



It Is Well with My Soul

By John La Boone

"The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."— *Psalm 34:18*

In April, 2006 my much younger brother, Rodney, was tragically killed in a highway accident. He was a registered nurse working in the psychiatric ward of a prison facility in Port Wentworth. He had worked a long night shift and was on his way back home in Lyons, 87 miles away. The drive normally takes about an hour and a half, a familiar commute that he had driven often. But this time he would not be coming home again. We believe that he was exhausted and fell asleep at the wheel, going off the road and crashing into the back of a semi truck that had stopped on the side of I-16 in just that spot for some mechanical problem. Killed on impact, he probably did not suffer or even know what happened.

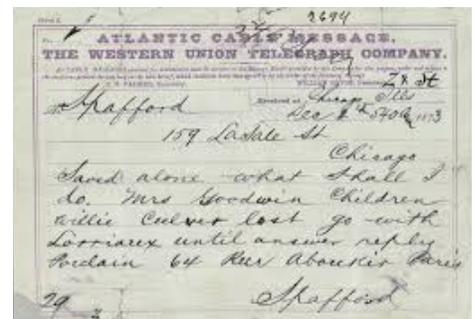
in a better place, and what we didn't get worked out in this world would still become redeemed beyond the veil.

(There are a numerous versions of this beautiful hymn on www.youtube.com. I especially recommend to you the performance sung by the three operatic tenors Luciano Pavarotti, Plácido Domingo and José Carreras with orchestra and choir: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UAchmvHSbFA>.)



I did not remember ever hearing that hymn before. It's not in our Episcopal hymnal, although it should be. So, not long after Rodney's memorial service I did some research and found that it has a fascinating history. The words were written by American lawyer, businessman, hymnist and Christian layman Horatio Spafford (set to music composed by Philip Bliss). It was written after very tragic events in the lives of the Spafford family. First was the death of a two-year-old son from pneumonia. Then their finances were wiped out by real estate losses in the Great Fire of Chicago in 1871. Next came more business problems in the economic downturn of 1873. That same year, Spafford promised to take the family to visit Europe for some much needed relief. Due to the demands of his business, he sent his wife, Anna, and their four daughters ahead on the SS Ville du Havre, planning to follow them several days later after he took care of work concerns.

Four days into the ocean crossing, their ship collided with the iron hulled SV Loch Earn and sank within 12 minutes. Amid the chaos, Anna was rescued but all four daughters were drowned. Anna sent her husband a telegram from Cardiff, Wales where she had been taken, that famously began: "Saved alone..." Spafford took the next available ship to join her in France where she was by then waiting for him. When his ship reached the point in the crossing where the Ville du Havre went down, the captain summoned Spafford and informed him of that. He stood on the deck gazing at the mighty sea. Drawing on his unshakable belief in a God of mercy, he knew in his heart at that moment that his daughters were not at the bottom of the ocean – they were resting in the bosom of the Lord of everlasting life. That's when he retired to his cabin and wrote:



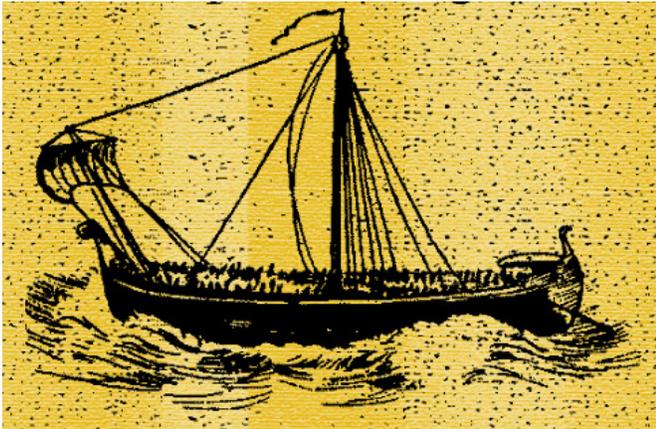
When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.

With God's help, the Spaffords found the strength to seek healing and to go forward in life. They had three more children, two daughters and a son. The son died of scarlet fever at age 4. They were Presbyterians and their church actually told them that their son's death was caused by unspecified sins on their part. It was an extra kick in the teeth that they did not need. In response, they left that denomination and formed their own sect which was dubbed "The Overcomers" by the press. The family moved to Jerusalem and with a small group of like-minded people founded The American Colony, a Christian utopian society that engaged in philanthropic activities among the local Christians, Jews and Muslims. They operated soup kitchens, hospitals and orphanages, working to help the needy without ethnic or religious distinction and without attempting to proselytize. The locals held them in very high regard. Others joined The American Colony and it continued its good works until the 1950s. But misfortune wasn't through with Horatio Spafford yet: he died painfully of malaria in 1888 just before his 60th birthday and was buried in Jerusalem. Even then, it was well with his soul.



When there is a death in any family, it's always hard but not necessarily in the same ways. We can't help but try to make sense of what has happened, whether that's possible or not, when people are cut down before their time. We do not like it when tragic events just don't seem justified or fair. Unexpected deaths are shocking. The sudden separation from a departed loved one can feel violent. But in some cases what is truly disturbing is that the death occurs while family relationships are broken. I wish I could say that Rodney's death at age 48 made us recognize the brevity and uncertainty of life and to begin to try to establish meaningful relationships with each other – but it didn't. By the time we went our separate ways later that day, it was business as usual.

There is an awful lot of pain in the world and much of it does not show on the surface. It's certainly best if families can value and celebrate their relationships during normal times and console each other during times of bewilderment, loss and grief. But there are many people in the world without strong family relationships who need a place to belong. When that is the case and life becomes difficult, it is even more important than usual to draw on our personal faith and on the love of our faith family. I think that's something that churches often do well, helping those who struggle in difficult transitions. In the Acts of



the Apostles, St. Paul tells about a shipwreck he was in, and how the survivors who could not swim made it to shore by clinging to the boards and broken pieces of the ship (Acts 27:41–44). That's an excellent metaphor for how we are sometimes forced to try to cope with overwhelming loss and the need to somehow survive. We can cling to the love, encouragement and prayers of others.

In those times we can summon up remembered Bible verses that have personal meaning for us. (The Psalms are an especially good source to turn to.) We hold on to our routine daily actions that give us comfort. We reach out for professional help or the solace of friends. Many people find healing in sacred music. If you do not own a copy of the hymnal, I suggest that you get one. Even if you are not a musician, the hymnal is a wonderful spiritual resource for prayer, meditation, counseling, solace and inspiration. Fortunately, our church has a weekly healing service that is powerfully comforting. Death, divorce, the estrangement from a parent or child, the loss of a career – in the day of trouble, we just try to make it to the shore instead of making sense of it all. Sometimes more understanding is revealed later, sometimes not. Events may never make sense but that won't stop God from embracing us.

One of the most profound statements about kindness that I've ever come across was on a plaque in the office of someone I was interviewing back in 1999. It said: "Treat other people as if you knew their struggles." You just never know how much pain a person may be in. I think it's especially important that we strive to be a church that reaches out to all in distress. Not just to our

established members and not just to people like us, but to anyone and everyone who might walk through our doors. We just have to keep those doors open wide – really wide – and make sure we can minister to people when they show up.

People have a lot of needs and the Church has unlimited opportunities to minister to them. It's excellent that we go to Manna House and to Burroughs-Molette Elementary School to do good works. I believe it's equally important that we welcome others who need us into our church home. At Christ Church, we could host Spanish language worship services, bereavement groups, English as a second language classes, parenting groups, mission preparation workshops, computer literacy classes, 12-Step groups, yoga and fitness classes, and many other worthwhile outreach ministries that would bring people together. As we contemplate the future of our shared ministry with new choices on the horizon, it's exciting to know that we can grow and make our parish famous as a place of healing and love, eager to make room for people throughout the larger community who need compassion, guidance, support, respect, friendship – and a sense of being part of the family. There is nothing more compassionate than saying: You are not a visitor; you are one of us. May it be well with your soul.

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.