

Blessings alongside woes

By [Lawrence Wood](#)

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Some years ago, on the day before All Saints' Day, the country's best distance runners met in Central Park. These included two old friends, Ryan Hall and Ryan Shay. Ordinarily they would be racing in the New York City Marathon, which was to be held the next day, but like other elite runners, they were competing in the marathon trials for the U.S. Olympic team.

The two men started side by side, and three miles into the race, both were near the lead. But this day belonged to Ryan Hall. Over the last few miles, he ran all alone in front, pumping his fists with joy. As he reached the finish, he raised his arms in triumph, knowing that his victory meant a berth in the Olympics.

It wasn't until the press conference that Hall learned that his friend and mentor had collapsed at the five-mile mark. Shay had died of a heart attack at the age of 28.

Friends remembered not a saint but a remarkable man who had grown up near the ironworks of northern Michigan and had retained that iron hardness. Teammates recalled how Shay had chided and pushed them to excel. The heart that had pushed them, and has in particular pushed Hall to greatness, had not been built to last. Long ago, Shay had been diagnosed with an enlarged heart. As his father noted, "The thing that made him such a great runner may have killed him."

Blessings and woes lie close to each other. In ancient times, good fortune was often taken as a sign of divine favor. But in this week's Gospel reading, Jesus stands that on its head. We might just as well assume that the poor, hungry and grieving are God's beloved, he says—and if we doubt that, let us only wait to see.

Paradoxically, grief often leads to blessings. Hall's wife says she and her husband have seen how fragile life is. The different extremes: You're on a high one moment, yet something completely opposite can be going on. It may seem like the Olympic trials are the end of the world and that they're the most important thing. They're obviously not. We have such a short time. What we do with our life, the people that we impact, and the God we serve, are the most important things.