



Feature

Bombing at the Boston Marathon

The tragedy in Boston, Massachusetts, seems so near to me this morning. My daughter went to Berklee College of Music in Boston, and we have many good memories of the city. We now live in Nashville, Tennessee, and several of her current friends also graduated from Berklee. We shake our heads in disbelief and horror over the bombing at the Boston Marathon. As we create this special issue of FAITHLINK, the investigations and the horrific aftermath of injuries, lost limbs, and death darken our spirits. As one of my daughter's friends asked, "Who bombs a marathon?"

CNN reported on Tuesday, April 16, that three people were killed and 176 were injured by the explosions of two bombs near the finish line of the marathon. One of those killed was an eight-year-old boy. Nine of the wounded are children. Injuries are like those seen in a war zone. Many had to have limbs amputated. The scene was horrific for those who attended to the injured. How do we grapple with such horror?

Tragedies like this one evoke our compassion for the victims and ignite our anger and our fear. The event also ignites soul-searching on personal, social, and political levels; and it stirs up theological questions. What is wrong with us? Can we fix it? Where is God in this event? What questions are emerging from this tragedy? What support can we gain from our Christian faith? How does Christian faith inspire and generate meaningful responses that make a difference in our world? The questions can be overwhelming. And sometimes, there are no answers.

We pray for all the victims of the bombing in Boston as we prepare this special issue. It relies heavily on insights drawn from past FAITHLINK issues about such tragedies. We pray that it will offer help for you as you reflect on this tragedy in the light of Christian faith.

— Pamela Dilmore, Lead Editor, FAITHLINK

What Issues Emerge From Violent Tragedies?

Some of us immediately turn to big-picture questions about our culture, our policies, or our theology. While many issues emerge for families and communities who suffer due to violent tragedies such as bombings and shootings, some general themes have emerged in several of the events. Two issues that frequently recur within our culture are civil discourse and the tendency to blame violence on those whose religious perspectives differ from ours.

Civil Discourse in the Public Arena: While there is no sense of direct cause and effect, many Americans are also questioning the role of mean-spirited, bipartisan, vitriolic debate in the political and media arenas. In a culture of demonizing the other that has developed over the past 30 years, people ranging from Pima County Sheriff Clarence W. Dupnik to Rabbi David Saperstein are voicing concern over the damage harsh words can inflict. Dupnik said that when

the rhetoric about hatred, about mistrust of government, about paranoia of how government operates is used “to inflame the public on a daily basis, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, it has impact on people especially those with unbalanced personalities.” Reverend Jim Wallis of Sojourners, says, “We start with ourselves,” and he encourages us to commit to “the higher standards that scripture calls us to in how we are to treat one another and act in community.”

Blaming Violence on Differing Religious Perspectives: A similarly polarizing reaction has come from religious groups and leaders who blame such violence on such things as the teaching of evolution and restrictions on religious instruction in public school. Brian Fischer of the American Family Association argued that such tragedies are the effect of removing prayer from schools and teaching evolution. Representative Louie Gohmert of Texas echoed the sentiment, saying, “What have we done with God? We told him that we don’t want him around.”

What Does the Bible Say?

The Bible reminds us that God loves us. In 2007, 32 people were killed in a mass shooting at Virginia Tech. When asked about Scripture passages that sustained him in the aftermath of the shooting, Glenn Tyndall, campus minister at Virginia Tech, had this to say: “I’ve been thinking of the psalmist litany that God’s steadfast love endures forever [**Psalm 136**]. And I know that God’s love means that as we shed tears here, God has a tear in his eye. I’ve also been thinking about how Paul tells us ‘to bear one another’s burdens’ [**Galatians 6:2**]. The students have been doing that, ministering to each other. Not just the students involved in the Wesley Foundation, but students all over campus have been bearing each other’s burdens. It’s ministry even though they may not call it that.” Glenn also said that others have been bearing his burdens through their prayers and messages of comfort. At Blacksburg United Methodist Church, the congregation heard **Romans 8:35-39**, which reminds us that nothing can separate us from God’s love in Jesus Christ. In that same service, Bishop Charlene P. Kammerer recounted the story in **John 20:11-18** in which Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene on Easter morning.

While the Bible is full of images of destruction, its overall narrative points to hope and the promise of redemption. **Psalm 23** describes a God who walks with us even “through the darkest valley” (**verse 4**). In **Joel 3:9-10**, the nations are summoned to beat their farm implements into weapons. Yet weapons ultimately fail in God’s saving project. The prophet Isaiah tells the returning exiles that “no weapon fashioned against you will succeed” (**Isaiah 54:17**); and in contrast to the image of shaping weapons in **Joel 3:9-10**, **Isaiah 2:4** says that weapons will be beaten back “into iron plows” and “pruning tools.” **Luke 13:1-5** records Jesus’ response to a mass murder. Pilate apparently killed some Galileans while they were at worship. Some religious leaders speculated that perhaps the murder was punishment for the Galileans’ sins. Jesus responded with a barbed warning: “Do you think the suffering of these Galileans proves that they were more sinful than all the other Galileans? No, I tell you, but unless you change your hearts and lives, you will die just as they did” (**verses 2-3**). In the story of Jesus’ arrest in **Matthew 26:47-56**, Jesus rebukes a disciple for using his weapon in self defense, admonishing him that the one who lives by the sword will die by the sword (**verse 52**). For Jesus, violence and spiritual death are inextricably linked in those who put their faith in violence to save them.

When a culture faces a tragedy, people of faith often take time for soul-searching. In **Genesis 28:11-19**, we find a soul-searching motif in the story of Jacob’s dream of angels traveling up and down a ladder to heaven. One interpretation of this story is that souls are meant

to experience spiritual highs and lows but should avoid allowing themselves to stay disconnected from God on the bottom rungs. As Rabbi Yitz Greenberg points out, “If we dwell only in the reality, we forget to imagine that our lives and the world can look different than they do. But, at the same time, if we dwell only in the dream, we forget to get our hands dirty working to repair the reality. The angels travelling up and down come to symbolize the authenticity of both the reality and the dream, and the fluidity between the two. Our challenge is to be able to bridge the division between the two, and, like the angels, to work to bring our reality closer to the world we dream of and long for.” In their soul-searching, Christians often find solace in parables like the mustard seed in **Mark 4:30-34**, the lost coin in **Luke 15:8-10**, and the hidden treasure in **Matthew 13:44**. From these stories they claim the grace to proclaim, along with Jacob, “Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!” (**Genesis 28:16**).

The Bible also addresses strong feelings such as anger and fear that often emerge from tragic events. When such events occur, it is okay to be angry. The book of **Psalms** provides ample evidence of human anger and fear. As these psalms articulate and work through such emotions, they move toward ultimate trust in God. **Psalm 22** is the classic example of a cry from one who feels abandoned by God. Jesus quoted the opening words of this psalm at the moment of his death on the cross. Paul writes in **Ephesians 4:26-27**, “Be angry without sinning. Don’t let the sun set on your anger. Don’t provide an opportunity for the devil. **Second Timothy 1:6-7** addresses fear. The verses read: “I’m reminding you to revive God’s gift that is in you through the laying on of my hands. God didn’t give us a spirit that is timid but one that is powerful, loving, and self-controlled.” Timothy was from Lystra, a place where Paul had been stoned by his opponents. Timothy would have felt fear at the prospect of preaching the gospel in an environment where Christians had been harmed or killed. Paul reminds him that God’s Spirit gives us what we need to overcome fear. The expression “the fear of the LORD” occurs frequently in the Bible. The phrase connects with **Deuteronomy 10:12-13**: “What does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being” (NRSV). Thus, “fear of the LORD” is much more than being afraid; it is a combination of worship, service, and wisdom. According to *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. V* (Abingdon, 1997), the phrase expresses “the total claim of God upon humans and the total life response of humans to God. . . . *all* human activities are undertaken in the light of God’s presence and purposes in the world.”

How Can Christians Respond in Ways That Will Make a Difference?

People of faith are people who pray. Immediately following the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, churches in Newtown, Connecticut, were opened so that people could come inside to reflect, pray, or just sit in silence. Churches across the nation gathered to pray for the victims, for the shooter and his mother, and for some kind of answers to the questions about their faith in God. Such response is typical after tragedies of this magnitude. Joe Lenow, a United Methodist student at the University of Virginia with a brother at Virginia Tech, said the tragedy brought the two schools closer together. That connection was strengthened by the faith community’s response, which included gatherings and vigils sponsored by Christian fellowships. “The only place to turn is prayer,” Lenow says. “It’s really been a comfort. People don’t know

what to say and what to feel. I've seen us Christians take this opportunity to step up and say who we are, to pray for the perpetrator as well as the victims, to pray for the healing of everyone."

Churches often open their doors in response to tragic events. For example, immediately upon learning of the Fort Hood shooting, First United Methodist in Killeen, Texas, opened its chapel for prayer and kept it open the following day. "When a tragedy like this occurs, the whole family comes together. President Obama also reminded those gathered for the memorial service about the important value of religious freedom in this country. "And instead of claiming God for our side," he said, "we remember Lincoln's words, and always pray to be on the side of God." Bishop Minerva Carcaño of the desert Southwest Conference lent her voice to the many worship services that followed the shooting in Tucson, Arizona, that injured Gabrielle Giffords, killed six people, and injured 14 others. Carcaño spoke about how children covered the sidewalk outside Giffords' office in colorful drawings: "Colored chalk is the medium, love is the heart, but hope is the message." She encouraged United Methodists to "be agents of hope by working for reconciliation knowing that we are all children of God in need of love and hope. . . . Let us be agents of hope by committing to work for justice, that peace, God's own peace, may come upon us. Our children expect no less of us."

The strong feelings of pain, fear, confusion, and anger continue as an important part of the healing process. It will take time to sort through such strong feelings. As the investigations of the bombing at the Boston Marathon continue, we hope to understand better the reasons for this tragedy, though some questions may never be answered. Such violent events remind Christians that during the healing process, people can benefit from the nurturing care of the church. We can respond to this tragic loss by seeking ways to help those who are hurting and by embracing the healing power of God.

Suggestions for Group Reflection and Discussion

Due to the emotional nature of the moment, it may be best to spend your time together as an open forum for people to share feelings and ask questions; however, answers may not come. The activities below provide a few options to guide your time together and help your group process the bombing with support from our Christian faith.

OPEN the Session

Sing Hymns and Reflect

You may want to consider using a number of hymns in your session today. Jeanne Torrence Finley, co-writer of the FAITHLINK issue dealing with the shooting at Virginia Tech in 2007, reported that her congregation at Blacksburg United Methodist Church had a powerful time of singing on the Wednesday evening following the shooting. She said the singing “connected them to other faith communities in other places and times saying there is a life beyond this one.” They sang the following “This Is My Song” (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, 437); “Here I Am, Lord” (593); “Be Still, My Soul” (534); “In Unity We Lift Our Song” (*The Faith We Sing*, 2221); and “A Prayer for Our Children” by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette (found at <http://www.umcworship.org>). Another song with a powerful text by former archbishop Desmond Tutu is “Goodness Is Stronger than Evil” (*TFWS*, 2219).

EXPLORE the Topic

List the Questions

Invite participants in your group to name the faith questions that emerge for them as a result of the bombing. List these on a markerboard for all to see. At this point, naming the questions is sufficient. As mentioned before, answers may not be possible.

Talk About the Power of Prayer

Ask: What do we believe about prayer? In what ways have you experienced God’s presence in times of tragedy through prayer? What sorts of things should we offer to God in our prayers?

Study the Scriptures

Review highlights of the section “What Does the Bible Say?” Choose Scriptures and assign them to teams of two or three. Have the teams discuss the following questions: What do these passages tell us about the character of God? What do they affirm about life? What other passages help sustain you through troubled times?

CLOSE the Session

Pray Together

Allow extra time for a closing prayer. Perhaps one of the most powerful witnesses Christians can make in a time such as this is to pray for not only those people affected by the bombing but also for those who commit such violence against others. This may be challenging

for some in your group, but remind them of God's grace and challenge to love even those who would harm us. Pray for the victims and their families, for all who are grieving, for everyone in Boston, for the churches there, for first responders, and for all of us who seek to live God's ways of justice and mercy.

FAITHLINK is a weekly, downloadable Bible study based on current events, issues, and trends. For more information and a list of previous studies to purchase, please go to www.cokesbury.com/Faithlink.

Copyright © 2013 by Cokesbury. FAITHLINK is a weekly resource dedicated to helping people make connections between the Christian faith and life. FAITHLINK is an official resource for The United Methodist Church approved by the General Board of Discipleship and published weekly by Cokesbury, The United Methodist Publishing House; 201 Eighth Avenue, South; P.O. Box 801; Nashville, Tennessee 37202-0801. FAITHLINK is available by subscription via e-mail (from subservices@abingdonpress.com) or fax (call 800-672-1789) or by downloading from the Web at www.cokesbury.com/faithlink.

Scripture quotations in this publication, unless otherwise indicated, are from the Common English Bible, copyrighted © 2011 Common English Bible, and are used by permission.

Permission is granted to photocopy this resource for use in study groups. All Web addresses were correct and operational at the time of publication. Fax comments to FAITHLINK, 615-749-6512, or send e-mail to faithlinkgroup@umpublishing.org. For fax problems, fax FREE to 800-445-8189. For e-mail problems, send e-mail to Cokes_Serv@umpublishing.org. To order, call 800-672-1789, or visit our website at www.cokesbury.com/faithlink.