



“Courage”
Scripture – Psalm 140
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, April 21, 2013

“Deliver me, O Lord, from evildoers; protect me from those who are violent.”

The city of patriots had two traitors. When their bombs exploded near the finish line of the Boston Marathon, we were shocked and sickened. With the burst of fire and smoke and the bloody aftermath caught on camera, many of us were glued to our televisions or computers watching in horror at the gruesome scene. We felt deep sorrow for the victims and prayed that the death toll would not climb too high.

Some of us worried that we might know someone who was running Boston and he/she might have family members standing on that sidewalk where the blasts occurred. Indeed two members of our church family, John and Penny McFarland, were watching their daughter and Penny’s brother run the marathon. Thanks be to God that both runners had finished before the bombs were detonated and the McFarlands –with their three young grandchildren in tow – had met up with them a couple of blocks away.

Why would the perpetrators want to murder and maim innocent people? It’s a struggle to comprehend the mental processes that prompt anyone to plant bombs intended to kill and injure random people gathered on Boylston Street to cheer runners.

Each day as we watched our screens and heard the bits of information trickling out – some true, some not – we prayed that the terrorists would be caught before they took any more lives. The people of Boston held their collective breath on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday.

Once the investigators revealed the pictures of the two suspects, things moved rapidly. Late Thursday night and into the early hours of Friday, the two brothers killed an MIT policeman, robbed a convenience store, hijacked a car and had a bloody shootout with the police. With the death of the older brother, their identities came into focus.

Friday was an eerie day for the people of Boston, especially those living in Watertown, locked inside their homes and knowing that the younger brother – armed and dangerous – was somewhere in their neighborhood. But Friday night, the tension was released and the celebration began once he was taken into custody.

The week from hell started with bombs exploding while people stood on the sidewalk cheering runners. It ended with people standing on sidewalks cheering the fearless law enforcement officers who had put their lives in harm’s way to protect them.

This morning's psalm reminds us that the world is not as God intends for it to be. We are a mighty distance from God's dream of a world where all dwell together in peace. Although this psalm was written 2500 years ago, it sounds as if it could have been the contemporary prayer of Bostonians just a few days ago. The psalmist writes, "Deliver me, O Lord, from evildoers; protect me from those who are violent, who plan evil things in their minds and stir up wars continually." Who cannot remember a time when you were afraid, and you pleaded with God to protect you?

Yet this psalm does not simply plead for help and the psalmist does not remain in a state of fear. After praying for God's protection, you can hear his confidence gaining as the psalmist affirms that God is his strong deliverer. You can also hear the anger and the raw emotion in his voice as he prays that those who perpetrate evil be stopped. He says, "Do not grant, O Lord, the desires of the wicked; do not further their evil plot...Let burning coals fall on them! Let them be flung into pits, no more to rise!...Let evil speedily hunt down the violent!"

The psalmist wants to see violence and wickedness snuffed out. I'm with him. I want to see the end of hostilities and destruction and suffering. But how do we get there?

One way to interpret this psalm is that the psalmist is very passive and is praying for God to do all the heavy lifting. "God, we've got a lot of problems, why don't you straighten out everything for us? Why don't you banish evil, injustice and violence from the world?" And that's the way some approach religious faith. They think their job is to tell God what God needs to do. It's a polite and pious way of saying, "I really don't want responsibility for this."

But I don't think that's what the psalmist is saying. In the final verse, he says, "Those who live right, will give thanks to God; those who live right will live in God's presence."

He's saying that God is with those who do what is right. God is on the side of good and opposed to evil. And when he speaks of God as his strong deliverer, he's saying that God is a source of strength to those who oppose darkness and seek light.

Watching the video of the two explosions at the Boston Marathon was horrifying. Even though we did not know the individuals who were injured or killed, we agonized for them and their loved ones. But as frightening as the scene was immediately following the blasts, it was also inspiring to see so many people run directly *to* the area where the explosions occurred. Police, race officials, doctors, nurses, bystanders, even runners, ran to the sidewalk to see how they could help.

A pediatrician was in the final mile of the marathon and had not yet turned onto Boylston. She heard the booms, and in seconds people were running toward her yelling "Bomb!" Rather than turning away, she picked up her pace and ran toward the chaos. Police and race officials were stopping all the runners. She dodged several of them until one finally stopped her. She said emphatically, "I'm a doctor. You have to let me help."

She ran to the scene of blood and mayhem and began caring for several people who were bleeding badly and missing limbs. Thanks to her courage and quick action, she very likely saved some people's lives.

Like those first responders who ran up the stairs of the World Trade Center on 9/11, numerous people at the Boston Marathon were undaunted, running to the site of danger rather than away from it. They put their own lives in imminent danger because they were determined to help complete strangers.

There is no way of knowing how many of the responders were followers of Christ, but their actions could not have been more Christ-like. Whenever Jesus encountered pain or suffering, he was undeterred in responding with compassion. And fed up with the unjust system that was keeping most of his fellow Jews in poverty, he decided to head toward, not away from Jerusalem, the seat of power for the religious leaders who were in collusion with the Romans. Incensed by injustice, he stood resolutely for the good of the people. Deep compassion for others creates a tenacious spirit.

The Apostle Paul understood that courage is to be one of the hallmarks of Christians. In his concluding remarks in one of his letters to the early followers of Jesus in Corinth, he wrote, “Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong.” (1 Corinthians 16:13)

It is essential that we let the world of terrorists know that their actions will not make us cower in fear. They want to heighten our anxiety and disrupt our lives. They want to make us panic so that we will change our way of life. They want to sow seeds of distrust to make us suspicious of our neighbor. We must be resolute in refusing to give them that victory.

Terrorists win if we become afraid to run races through the streets of our cities and crowd the sidewalks to cheer. Terrorists win if we become afraid to fly or to go into tall buildings. Terrorists win if we mistreat our Muslim neighbors and act as if every Muslim is an extremist. Terrorists win if we respond to violence with more violence and retreat from our mandate from Christ to become peacemakers.

The day following the bombing, Tom Friedman wrote, “Cave dwelling is for terrorists. Americans? We run in the open on our streets...in shorts not armor, with abandon and never fear.”¹

Three days after the bombing, our daughter Grandison registered for the Delaware marathon. Determined to qualify for next year’s Boston Marathon. No terrorist is going to scare her off.

If I were fast enough to qualify, I’d join her. I’ll do the next best thing, I’m going to run the New York Marathon in the fall with 35,000 others – in the open, unafraid and in defiance of terrorists who think they can change our behavior.

The day after the bombing, a runner and poet named Scott Poole wrote a piece he entitled “To Run – a Prayer for Boston”:

To run
is to rise above the weak spirit
is to take on pain
is to push pain in the chest
with both palms

stumbling over garbage,
gravel, fragments of life,

is to say I will take you
on in the street.
Every breath of mine
is a battering ram,

shoving, crushing,
swinging a hammer of air.

I am a body of fast moving blood
inhaling you
taking you in like a tank.
I will consume your hate.

I will run straight into you
as if you were a finish line of joy,
picking up the fallen along the way
and you will never stop me,
you will never
stop me.

In God, we find the courage to defy evil
because light vanquishes darkness and love overcomes hate.

NOTES

1. Thomas L. Friedman, "Bring on the Next Marathon," *The New York Times*, April 16, 2013.