

“It Is Well with My Soul”

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship on October 18, 2020
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
Text: Jonah 1:1-17

This is one of those old time hymns beloved of so many. In fact, I am including it in this sermon series precisely because when I put out a request for suggestions through Facebook chat groups, this was one of the few hymns that received multiple votes. Thus, I could not overlook it, even though I confess it is not one of my favorites. Actually, that’s not entirely true. I do love the refrain, especially when it is sung using the “echo” effect of the phrasing: “It is well (it is well) with my soul (with my soul), it is well, it is well, with my soul.” Truth be told I think we all long to be able to say that, to sing that, and truly mean it. Surely peace in our souls is a rarity these days of seemingly endless worry and anxiety. Perhaps this longing is why so many are drawn to this hymn.

No surprise, then, to learn that this hymn was composed by a man – Horatio Spafford – who was desperately in search of comfort and a sense of peace in the aftermath of a horrendous series of events in his life which took everything from him. Up until 1871, Spafford was a successful lawyer in Chicago and an Elder in his Presbyterian Church. He was married and the father of five children. Then, in 1871 his four-year old son died. Soon after, the Chicago Fire happened taking Spafford’s fortune, heavily invested in Chicago real estate with it. By 1873 he was still struggling to recoup his losses when another severe economic downturn further increased his financial woes. He decided that what his family needed was a change of pace via a vacation in Europe, not surprising since his wife Anna was originally from Norway. Arrangements were made for the family to travel from New York City to France. At the last minute, Spafford decided to delay his departure to tend to some urgent business matters in Chicago. His wife Anna and their four daughters, 11-year old Annie, 9-year old Maggie, 5-year old Bessie and 2-year old Tanetta, went ahead as planned and boarded the ship *Ville du Havre* in New York City. The voyage was uneventful until midway through the crossing when the *Ville du Havre* collided with the *Loch Earn*, a Scottish three masted schooner, at 2am on Saturday, November 22nd. The collision was so violent

that the sleeping passengers were awakened and came up on deck only to find the captain assuring them all was well. In fact, nothing could have been further from the truth as the *Ville du Havre* had nearly been broken in two and was sinking rapidly. The passengers quickly figured this out and began trying to deploy the lifeboats themselves only to find that several of them were stuck fast to the deck having just been painted. So, it is no surprise that the number of fatalities was high. 61 passengers and 26 crew survived but 226 passengers were drowned, Spafford's four daughters among them. His wife Anna survived and was found unconscious floating on a plank of wood. When she landed with the other survivors at Cardiff, Wales nine days later, she immediately telegraphed her husband saying, "Saved alone. What shall I do..." We can only imagine how Spafford reacted to such horrendous and tragic news. He immediately left for Wales to bring his wife home. Of course, he had no choice but to travel by ship himself and the Captain of the vessel on which he was traveling knew of his sad story. He sent for Spafford when their ship was sailing over the spot where the *Ville du Havre* went down. It was on this painful and sad voyage that Spafford wrote the words to this hymn, "It Is Well with My Soul." The music was written later by Philip Bliss who named the tune *Ville du Havre* after the sunken vessel. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_Ville_du_Havre)

Knowing the sad story behind this beloved hymn gives a whole new sense of meaning behind the words Spafford chose. "When sorrows like sea billows roll" no longer sounds like just a poetic turn of phrase. For Spafford this was real, soul-crushing pain acknowledging that his four young daughters were swept away by the sea. Yet Spafford insists that "whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, it is well, it is well, with my soul." Yikes! You're sailing over the place where your remaining four young children drowned in a shipwreck that was now 3 miles deep beneath you and you can say, "it is well with my soul?" Really? How is that even possible?

Well, we can find Spafford's answer to that question in the remaining verses. In verse two, he states that he believes that all this evil and torment comes into the world via Satan but that Christ knows how vulnerable each of us is to Satan's whims and willingly "sheds his own blood for my soul." Verses three and four continue on with more details on this notion that as long as we acknowledge Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior by accepting

his gift of salvation through his death on the cross, we can be assured that, at the last, all will be well when we find ourselves in heaven. In these verses Spafford was able to write in such a moment of abject grief, we see that he found the greatest comfort in what he saw as several theological truths. First, he believed that God was ultimately in charge. Second, he believed that bad things happened because of Satan's action in the world, not because of God. Third, he believed that accepting Jesus' sacrifice on the cross in atonement for sin was the only antidote to Satan's evil actions. Therefore, if one was able to see that such a great tragedy was Satan's fault *and* that ultimately Jesus would triumph over Satan through atoning for humanity's sins on the cross, then one would also see that this great tragedy was only a temporary hardship within the framework of God's eternity. With that understanding, one could truly sing, "It is well, it is well, with my soul."

But is this how we understand God working in our lives? Do we believe that Satan is behind all the bad things that happen? Do we believe that all that is required of any of us is to accept Jesus' sacrifice on the cross as our ticket to heaven where all will be well in spite of all the tragedies and hardships and pain of life in the world each day? With all due respect to Mr. Spafford's unbearable sadness and grief, this seems to me like a tremendous over-simplification of a complex tragedy. This, to me, sounds as though God allows Satan to just mess with people, causing pain and hardship for the sole purpose of creating situations in which people are forced to turn to Jesus for salvation as a result of his bloody death on the cross. It reduces Jesus to a sort of cosmic eraser who washes away our sin and our broken hearts too. But is that all there is to faith? Is waiting for things to be better in heaven all we are left with in the wake of great tragedies? Where is the expectation that humans, beloved beings created in the image of God, have a responsibility to be proactive in their relationship with God rather than reactive when things get tough?

Thinking about these questions is what guided me to the scripture text I chose for our reflections on this hymn. Well, that and I was so intrigued by the line, "when sorrows like sea billows roll." There are actually some great Bible stories about sea billows rolling and I considered all of them but eventually I settled on one of my favorite stories about God's

reluctant prophet, Jonah. Let's face it, Jonah would not be Jonah without sea billows rolling. But how did he get to that point on the sea? That's the best part of the story, which we read just a few moments ago. Long story short, "the word of the Lord came to Jonah" and God told him to go to Ninevah and tell the people there to repent. Jonah, knowing that Ninevah was the capital city of an enemy nation, decided he did not want to do what God was asking so he took off. He went to the port city of Joppa and bought a ticket on a ship sailing to Tarshish. Apparently, he believed he could run away from God *and* that God would not be able to find him. He soon found out the folly of this thinking when God sent a storm so powerful that the crew of the ship thought it would sink. The sea billows were rolling indeed. They were throwing things overboard to lighten the load and praying to their respective gods at the top of their lungs, to no avail. Meanwhile, Jonah was sound asleep in the hold. Geesh. Who is this guy? Anyhow, the captain came to get him and eventually it came out that the storm was the result of God being angry with Jonah. My favorite part of this story is that when Jonah told the crew it was his fault and that they should throw him overboard to appease God, they didn't want to do it. They tried harder to save the ship on their own but when it was clear this wasn't going to work, they realized they would have to throw Jonah overboard so they did. But not before praying to God for forgiveness if they were spilling innocent blood. So, Jonah lands in the ocean where he gets swallowed by a whale and you know how that turned out.

So, how does the story of Jonah connect with the story behind the writing of "It Is Well with My Soul"? Besides, the whole sea billows rolling thing? In both stories, there is an assumption that God is behind it when bad things happen. It's true that for Spafford it was Satan that was responsible for the bad things, but if God is all powerful, then Satan could only do these bad things because God allows it. For Jonah, God didn't send the storm to destroy him so much as to get his attention, and to give him the opportunity to set things right. Spafford's answer to the bad things that happened to him was to surrender all his grief to the belief that no matter what awful things happen in life, it is ultimately okay because Jesus saves us for heaven. For Jonah, his time in the sea billows taught him that he

could not hide from God and God's plans for him so he better figure out what God wanted him to do and do it.

So where does this leave us? Seasick from all those rolling sea billows? I hope not! What we have in these two stories – one embedded in an old, familiar hymn and the other a beloved story from the Bible – are two different ways of understanding God and our relationship with God. For Spafford, one's relationship with God was pretty one dimensional – accepting the gift of eternal salvation as a result of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross for our sins to guarantee our entrance into heaven at the end of life. Knowing this is where we will be for all eternity is what allows all to be well with our souls. Jonah, on the other hand, learned the hard way that a relationship with God is give and take. God gives you something to do and you do it. Jonah's story emphasizes personal responsibility in one's relationship with God. It reminds us we have to answer to God for what we do, and what we don't do. Put another way, Spafford illustrates in his hymn a relationship with God that is passive while Jonah's story tells us in no uncertain terms that our relationship with God must be an active one.

But what of the tragedy that prompted Spafford's hymn in the first place? Doesn't his response make sense in the light of such a great tragedy? After all, he had lost all five of his children in just a few years. It only stands to reason that he would be looking for assurances from God that he would be with them again one day. Of course! That is totally understandable. Grief is a hard master and it takes real, sustained effort to survive it. Certainly surrendering to God's will is part of that. But it can't be all there is. Time to heal, to recover, to rest in God's presence is all important in dealing with the aftermath of bad things, of horrible tragedies and unexpected loss. But, eventually, that surrender must take on the character of Jonah's surrender to God's will for him to DO something. God needed Jonah to step beyond his fear, beyond his own limitations to do more than he thought he could. The truth is, God will always challenge us to reach beyond ourselves in whatever way we are able to, to be a part of God's unfolding vision for the world. Sea billows will roll – figuratively and literally – through our lives. That we know for sure. How we respond to life's changing tides is up to each of us. But, hey, we're New Englanders – we got this... Amen.