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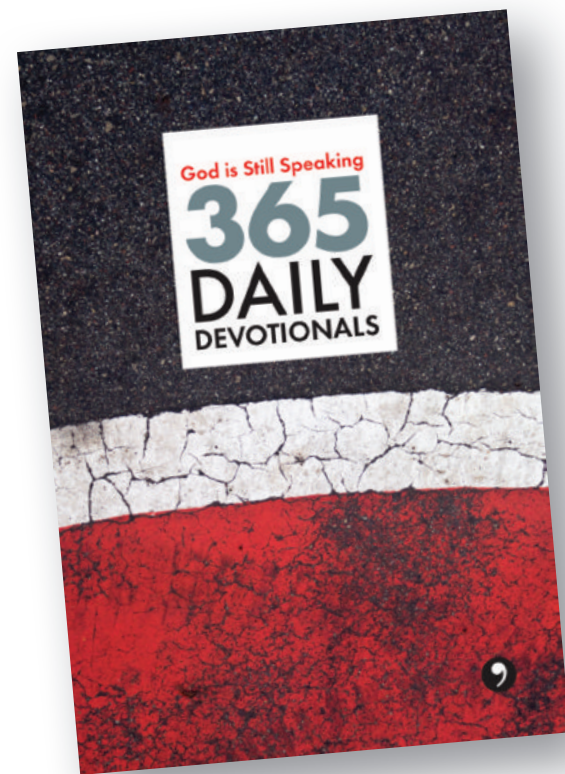
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The Church of the Finish Line: Old South Church in Boston

A POST-MARATHON BOMBING REFLECTION

by Nancy S. Taylor



“

Oh my God.

Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God. That was the cry that day. In the bombings' immediate aftermath. At the Finish Line. On the sidewalk. Amongst the blood and severed limbs. Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God. We heard it and we said it over and over and over. Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God. Uttered by agnostic, atheist and "none"; by soldiers acquainted with war and police officers who see brutality up close and personal. Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God.

In the presence of carnage, slippery blood and grievous pain, human beings don't curse. Have you noticed this? No one, I mean no one, says the F_ word. Instead, in the company of horror and death a more elemental cry erupts from deep within: Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God. It is an appeal. A plea to something more, higher, better. Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God.



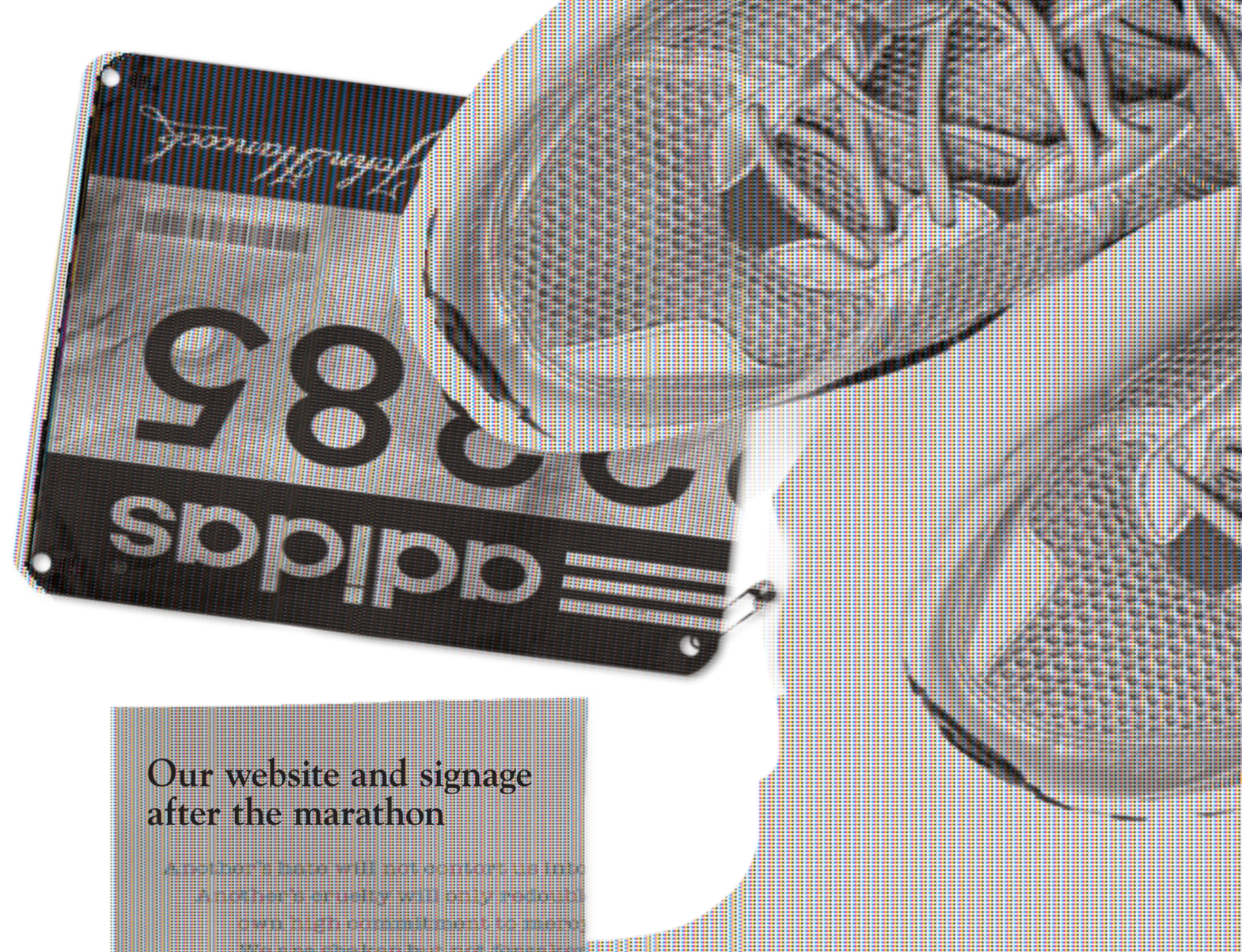
Something in the evil of that day, in the company of agony, sent us all God-ward. And so it was that the city turned to houses of faith and within days of the bombings the nation went to church with the President of the United States. With tears streaming down our cheeks we said it and sang it and prayed it together: *Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God.*

Go get the balm.

It is not every day that agnostics cry *Oh my God*, so when they do, the Church had better have a word from On High to offer, some good news to counter the bad news, a Holy Presence to fill the unholy absence of goodness and mercy.

It is given to us—to the Church—to handle together the mysteries of life and death, good and evil, time and eternity, justice and mercy. So when evil and death have kidnapped the world’s attention, when justice and mercy are on everyone’s lips, the Church had better be ready . . . had better have life and hope to offer, healing and comfort to tender. This is our moment. When hearts are rent asunder, this is the Gospel’s opportunity. We have direct access to the balm in Gilead. For heaven’s sake, go get the balm! Be quick about it and be generous.

Practically speaking, in the immediate aftermath of the Marathon bombings, Old South Church did what we are good at, what we know how to do. We dropped everything else. We tore up worship



Our website and signage after the marathon

Another's pain will not comfort us here
 Another's cruelty will only remind us
 of our high commitment to mercy
 We are shaken but not broken

Old South Church in Boston files our
 Marathon Runners in MEMORY of
 whose lives were taken
 with PRAYERS for those who are
 harmed and grieving
 In THANKING for all Pastors

And now, we are here

Still Strong

Still Healing

bulletins, cleared calendars and began again. We changed our Website and signage as soon as we were able.

The bombs had scattered us. They had sent us running. It is the Church’s vocation at such a time to enable re-gathering and opportunities for communal grief, healing and resolve. We offered a Sanctuary in the City. We worshiped outside on the street where we served Christian comfort-food to worshippers and passers-by (hunks of sweet challah bread and an ever-flowing cup).

We sang comfort-songs: “Let There Be Peace on Earth,” “This Little Light,” “There is a Balm,” “This Land is Your Land.” We held hands, swayed and cried.

“When evil and death have kidnapped the world’s attention . . . the Church had better be ready.”



We tolled our Great Tower Bell, once for each of the dead, including the older brother of the alleged bomber. We gathered at the Marathon Finish Line to reclaim it.

The Church is not surprised by evil.

Others might be but we are not. We are acquainted with hell and harrowing pain. Yea, though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death . . . Right? I don’t know too many pastors who are surprised by evil. We have lifted the cover and seen its fangs and smelled its foul breath. And, not uncommonly, we have climbed in next to it. Like Jesus, we are acquainted with evil, we are not surprised by it and much of ministry takes place side by side with evil. Disheartened by evil? Oh yes. Pained by the havoc evil causes? Desperately so. But not surprised.

In fact, do you want to know what is surprising here? This: the Boston Marathon is the world’s oldest, peaceful, international competition. Do you get how great this is? How rare? A peaceful, international competition. There is no armor here. No weapons. It is a foot race and it needs only the spare form of the human body.

The Boston Marathon is like the Olympics . . . but without the politics, without the Ralph Lauren US Olympic Collection, without the over-the-top expenses and state-of-the-art facilities. And, unlike the Olympics, the winners of the Boston Marathon often hail from among the poorest nations on earth. How great is that? The Marathon begins in a village, weaves through towns and neighborhoods and concludes in a city. Folks who live along the route participate by provisioning the runners with fresh oranges, cold water, shouts of encouragement and garden hoses of cooling spray through which to run. Many of the runners are running for a cause. Not to win. They run to raise money for cancer, MS or HIV/AIDS. Some were running for the victims of the Newtown shootings. How great is that?

The Boston Marathon requires hundreds and hundreds of volunteers who are out from early in the morning to early evening to support the world’s oldest peaceful international competition. How great is that?

Evil, by contrast, is contemptible. Shriveled. Show the contrast.

The vulnerable.

With the injured being treated in hospitals and the grieving being comforted and the manhunt underway, two groups emerged as especially vulnerable at this time: Muslims and the homeless. The clergy of Old South Church turned our attention to these two populations.

As the word “Muslim” was yet again linked with terror, our Muslim friends and neighbors were feeling increasingly threatened. Our Governor, Deval Patrick, was amazing in the way he worked to tamp it down, but local Muslims felt extremely vulnerable nonetheless and for good reason. Interfaith leaders therefore scheduled daily conference calls. We listened to our Muslim colleagues, bore their pain and provided input to the Interfaith Service. In addition, we sent Jewish and Christian clergy to worship with Muslims at local mosques. We gave witness to our friendship and our trust.

At the same time, the ten-block crime scene in the heart of Boston (maintained for a remarkable eight days) displaced homeless men and women from familiar haunts: from places where they hung out with friends, panhandled, bantered with shop-owners, foraged and slept. Already fragile, and having been dislodged from whatever normalcy they maintained, some were at their wits’ ends. We made a point of fanning out, seeking out our homeless neighbors and engaging them with soft fist-bumps and casual banter. We asked how and whether they were managing. We endeavored to humanize a manifestly inhuman circumstance.

“When hearts
are rent
asunder, this
is the
Gospel’s
opportunity.”



▲ Damaged church banners at Old South.

▶ Conclusion.

There is no conclusion. There will be an anniversary. We will mark it. There will be next year’s Boston Marathon . . . on the day after Easter.

We will do tomorrow what we do today, what we did yesterday, what we did on April 15, 2013 and in the aftermath of the Marathon bombings: we will handle together the mysteries of life and death, good and evil, time and eternity, mercy and justice. Handling such things is a high and holy privilege, a sacred trust. It will hurt like hell but we know where the balm is stored. We will get the balm, uncork it and pour it out with abandon, prodigally . . . the reckless effusion of God’s grace. ♡

Nancy S. Taylor is the senior minister of Old South Church in Boston.