

I

Horatio Spafford was an attorney who had done well for himself by investing in real estate in his hometown of Chicago. But when the Great Chicago Fire ripped through the city in 1871, it ripped through most of his family fortune as well.

Nevertheless, as a man of deep faith, Horatio poured himself into his work, helping to rebuild the city and assist the 100,000 Chicago residents who had been left homeless by the fire.

Two years later, Horatio and his wife Anna decided to take their young family to Europe. However, at the last minute, Horatio was detained by urgent business at home, so he sent Anna and their four daughters ahead aboard a vessel called the *Ville du Havre*, and Horatio and promised to join his family in Europe a few days later.

However, in the predawn darkness of November 22, 1873, the *Ville du Havre* collided with another vessel, and within minutes, the ship sank beneath the waves. When the survivors reached the coast of Wales, Anna Spafford sent her husband a cable that simply read, "Saved Alone."

Horatio immediately booked passage to join his wife. While en route, on a cold December night, the captain of the vessel called Horatio aside and said, "I believe we are now passing over the place where the *Ville du Havre* went down."

Horatio returned to his cabin, but he could not sleep. So he took out a piece of paper and began to write. And his meditations that dark night at sea eventually became the foundation for a hymn, the first stanza of which goes like this:

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, it is well
with my soul."

Whatever my lot, thou hast
taught me to say, it is well.

What could possess a man to
sincerely write, "It is well with my soul"
after suffering such a series of
devastating tragedies?

I don't believe it was a
commitment to some notion of stoic
masculinity or Victorian era
sensibilities. Horatio Spafford was a
man of deep faith in Christ, but anyone
in such a situation would ask some very
hard questions of God. So what was it
that could possess a man so beset by
grief and tragedy to write quite
sincerely, "It is well with my soul."

II

I submit to you that it was a
Horatio's deep understanding of
gratitude.

Gratitude, theologically
understood, is more than just good
manners or the recognition of being in
someone's debt.

Gratitude, theologically understood, is the recognition that all that we have, all that we are, and all that we will be, is a gift from a good and gracious and exceedingly generous God.

For us as Christians, when we look at the cross, we are reminded once again of the height and depth and breadth of God's love for us. We are reminded that in the life and ministry and death and resurrection of Jesus, God did for us what we could have never done for ourselves. We are reminded that we were once cut off from God and without hope, but now we have been adopted by God and made co-heirs with Christ, and there is nothing that can ever take that away.

I think it was that commitment to gratitude that gave Horatio and Anna Spafford the kind of supernatural peace that Jesus promised on his last night with the disciples, the kind of peace that passes all understanding, the kind of peace that enabled Horatio and Anna Spafford to endure unimaginable pain.

For the next few Sundays, we're going to be talking about this kind of gratitude, as well as some of the enemies of gratitude, the habits and practices that that so often rob us of the peace and joy that gratitude brings.

III

And so our reading today comes to us from the story of the Exodus. You may remember the basic contours of the Exodus story, but allow us to refresh our memories. By a long set of

circumstances, the people of God came to dwell not as free people in their own land, but as refugees and slaves in the Land of Egypt.

For 400 years, that's how it was. Life in Egypt for the people of God brutal, sad, and short.

But God heard the cries of God's people. God saw how their oppressors mistreated them. And then, again, after a long set of circumstances, God led them out – out of Egypt, out of slavery, out of bondage – and into a new and unpredictable future. But all was not well. And that brings us to our text for today, a reading from Exodus 17:1-7. Listen now for a Word from God.

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² The people quarreled with Moses, and said, 'Give us water to drink.' Moses said to them, 'Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?' ³ But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, 'Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?' ⁴ So Moses cried out to the LORD, 'What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.' ⁵ The LORD said to Moses, 'Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶ I will be standing there in

front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.’ Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. 7 He called the place Massah, and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, ‘Is the LORD among us or not?’

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Already in the wilderness, God has proven that God is attentive to the physical needs of God’s people. When the people were hungry, God provided a fine, sweet, flaky bread-like substance the people called “manna.” God caused quail to come up and cover the ground.

But the people’s gratitude for God’s presence and provision, their joy in God’s presence and their trust in God’s future, has been eroded by one of gratitude’s chief enemies – the enemy of nostalgia.

They say that the sense of smell is the one that is most strongly tied to our memories. And I was reminded of that fact this week when I walked into the gym at the middle school our older boys will be attending this fall. I am convinced that every middle school gym in America smells just like the one I attended.

But nostalgia is more than just a memory. Nostalgia is an idolatrous longing for a past that never existed, a memory of Egypt that remembers the predictability of life there, but

whitewashes its inhumanity and abject brutality.

The people of God had lived for 400 years under the yoke of slavery. They had been made to make bricks all day. They had no rights. Every now and again, the Pharaoh would order their male children to be killed. And nostalgia caused the people of God to look back and say, “Those were the good old days.” Nostalgia blinded the people of God to God’s acts of liberation, to God’s acts of provision and care.

If left unchecked, nostalgia can rob us of joy and peace and contentment. Rather than moving forward in hope and trust, nostalgia causes us to get stuck in permanently in places called Bitter and Test and Quarrel.

IV

My friend, to be clear, there’s nothing in the world wrong with having fond memories of times gone by. But there’s everything wrong with being so caught up with nostalgia for the good old days that you cease to give thanks to God for the miracles that God is doing in your life in the here and now.

In the desert, the Israelites looked back and asked, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

You and I know the answer to that question, for you and I live on the other side of the cross. You and I know that in Jesus of Nazareth, God took on human flesh and lived among us. You and I know that one of the names Jesus

is known by is Emmanuel – God-with-us.

V

Is the Lord among us? Yes. The Lord is among us in the land of Egypt. The Lord is among us when we cross the sea. And even in the wilderness, even when we wonder if all has been for naught, the Lord is with us.

Is the Lord among us? Yes. The Lord is among us on the first day of middle school. The Lord is among us as we plan a wedding. The Lord is among us as we gather to grieve someone whom we've loved and lost.

The Lord is among in times of great joy. The Lord is among us in times of great sadness. The Lord is among us in all the good times, all the hard times, and all the in between times.

After a life beset by shipwrecks and hardships and loss and pain, the Apostle Paul nevertheless wrote this to the Romans: I am convinced that there is nothing, neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of God.

When peace like a river attendeth my soul, when sorrows like sea billows roll, whatever my lot, thou has taught me to say, It is well, it is well, it is well with my soul.

Thanks be to God. Amen