

Courage

by EARL F. PALMER

WHAT COMES TO YOUR MIND when you hear the word “courage?” In the New Testament there are three words that stand out. First is “risk” or “dare.” Mark’s Gospel says Joseph of Arimathea “dared to ask Pontius Pilate” for the body of Jesus following the crucifixion so that Jesus’ body could be properly buried. Whenever bravery is described it always acknowledges this risky stretch that a courageous man or woman chooses to take on. In the face of danger a courageous person dares to risk a necessary action.

The second word is “presence.” Paul tells the Philippians of the hope he has that he will share his faith in Christ “with full openness” (Phil. 1:20). The Greek word that Paul uses here is *paresia*, which literally means “openness.” For Paul, it is the courage of faithful presence so that he can be found, and so that the good news he hopes to share can be found too. It is the opposite of the secrecy of avoidance. This is a simple description of physical courage in a time of danger — it is that person who is willing to be exposed to danger just two or three minutes longer than would be ordinarily expected, to be out in the open. The New Testament uses this very word to anticipate the second coming of Christ. It is sometimes called his Parousia: his grand appearance.

In May 2012, Seattle suffered the deaths of five innocent people at the hands of a murderer. One of those attacked that day was a mother of two who was beaten and shot at point-blank range in a parking lot. Jo Ann Stremmer, the principal organist at University Presbyterian Church, saw what happened, rushed toward the fallen victim, and gave aid to her. Jo Ann faced the killer as he drove the victim’s car away but still assured the fatally wounded woman, “You are not alone.” This is courage that risked and was present when needed most. The Seattle Times described her as a “Good Samaritan.” I know Jo Ann very well, and we who read the accounts of that act will never forget her courage on that terrifying day.

The third word is a favorite of the New Testament

writers. It is the endurance word, sometimes translated into English as steadfastness. The word in Greek is *upomemo* and it means in the most literal sense to “stay under” or “to hang in there” for the long haul. James uses the word; “Blessed is anyone who endures” (James 1:12), and Paul includes steadfastness as one of the virtues of love (1 Cor. 13:7).

I recently had a conversation with an international human rights worker. We were talking about dangerous hotspots in the world where local populations face immediate devastation from natural catastrophes or political violence. We spoke of the various

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agencies that seek to help in times of stress, such as the United Nations and other governmental aid efforts. He told me how much he respected the Christian agency World Vision for its wise and substantial efforts, and then he added: “You know, they are the first to arrive and the last to leave.” What he was really describing was *upomemo*, the courage of staying for the long haul.

Whenever and wherever we see courage in favor of those who are in danger, we thank God that we have witnessed his love. At just such a moments we are invited into an experience of Holy Love showing up — sometimes when we were not expecting it — and sometimes shown to us by those from whom we least expected it. Both ways we are being drawn toward a good place of even more discoveries.

EARL F. PALMER is pastor emeritus of University Presbyterian Church in Seattle

