

When Tragedy Strikes So Close to Home

Psalm 46

Last Monday was the first Boston marathon that I and my family have ever watched. We're just about a 15 minute walk from Central St. in Natick. So like much of the neighborhood, we loaded a bag of goodies, grabbed the stroller, and headed down to watch a pretty incredible race, sitting right around the 8-mile mark. I've never seen anything like it. It was fun. And we were kind of excited to be part of Boston culture. This is what the townies do, right? There was almost a kind of pride—"we live in walking distance to the Boston marathon route."

Hours later, came the sober and shocking reminder that we still live in a fallen world—a world filled with what the psalmist simply calls "trouble." There's evidence enough of that every day. But tragedies like this get our attention in a special way. That's why we can often remember where we were when we first heard the news about these kinds of events. Just getting out of class in Richards Hall my freshman year of college when I heard from a former classmate about the Columbine shooting. Sitting in the dentist's chair watching the news while the second tower fell to the ground on 9/11. Heading home for lunch when I heard on the radio that the department store my sister-in-law worked at in Omaha, Van Maur, had been shot up, and there were several casualties. And you grab the phone, and you pray, "Lord, don't let it be Jessica."

Many of you grabbed your phones on Monday, and prayed, trying to locate friends and family. Friends and family from around the country tried to locate you. And the fear that grips you in that moment. The uncertainty. The sudden realization that we're not as safe as we thought we were, and we're not really in control of any of this. Our hearts are flooded with fear—the fear of losing someone you love, the fear of life never being the same again, the fear of pain, even death.

We breathed a sigh of relief on Friday night, as the last of the suspects was apprehended. And we praise God for the incredible work of our local and federal authorities. But we're still left with some unsettling questions. What do we do with all this? How do we make sense of it all when tragedy strikes so close to home? When the earth seems to give way around us, like it did on Monday? When it's not just happening on the TV in some other part of the world, but in the city we love, on the streets we walk on, in the neighborhoods we live in?

The psalm that we're looking at this morning is very honest about how this world is filled with trouble. With disaster and tragedy. How it does not work the way it is supposed to. And yet, how amid that chaos, amid the crises, there is hope, there is stability, there is security so strong that we need not live in fear. A hope and security that come not from within us, but from the presence of the God who is *with* us.

The Tragic Presence of Trouble

When this song was written, what we call Psalm 46, God’s ancient covenant people, Israel, were facing a deep and tragic trouble. We don’t know precisely what that was, and I think that the author did that on purpose. Because this song was written not just for Israel’s trouble, but for our trouble—for any trouble God’s people may face in life.

The imagery he uses to describe it is quite dramatic. In vv. 2-3, he describes it in language of natural disaster: the earth giving way, mountains falling into the sea, the waters roaring and foaming and overtaking the earth, the mountains quaking—it’s the imagery of creation being undone. Of chaos. And it’s a good description of what so many experienced at the finish line on Monday—the earth giving way beneath them, a city trembling, shaking, at the shock of the explosion, and the senseless loss of life.

The second imagery that the psalmist uses also captures the situation rather dramatically. In v. 6, we see Jerusalem, the city of God, the city of his holy temple, the place of King David’s throne, being attacked by foreign nations. Just as the waters *roared* in v. 3, so the nations *roar* in v. 6 (same word); just as the mountains *fall* in v. 2, so kingdoms *fall* in v. 6 (same word). It’s a picture of violence and warfare that sets an entire city on edge.

And that picture touches even closer to home. There was nothing natural about this week’s disaster. It was an act of evil, intent on wounding and terrorizing the people of this city, and all the guests gathered from across the globe, right under the view of the watching world. This was an act of terrorism.

We call it *terrorism* because that is what it seeks to do—strike terror and fear into our hearts. And to be honest, it often works. We’re thankful that the present threat has been removed, but we spent much of the past week in fear—the unknown of who did it for the first few days, and then the fear of knowing the perpetrators are hiding in some of our neighborhoods. We fear for our safety. We fear losing those close to us. We fear the loss of life as we know it.

Several of the early reactions captured in the local papers express this very fear. A local Natick man told reporters he was afraid the Marathon he knew was gone. The bombers “had stolen it.” “It’s never going to be the same,” he said. “Once something like this happens, nothing goes back. Not like the way it was.”¹ The world is different now.

One letter to the editor in the *Taunton Daily Gazette* asked, “Can we ever truly feel safe again?” The author, who lives in Quincy, writes:

What has become of our society? I ask this question because I don’t have the answer. . . . In the ’70s I remember walking to school just a few blocks away from home when I was 6 with my 8-year-old brother, something that just doesn’t happen anymore. As a young boy of 9 or 10, I felt safe and secure in my home, in my city, in my state and in my country. Monday was just another example of how times have changed. . . . When and where will we ever feel safe again?²

¹ Ron Simmons, cited in Peter Schworm and Lisa Kocian, “Along Marathon route, grief and anger run deep,” *The Boston Globe*, Apr. 17, 2013.

² Michael Hull, “LETTER: Can we ever truly feel safe again?” *Taunton Daily Gazette*, Apr. 16, 2013.

And I think this man speaks for so many of us as we try to process all that has happened this week. When and where will we ever feel safe again? This question is the brick wall we crash into when it dawns on us how unstable, unpredictable, and unsafe the world we live in really is—a safety that we can no longer take for granted. This is the insecurity of life in a fallen and broken world, surrounded by other humans who, just like us, are corrupted by sin.

When we speak of living in a fallen or broken world, or say that all humans are corrupted by sin, we're not saying that it's as bad as it could possibly be, or we're as bad as we could possibly be. In many ways the heroic actions of the first responders on Monday outshined the darkness and evil of the bombers. Rather, what we're saying is *this is not the way it's supposed to be*. When God created this world it was *good*. When he created humans, he made us *in his image*—to know and love him as a child loves a father, and to reflect his love to the world. But when the first humans chose to doubt God's love, and to disagree with what he said was good or not good, and decided instead that they should call the shots, that they should be king instead of God—that's when what we call 'sin' entered the world. Rebellion against God, high treason against the king of heaven. And the result of that rebellion was judgment for sin—death, and eternal death. Instead of enjoying the blessing God created us for, humanity brought God's curse upon themselves—and not just on themselves, but on the very fabric of God's good creation (cf. Gen. 1-3).

And so it is that the world doesn't work the way it's supposed to. It is fallen, broken, stained, corrupt. We see it in the torn fabric of creation—diseases that ravage our bodies, natural disasters that devastate lives. Tragedies like the fire and explosion at the fertilizer plant in West, Texas, on Thursday that has claimed at least 14 lives, with 60 people still missing.³

We see it in humanity's ability to accomplish great evil—the atrocities of war, genocide, murder, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and of course, terrorism. The evil that killed Krystle Campbell, Martin Richard, and Lingzi Lu, and injured 176 others, resulting in at least 13 amputations. The evil that took the life of 26-year-old police officer Sean Collier at MIT, and severely wounded Officer Richard Donahue. And an evil that stretches far beyond Boston. On the same day as the marathon bombing that claimed 3 lives, 55 people were killed across Iraq in a string of coordinated bombings,⁴ and another 27 died on Thursday from a bomb in a coffee shop in Baghdad.⁵ What we experience as a momentary shock and national tragedy is daily life for far too many in this world.

And yet the fallenness of this world is much, much closer than any of us would like to admit. The same sin that drove these men to do what they did lies in *every* human heart. But for the grace of God, there go I. Though we may not as bad as we might be (by God's common grace), every thing we do still bears the mark of the fall in some way—whether it's our subtle pride when we do good, our selfish motives, our grumbling or bitterness, perhaps even our idolatry of treating something other than God as our ultimate thing. We're all affected by sin, and we all participate in it. And as long as there is sin in this world, there will be trouble.

³ Nathan Koppel and Megan Buerger, "Death Toll Rises to 14 in Texas Blast," WSJ Online, April 19, 2013. Available at: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324493704578432562568039802.html?mod=e2tw>.

⁴ Transcript: "55 Killed in Coordinated Attacks across Iraq," *PBS News Hour*, April 15, 2013. Available at: www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/law/jan-june13/other_04-15.html.

⁵ Mohammed Tawfeeq and Greg Botelho, "Blast in popular Baghdad coffee shop kills at least 27," *CNN*, April 18, 2013. Available at: www.cnn.com/2013/04/18/world/meast/iraq-violence/index.html?hpt=hp_t3.

The Hope and Security of God's Presence

But as honest as this psalm is about the problems that mark this fallen world, the note it sounds again and again is not one of fear, but of *hope* and *security*. But not just a hope and security in our circumstances—“the threat is removed, we can sleep well tonight.” And not just a hope and security in our own strength and resolve—“we’re Boston Strong; we’ll get through this.” But a hope and security deeper and more stable than anything our circumstances or city can provide: the hope and security of God’s very presence with his people.

This is the central message of this psalm—that *God is present with his people to protect them in all trouble*. Verse 1: “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.” Verse 7: “The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.” And verse 11 is identical to it: “The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.” God is *with* his people to protect us. He is our refuge—the place we turn to for shelter amid the storm. He is our fortress, the place we run to for protection and safety when this world wars against us.

We see God’s presence depicted in this psalm in the temple of ancient Jerusalem, “the holy place where the Most High dwells,” the picture of living waters flowing from God’s presence to his people (46:4-5). The temple was the place where Israel went on earth to speak with God in heaven. It was the place that represented God’s covenant promises to bless his people in the land and to dwell with them. Verse 5 tells us, “God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day.” And from Jerusalem, God’s protective presence for his people extended to the ends of the earth. The temple stood as a reminder of God’s promise to be with his people.

But as we follow the story of the Bible we see that all the promises of God’s blessing and protection and presence represented by Jerusalem point forward to a day when God himself would come down to earth. They point to the incarnation of Jesus Christ, God’s Son, who was called “Immanuel,” which means “God *with* us” (Matt. 1:23). All that God promises about his presence and protection in the ancient temple is available to us today through faith in Jesus Christ—in his life, death, and resurrection. When God’s people look for God’s presence today, we don’t look for a building on the other side of the world that was destroyed thousands of years ago; we look to Jesus Christ—God with us—God for us. We look to the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us. The Son of God who loved us and gave himself for us on the cross to rescue us from all sin and redeem us for God. The one who rose from the dead in victory over the grave, and who sent the Holy Spirit to dwell in us that he might be “*with us* to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:20).

So in what ways is God our refuge amid the trouble? What does that security and protection look like? First, it means that *the God who made us is close enough and powerful enough to protect us and to rescue us from harm*. Verse 1 says he is a *present* help in trouble. He’s near; he’s accessible. He’s not far off, somewhere way out there beyond the stars, just out of earshot of his people. God is everywhere at all times, and especially close to his people—to hear us, to protect us, and to rescue us. The Lord Almighty is *with* us.

For all the trauma of this past week, there are also countless stories of God’s protection and intervention. From an “untenable crowd” that thwarted the Brocks and Ozunas from being able to reach the finish line to watch the race, to the television set that intercepted a bullet that might

have penetrated Pastor Steve McAlpin's bedroom during Thursday night's shoot out in Watertown, God answers prayer to protect his people.

God is present to protect us from experiencing trouble. But second, *he is also with us when trouble strikes*. Psalm 46 doesn't actually promise us there will be less trouble, but it does promise us that, in Jesus, *we are never alone in our trouble*. The waters will still rage, the nations will still roar, until our Lord returns. But he has not left us as orphans; and he is not unfamiliar with our suffering (cf. John 14:18; Heb. 4:15-16).

Jesus knows what it's like to ridiculed, rejected, and mocked. He's knows what it's like to slandered and ignored. He knows what it's like to be betrayed by those closest to him, to be falsely accused, wrongfully imprisoned, and unjustly condemned. To be beaten and brutally murdered as a public spectacle for others. More than that, we knows personally and intimately the trouble you face—the disease, the fear, the rejection, the terror—for on the cross your trouble became his trouble. Just as your sin became his sin, that he might pay the debt we owed and fully exhaust his Father's holy anger against our sin, so also your sorrow and suffering became his sorrow and suffering—he bore it in our place, to bear the weight for us, and free us from its effects—in part now, and fully when he returns.

He is not only with us to sympathize and to bear our trouble on our behalf, but third, *his presence provides a security and safety that nothing on this earth can shake*.

Cities can be shaken, quite literally. Kingdoms and nations can be shaken. Businesses can falter, bank accounts can be drained, relationships can be broken, bodies and minds can fail us. When the world around us is rocked, these are the very things we tend to cling to (quite ironically)—our own strength and resolve. Even in the aftermath of Monday's bombing, this is much of the message we heard.

"Nothing can defeat the heart of this city," we were told by Mayor Menino. "Nothing will take us down because we take care of one another."⁶ President Obama told us "Your resolve is the greatest rebuke to whoever committed this heinous act. If they sought to intimidate us, to terrorize us, to shake us from . . . the values that make us who we are, as Americans—well, it should be pretty clear by now that they picked the wrong city to do it."⁷

While I want to add my voice of praise for the strength and resolve of this city—for the courage of the first responders, moving *toward* the wounded with the possibility of further bombs; the care and expertise of the medical personnel who cared around the clock for the victims; the tireless and dauntless effort of local, state, and national authorities in identifying and tracking down the criminals who committed this evil crime; the selfless cooperation of the public, the support of our President; the solidarity of cities and people across the country and across the world—there is so much to be thankful for. I agree with Governor Patrick when he said that "the grace this tragedy exposed is the best of who we are."⁸ This is a great city, a strong city, and I'm proud to be a part of it.

⁶ Cited in Adrian Walker, "Three secular ministers preach healing," *Boston Globe*, Apr. 18, 2013.

⁷ "Transcript of President Obama's remarks," *Boston Globe*, Apr. 18, 2013.

⁸ "Transcript of Governor Patrick's remarks," *Boston Globe*, Apr. 18, 2013.

But the reality is that none of these things can restore the deceased victims to their families. None of it can undo the pain of the tragedy. And none of it can actually protect us from something like this happening again. We are no safer today than we were last Monday morning, before anyone knew what was about to happen. And if we put our ultimate hope and security in things on this earth that can be shaken, we set ourselves up for devastation and disappointment.

But there is a God who can raise the dead, and who promises to do so on the last day. There is a King whose death on the cross was enough to cover all our sins—your sin, my sin, even Dzhokhar’s sin. There is a kingdom that cannot be shaken, a heavenly city that no bomb can touch, and no terror can overcome (cf. Heb. 12:28). There is, as the Apostle Peter describes it, “an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Pet. 1:4-5, ESV). And at the center of it all is the God who made us, the God who rules over us in justice and goodness, in holiness and love, the God who sent his eternal Son to save us, the God who is with us by the Holy Spirit, if Jesus is our Savior and King.

God alone is able to make wars cease to the ends of the earth, to break the bow and shatter the spear, and burn the shields with fire (Ps. 46:9). And though this world may take away from us all that we hold dear on earth—our way of life, our loved ones, even our own lives, *it cannot take us away from God*. Not if we belong to Jesus. And *it cannot take from us our inheritance in heaven*—the coming new creation where God himself will dwell finally and fully in the midst of his people, when all wrongs will be brought to justice, and his peace will triumph over all. Where “He will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Rev. 21:4, ESV).

God is present with his people to protect us in all trouble. There is hope and security available, even in a fallen world. And for that reason, we need not clamor for control amid the chaos, nor live out our days in fear or terror of what might happen.

The Peace of God’s Presence

Look with me again at v. 1: “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. *Therefore we will not fear*, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging” (Ps. 46:1-3). If God is with us, and if he is stronger than the chaos and trouble of this world, if there is nothing in this world that can separate his people from his love (cf. Rom. 8:31-39), then we need not live in fear. Even though trouble comes; “the Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress” (46:7, 11).

We need not live in fear, nor clamor for control amid the chaos. Look at vv. 8-10: “Come and see the works of the LORD, the desolations he has brought on the earth. He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear, he burns the shields with fire. ‘Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth’” (Ps. 46:8-10).

If God is the one who can put down evil, and who will be faithful to establish his purposes in the end, to exalt his name over every nation, to display his glory and reclaim his fallen world... In

other words, *if God is God*, then we don't have to be. We can be still. We can cease striving, stop clamoring as though the fate of the whole world lay on our shoulders. That doesn't mean we don't work hard to fight against injustice and violence. That doesn't mean that we don't want or value the highly skilled authorities who did such an excellent job providing civic protection. But it means that we keep in mind all the while who it is that's actually able to do something about the situation. It means that our trust is not ultimately in horses or chariots, in tanks and armored cars (Ps. 20:7); it's not in the resolve of our city, or the strength within our hearts. It's in God. He will be exalted among the nations. He will be exalted in the earth.

If Jesus is your Savior and King, if you have recognized the wickedness of your sin, and turned to Jesus in faith, trusting in what he has done to rescue you through his life, death, and resurrection in your place, then take heart. "In this world you will have trouble," Jesus says. "But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Fear not, and rest in Jesus. Cry out to him in prayer. Let his presence calm your heart and give you perspective. And let his gospel shape your response to tragedies like this—both with an honesty that calls sin and evil what it is, but with a compassion and grace that flows freely from the cross. Pray for your enemies.

If you're here this morning, maybe even here every Sunday morning, but your heart is unsettled, or perhaps locked in anger or fear, or hardened with indifference, because you know deep down that you do not have the peace that this psalm is talking about *because you do not know Jesus as Savior and King*—then take Jesus. Cast your life and faith on him. And find the hope and security that nothing in this world can shake or take away. Find the peace and rest of knowing that God is God, that he is with us by his Spirit, and he has conquered sin and death by the blood of his Son, Jesus Christ, and that he will be exalted in the end. And rest joyfully in him.

May all of us heed the words of 1 Peter 5:6-11:

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.
⁷ Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. ⁸ Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. ⁹ Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings. ¹⁰ And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. ¹¹ To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.