

Great Expectations of Hope
Jeremiah 33:14-16
NUCC Traditional
02 December 2018

*PRAY

Life can be so unpredictable. Joys and sorrows mingle together. One of the lessons that I continually struggle with in my own life is the realization that things will never be perfect. I will never have it all together at the same time. At the moment things are running seamlessly here at the church, there is some sort of challenge in my family. And about the time **that** gets settled, I have a large and unexpected repair at home and there goes a significant amount of savings!

Great Expectations was Charles Dickens 13th novel and begins on Christmas Eve around 1812. Although the storyline is somewhat complex, I believe that it raises to our awareness some of our own struggles with the holiday season. We all have “great expectations” around Christmas. We all have thoughts about how “...this year, Christmas will be different. This year, Christmas will *feel* different. This year, our family will be different.” Perhaps the joy will be greater, or maybe it’s that the pain will be less, or that the celebrations will feel more holy and less hectic.

No matter what your expectations are for this Christmas season, over the next four Sundays we will be examining how the Advent themes of Hope, Joy, Peace, and Love help us meet our expectations, or more accurately, help support us when our expectations **aren’t** met.

Today, as we look at hope, I couldn’t help but think of Horatio Spafford. He knew about the highest mountaintops and the lowest valleys. He knew what the prophet Jeremiah meant in this morning’s scripture reading:

“The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made...”

Mr. Spafford was a successful attorney and real estate developer, yet he was surrounded by tragedies. The first was the death of his son during the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, which also ruined him financially. What little business interests he had left were devastated by the economic downturn of 1873.

He decided that he and his family needed to get away. So, he sent his wife and four daughters ahead of him on a ship to Europe. While crossing the Atlantic, the ship sank rapidly after a collision with another sea vessel, and all four of Spafford's daughters died. However, his wife Anna survived, and sent him a now famous telegram, "Saved alone ...".

Immediately, Horatio Spafford traveled to meet his grieving wife. Aware of the tragedy that had befallen one of his passengers, the captain of the ship that Spafford was traveling on called him to the deck as they traveled over the place where his daughters had died.

And as they did, the words of the great hymn “It Is Well with My Soul” came to Horatio Spafford, and he penned these words:

**“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.”**

The Spaffords later had three more children, including a son who died at age 4 of scarlet fever.

I honestly do not know how someone like Horatio Spafford kept his faith and wrote such powerful words, except to believe that his faith was anchored by hope, a hope so great that it kept him nourished and whole when undoubtedly nothing else

could; a hope so deep that it pierced the darkness with light one night long ago; a hope so great that ordinary people, shepherds, were the first to be told about it; a hope so extraordinary that wise ones had to come and see for themselves.

You see, our story of faith is also a story rooted in hope. Even when life doesn't add up, or when we cannot seem to nail everything down at the same time, we can sing with courage and conviction words such as: "...it is well, it is well with my soul."

I read that the Spaffords Presbyterian church regarded the tragedy as divine punishment. In response, the Spaffords formed their own religion that the American press dubbed, get this, "the Overcomers."

And is that not our story? Are we not "the Overcomers," the people whom God has inspired and convicted to make this world a better place? So my friends, this Christmas, bring your expectations, bring your hearts, and yes, bring your **hope** to this place. And together, let us look with great expectation to see what God will do next in our lives and in our world.