

When Opposing Situations Develop, Including Death, How Does One Take Courage?

Psalm 27:1-5,11-14 and Romans 8:35,37-39

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When opposing situations develop, including death, how does one take courage? While this question is absolutely serious and is at the heart of both Psalm 27, which we have just now read, and Romans 8, which comprised the Scriptural opening sentences, the question has not been without sarcastic responses. Khartoum is the capital of The Sudan, the large nation south of Egypt in east central, sub-Saharan Africa. "Khartoum" is also the title of a 1966 movie set in the same city and country during 1883. It featured Charlton Heston as British General Charles Gordon and Laurence Olivier as The Mahdi, who is a regional guerilla militia leader and a self-proclaimed messianic Muslim religious personality. The Mahdi opposes British colonialism with a popular uprising from the regions beyond Khartoum. General Gordon is sent to Khartoum to reassure British subjects, including Egyptians living there, that the British still care about protecting them. In the movie, the growing tension of a life-and-death struggle is not without biting sarcasm. Three examples ... (1) When "large ego"-General Gordon says to his military aide, Col. Stewart: "Colonel, what are the chances of my dismissing you as my aide?" the Colonel replies: "If any possibilities exist for that to happen, General, please be assured that I'd be the first to point them out to you." (2) At another point, Col Stewart asks the General: "Why, Sir, did you let them talk you into this mission?" The General replies: "As is well known, I regard myself as a religious man, yet I belong to no church. I'm an able soldier, yet I abhor armies. I can even add that I've been introduced to hundreds of women but never married; in other words, no one's ever talked me into anything." (3) And, as General Gordon is being sent on the complicated, dangerous assignment to Khartoum, Prime Minister William Gladstone tells him: "God go with you; and I don't envy God." The movie, "Khartoum" illustrates how sarcasm is one element of human response when facing the stress of growing opposition or even death. Sarcasm can even be a distraction and a protection from a deeper, natural emotion like panic or fear; thus sarcasm keeps panic and fear suppressed and beneath the surface of important functioning emotions, such as clarity of thought, courage, and perseverance, so crucial in any person's dealing with the extreme situations one can face.

Yet you and I are here this morning to consider something more than sarcasm as a resource in life's file-folder of strategies when facing threats. Some of you have heard me tell what has been my response for years, when either of my sons would say, "Dad, you've got to see this new horror movie." My standard reply was then and still is, "Thanks, but not interested. I see enough horror in real life that I don't need a movie to give me more." A few weeks ago, on Saturday evening when I'd finished preparing for Sunday morning, I noticed that some channel was broadcasting the 1992 movie, "The Last of the Mohicans." I had never seen it, so I hit "enter" on the remote and immediately had to make a decision. It is very violent in re-enacting battles of the French and Indian War during the 1750s in the north and mid-western states. My question was, "Do I continue watching to see how the story develops, in spite of the combat violence?" I chose to do so, because the story was compelling, but I realized immediately that the combat scenes made me feel like I, watching television safe in my house in 2017, was as anxious and vulnerable to physical attack as if I literally was one of the British, French, or Native American characters in the movie, or in history 250 years ago. I have never served in combat in the armed services, nor have I been employed as a first responder eye-to-eye with threats in the line-of-duty, such as law-enforcement, medical, fire-fighting, or emergency rescue or transport personnel. These are people who stare opposition, crises, and death eye-to-eye, and death stares straight back.

When I was a high school sophomore, a junior member of our varsity football team was killed in a car wreck one hour before time to report to the locker room for the first home in-district football game. While there was conversation about not playing the game, the coaches, principals, and superintendents made the decision to go ahead and play. I still remember, immediately after the opening kickoff, looking to my right and seeing the senior assistant coach, on one knee, his face in his hands, sobbing. Nine years later, I was 24 years old and serving as an intern chaplain at St. Joseph Hospital in downtown Houston. One summer mid-afternoon, I was making calls to the Protestant patients on the general medical floor. As I passed the nurses' station, the ward clerk said to me that Sister Margareta had called for me to report to a room on the women's wing floor, the Protestant patients there for which I was also responsible. Sister was that floor's nursing

supervisor. If you asked me about Sister's personality, I would say she was "serious," and I could add that, seeing her about 4 days a week for 7 weeks, I think I saw her smile once, but it may have been the way the late afternoon light shined on her face. So perhaps I had not actually seen her smile. She told the ward clerk to inform me that it was a Code Blue situation, and she needed me to sit with the family. As a 24 year old Protestant seminary intern, one thing I had learned in my seven previous weeks at St. Joseph was when Sister Margareta said "jump," on the way "up," the only response was, "How high?" Arriving on the women's wing, I found the medical crew in the room working feverishly but without success to get a pulse from the woman patient, with her family weeping uncontrollably. I thought to myself, "How sad. How helpless they and I feel." Later Sister Margareta would ask me: "So how did that seem to you?" "Grim, Sister," I replied. "And did you pray with them later?" she asked. "Yes, Sister," I said, "but I have no idea if I was helpful." She responded, "Being present is far more important and helpful than saying or praying something profound." An assistant football coach in tears from grief's agony and a Registered Nurse Catholic Sister who commanded me to go where I had no desire to be both taught me about facing death honestly, vulnerably, and respectfully when helpless in relation to death's agony on survivors.

In addition to Death, you may well have encountered Death's cousin, "Meaninglessness." When opposing situations develop, including death and the sense of there being no larger significance to everyday life, in other words, Death's cousin, "Meaninglessness," how do you or I nevertheless take courage? I think of six possibilities. (You may think of others.) The six ways by which I think we people can take courage are: (1) through what is humorous, ironic, and laughable; (2) through the reinforcement of our positive memories; (3) through learnings from our negative memories; (4) through the power of certain music and/or songs; (5) through others' personal outreach and support to us; and (6) through a prayer relationship where God is "on the listening end," even if your or my or anyone's communion with God is what I call unalterably honest – when the only way one can face God is with honest anger and helpless frustration, which is o.k. with God.

Abraham Lincoln knew agony in his personal and in his public service life. Lincoln-historian John Burt has written of the nation's 16th President: "During his Presidency, Mr. Lincoln (believed) that to call upon the divine will to ratify some course of action you have already chosen is to act with a kind of moral narcissism, which God almost never fails to (disappoint). The one thing Lincoln's God never allows is for mortals to imagine they have God in their back pocket, ready to use as a club on their opponents... As people do not know the meaning of war when war begins, so we do not know the scope of the new birth of freedom possible when we commit ourselves to it; and our version of that new birth is as likely as not to turn out too narrow" [Lincoln's Tragic Pragmatism: Lincoln, Douglas, and Moral Conflict; Belknap/Harvard Univ. Press, 2013; p.666]. The same can be said in our personal lives. We cannot know the depth or length of pain related to an experience of agony, anymore than we can know the breadth of the new life possible which God can create through us over time. John Claypool grew up a Southern Baptist. As an adult, he suffered the death of a daughter, a divorce, and switched from the church of his upbringing to the Episcopal Church. He once preached that the breath individuals receive during and beyond extreme agony is (1) a way God blesses people with courage and (2) a way God facilitates our evolving toward healing and new serving in love.

In the early 1980s, a Presbyterian minister's wife died from a battle with cancer, leaving him a single father of a teen daughter and son. At her memorial service, they chose to have the congregation sing, "Sing Praise to God, Who Reigns Above." We will sing it as our closing hymn: "What God's almighty power has made, God's gracious mercy keepeth... The Lord is never far away, but, through all grief distressing, an ever present help and stay..." As you sing such words this morning, imagine a family singing it thirty-five years ago. Imagine singing this during an oppositional and agonizing challenge, including the possibility and the experiences of death and meaninglessness. Imagine it as a prayer for courage from God whom you know, as Abraham Lincoln knew, (God whom) you do not have in your back pocket; yet who is the One who will always, always, always be the source of the courage you need. From 25 centuries ago, the psalmist coaches people like us: "Wait for the Lord. Be strong. Let your heart take courage." Every breath we are given is a gift contributing to courage and the new life God evolves toward our present-and-future-healing for serving in love. When death and meaninglessness in different forms draw near and threaten, God is continually the Source of courage for you, for me, for each and every one. – All honor and praise be to God.