

Of Prophets & Crocuses & Queers
Sunday, October 10, 2021, 11:30 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Susan Russell

*God of the stand-up triple, the backdoor slider,
the stolen base and the 3-6-3,
we thank you for the ordered enchantments
of the game of baseball.
For the snap of a split-finger fastball in a catcher's mitt
and the arc of a white ball against a blue sky,
we praise you.
For the green of the grass and the throat of the crowd,
we glorify you.
For the grace and grit, the speed and strength,
the skill and savvy of those who take the field,
we give you thanks.
Creator God, teach us to play fair;
to cheer excellence whomever exhibits it,
to root for teams worthy of our affections
and keep us ever mindful that no matter what the umpire says,
in your love,
we are always safe at home.
Amen.*

Yes, it's a bit of an indulgence for this died in the wool, second generation, life-long baseball fan to start by giving thanks for the gift of baseball.

But my hope is wherever you find yourself on the continuum of baseball fandom, the words of my friend and colleague Jim Naughton are a window into not just the love of a particular game - - or a particular team or a particular playoff season -- but a celebration of all those gifts that give delight, bring joy and offer respite from all the challenges and struggles that surround us.

And so I want to begin this morning with a moment focused on gratitude. Just a moment to pause -- to close your eyes if you choose to or not if you don't -- and call up what it is that gives you delight, what it is that brings you joy, what it is you're thankful for this morning.

We'll get to the challenges in a minute ... and Lord knows there are plenty of them ... but just for now ... breathe in gratitude for all the blessings of this life ... and breathe out anxiety for all the challenges of this life.

And just for a moment
be mindful that no matter what anyone says
in God's love
we are always safe at home.

And it is that knowledge -- that sure and certain conviction -- that nothing can separate us from the love of God -- that is the core of the faith we share as followers of Jesus ... the radical rabbi from Nazareth who wasn't always all that welcome in his own hometown.

The Gospel this morning tells us that story according to Mark. Mark tells us "they were offended over him" as he preached to them in their synagogue.

Luke tells the same story but with a little more graphic detail:

When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.

It turns out a prophet is not only without honor in their hometown -- sometimes a prophet is in danger in their hometown.

And little wonder.

Speaking truth to power is never popular with the powerful because it just about always involves asking those with power to recognize the usually unexamined privilege that comes with that power ... and it's just a hop, skip and a jump from there to examining that privilege and to being asked to share that power.

But that's how change happens -- healing happens -- transformation happens.

And since tomorrow is National Coming Out Day I have a quick story as an example.

I came out in the National Cathedral in on the 4th of July in 1996 ... but that's not the story I'm going to tell. The story I'm going to tell is about when I came home and met with my then Bishop -- Fred Borsch -- to break the news.

Fred asked me two questions for which I've always been grateful -- "how can I help?" and "how are your boys?"

And then shared something with me -- which I've never forgotten.

He told me he believed the voices, stories and experiences of gay and lesbian people were going to be a gift to the church because they were going to challenge the unexamined sexuality of most straight people ... and while those weren't always going to be easy conversations to have, they were going to be critically important in order to heal the church of the homophobia that infects it and to liberate both the oppressed and those participating in the oppression ... whether they're aware of it or not.

"And that includes," he said smiling, "old bishops like me!"

I look back today at how far we've come since that July 1996 afternoon in the bishop's office ... recognizing how far we have yet to go ... but also grateful for how far we've come ... and for the prophets on whose shoulders we stand as we continue to do this work we have been called to do.

And this feels like a good point to pause for a little refresher course on the job description of the prophet ... something I learned in seminary from Rabbi Abraham Heschel in a book called (.... wait for it)

The Prophets:

***The prophet has a two-fold job description:
to comfort the afflicted
and to afflict the comfortable.***

The prophet has a both/and job description because we live in a both/and world – and yet we live in a moment when our discourse is dominated by those insisting on simplistic either/or solutions to the complex both/and challenges that face us –

a time where the polarization that divides us is as pandemic as the coronavirus that infects us – a time when science is argued to be antithetical to faith and a time when wearing a mask to prevent the spread of a deadly disease has been polarized into a partisan political statement.

And it is in just such a time as this that we are all called to the work of the prophet to serve as antibodies to the pandemic of polarization by living into the both/and call to afflict the comfortable and to comfort the afflicted.

I know. Seriously. It sounds exhausting, doesn't it?
Because it is. And most of us don't feel very much like prophets.
At least I know I don't.
But like it or not, it is the work we have called to do.

When I went off to seminary -- a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away a friend and choir colleague sent me off to seminary with a poem she had copied out on a piece of notebook paper.

I kept it folded up in my prayer book and read it over and over and over again ... and I managed to find it yesterday to share with you this morning. It is entitled simply "Crocus."

*It takes courage to be crocus-minded
Lord, I'd rather wait till June
like wise roses
when the hazards of winter are safely behind
and I'm expected
and everything's ready for roses*

But crocuses?

*Highly irregular
knifing up
through hard frozen ground and snow
sticking their necks out
because they believe in spring
and have something personal
and emphatic to say about it*

Lord, I am by nature rose-minded

*Even when I have
studied the situation her
and know there are wrongs that need righting
affirmations that need stating
and know that my speaking out
might even rock the boat
Well, I'd rather wait till June*

*Maybe things will sort themselves out
and we won't have to make an issue of it*

*Lord, forgive
Wrongs don't work themselves out
Injustices and inequities and hurts don't just dissolve
Somebody has to stick their neck out
somebody who cares enough to think through
and work through hard ground
because they believe
and have something personal to say about it*

*Me Lord, crocus minded?
Could it be that there are things that need to be said
and you want me to say them?
OK. Then I pray for courage. Amen. ^[1]*

So let us all pray for courage ... each and every one of us ...
no matter how "rose-minded" we are ...
to ask God to send us into the boats that need rocking,
to tell the truths that need telling,
to work through the hard ground that needs breaking through.

Courage to work to end violence in all its forms and who pray for both victim and perpetrator
as we seek healing and wholeness for absolutely every member of the human family.

Courage to speak up to end the politicization of public health policies.

Courage to afflict those who are so comfortable in their unexamined white privilege that they
are blind to the systemic racism that surrounds us and make us people who amplify the voices
of those who have endured generations of oppression, marginalization and discrimination.

Courage to learn from climate scientists what we must do to be stewards of this fragile earth,
our island home and make us people who reject the false narrative that we must choose
between science and faith

Finally and most importantly
courage to claim the resurrection promise,
that is the foundation of our faith:
trusting that absolutely nothing can separate us from God's love;
and that no matter what anyone says
in that love
we are always safe at home. Amen.