain summoned him to the bridge. Pointing to his charts, he explained that they were passing over the spot where his wife's ship had sunk, and his daughters had perished. Some accounts say that Spafford returned to his cabin and wrote the hymn *It Is Well with My Soul*."¹ It is a powerful testament of faith following such a life-altering loss.

Today's text from the Gospel of Mark was written for people caught in the storms of life. The author of Mark wrote to second generation Christians who had lost loved ones and who lived in fear of being persecuted and possibly killed for the faith they professed.

This story has spoken to people throughout the ages, because at one time or another, we all face moments of distress and turmoil. Whether it is a debilitating illness, a financial disaster, a family crisis, or the death of a loved one, sooner or later everyone faces a severe storm. And when those storms threaten to overwhelm us, we need something to help us endure.

Our passage begins with the sun setting on a long day of teaching, and Jesus and his disciples standing on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus says, "Let us go across to the other side," and the disciples crawl into the boats and set sail. In a short time, the sun vanishes below the horizon and darkness blankets them.

As they are making their way across the sea, the wind picks up force, the stars disappear and the waves become angry. They are far from shore now, and the wind velocity is ramping up. The waves begin to crash against the sides and some are high enough to spill into the boat. They are in danger of being swamped or washed overboard. The disciples, several of whom are experienced fishermen, are having their skills pushed to the limit. Every able hand is bailing water and straining every fiber to keep their boat from capsizing, but they are terrified that they may not survive the tempest. Everyone is frantically doing what he can to keep their vessel afloat. Everyone, except Jesus.

The gospel writer says that Jesus is in the stern, asleep on a cushion. The disciples wake him up and say, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" If you are skeptical that Jesus would be napping in a boat that is about to be swamped, then you have picked up on a clue that this is not simply a retelling of a breath-taking moment when Jesus and the disciples survived a nasty storm. Rather, it is a symbolic story that evokes rich images to which everyone who has faced a harrowing experience can relate.

In ancient times, to talk about the sea was not only to speak about a particular body of water. The sea evoked images of the watery chaos that preceded the creation of the world and continued to be a menacing threat to life.

Our passage appears to give too simple of an answer. After the disciples wake him from his slumber, Jesus shouts at the storm and all is calm. He then appears to berate the disciples for their lack of faith. However, perilous seas are a part of life. God has created a world in which we are free – free to build up or free to destroy. Without freedom our lives would be meaningless; with freedom, our lives are vulnerable.

After calming the storm, Jesus says, "Where is your faith?" Is he trying to make them feel guilty because they were scared out of their wits? Was he saying, "Have faith that everything will turn out fine." Or, could his question be an encouragement to ponder their faith and to realize: Faith is where you can find courage to face the crisis. Faith is where you can find strength to battle the storm. Faith is where you discover that you need not face the storms of life alone.

We wish that when ill winds blow into our lives we could simply appeal to God and the cancer would be cured and the terrorists would disappear and the job would be saved and the loved one would not die. However, this was not the story of the disciples, nor the early church, nor the church today. God does not make all of the storms of life vanish. However, God does not remain asleep and unconcerned. In God, we can discover the courage to

face the storm, the strength to endure it and meaningful ways to cope with it. God calls us into the body of Christ, the church, so that no one must face a storm alone.

Following the loss of their four daughters, the Spaffords returned to Chicago where they tried to rebuild their lives. Five years after their tragedy at sea, Anna gave birth to a daughter, and two years later, a son. However, at the age of four, their son died of scarlet fever.

Sadly, some members of their Chicago church did not respond to their catastrophes with compassion and support. Instead, like the so-called friends of Job, they openly asked "What have the Spaffords done for God to heap such misfortunes upon them?"²

The Spaffords left the church. However, several of their friends also left the church and rallied around them. Within a year, and shortly after the birth of a daughter they named "Grace," the Spaffords and 16 of their friends moved to Jerusalem. They called themselves "The Overcomers," and settled together in a small house in the Old City of Jerusalem.

They lived as the early Christians did, a simple life with everything held in common. Their door was always open to their Arab and Jewish neighbors as well as the Bedouins. Their reputation for hospitality spread and they became well known for their charitable acts toward Jews, Christians, and Muslims.³ Knowing tragedy first hand, they reached out in love to mend the lives of others who experienced hardship.

A dozen years later, 70 Swedes living in America joined them. They needed much larger housing and bought a palace that had been built for a Turkish pasha. They became known as the American Colony. Many years later, their large building would become The American Colony Hotel. Dozens of us from Westminster have enjoyed time there during our pilgrimages to the Holy Land, as has Mark Twain, Winston Churchill, Bob Dylan, and a host of others.

"The original founders retained their first home in the Old City and used it for charitable purposes, providing care to needy children. Today that building houses the Spafford Children's Center, which runs medical, infant welfare and social work departments for local Palestinian and Israeli children."⁴

Over the years, thousands of children have received the help they needed; all because a couple who experienced horrible tragedies defiantly clung to their faith that God can bring light out of terrible darkness. Their belief that God is a God of resurrection is the only way they could sing, "It is well, it is well with my soul."

NOTES

1. Horatio Gates Spafford - The story behind the hymn "It is well with my soul," *bethelripon.com*
2. www.loc.gov/exhibits/americancolony/amcolony-jerusalem.html
3. www.americancolony.com/history
4. Ibid.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Gracious and generous God, we are grateful for your gift of life and for the chance to explore the beauty and the wonder of your marvelous creation. When the waters of life are calm and your Spirit fills our sails, our boat glides across the placid surface sending out gentle ripples that touch the hulls of fellow sailors. We soak in the warmth of the sun, we find joy in the festive sails and the acrobatic seagulls, and we marvel at the shards of light that sparkle as we voyage across the undulating field of diamonds.

But when the peaceful skies suddenly turn menacing, and viscous winds kick up angry waves that threaten to overwhelm us, we shudder. We call out to you through the turbulence and plead with you to still the storm.

Why is it Lord, that when the sea turns choppy, we imagine you asleep and unconcerned about our peril? Why is it that when rough waves batter us, we believe you have either stirred up the danger or do not fully recognize our plight?

Make us mindful that you have not predetermined our voyage, but have given us freedom to chart our own course. Such freedom makes our lives vibrant and exciting, but it also harbors risk. We confess there are times when we fumble the freedom you place in our hands. We make unwise decisions and steer head-on into hazardous waters. Sometimes ignorance lands us in a raging storm, other times foolishness lures us into predictable hazards. However, there are also times when we do our utmost to skirt perilous seas, yet gales seem to hunt us down and hurricane-force winds engulf us.

Help us to know, comforting God, that you are always in the boat with us and attentive to our needs. Although we may be filled with fear, although our confidence may be shaken, you can help us muster whatever courage we need to face each raging storm.

Help us to know, O God, that you are always at our side, and in you we can find the determination to withstand the ferocity of the chaotic forces that threaten to destroy us. Although we may think the strain will break us, you can stiffen our resolve not to be swept away by any violent squall.

Help us to know, faithful God, that you will never leave us, and we can discover in you wisdom for handling the storms of life. You teach us to bind our vessel together with others, knowing that it is better to face adversity united, than to attempt to face the turmoil alone.

Now, we join our voices as one and pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray together saying,

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.