

Cracks
Rev. Mark Belletini
March 15, 2009

Opening Words:

We are here
as winter's last days give way to spring
to worship, to find the deep, strong places
in the midst of leaner times,
to celebrate the wholeness at the heart of it all,
and the sacred in the perfectly ordinary.

And so, though our ways of thinking and feeling about the meaning of our days may differ, we agree to journey together, side by side, face to face. Within this circle of strong spirit, mutual care, and ethical vision, may we ourselves remain open to being transformed by a welcoming heart and emerging justice.

Sequence:

Spring is coming with its buds and mud,
spring is coming;
and the rain comes down
to soak you and me with warmer, if wetter joy.
Yellow petals, unfolding cautiously,
peek out at bare branches knotting up with promise, shaking off winter weariness.
The far-flung clouds split open now and then,
crack like delicate wafers
and the sweet sunlight pours through,
pin-spotting our world like a stage.

O invincible Spring, You are
still hidden behind my disbelief and wary caution, still a premise, not entirely a presence,
I nonetheless turn to you.
Let your muddy ways unroll into lanes of flowers at their own pace, not my own.
Let your rains wash me, cleansing my often clogged-up eyes so that I might see your
blossoms trumpet forth even before they open.
Let the cracks in the clouds open wide to allow
your light to come down, for what else are such cracks for, but to let in the light?
And now let these words also split open,
that your silence might also flow and pour in.

silence

Spring is coming, and with spring comes memories of springs past, and dreams of
springs to come. Into this present spring,

faces from other springs...faces I love,
faces I miss, hearts that I struggle to understand.
These faces have names,
and their names are woven with my own.
May we each now take a moment to
bring our own lives into this time of
our Common Life, that our worship might
be whole, personal as well as universal.
We name aloud or in silence.

naming

Spring is coming. Let music be our praise.

Readings

The First Reading *this morning is a poem
by Albany NY poet Frederick Pollack,
written just last October. The unusual word
toward the end of the poem, quixotism,
comes from Spanish literature and means
impracticality. The title is Amends*

When the bridge collapsed,
the engineer tracked down and phoned a guy
he had roomed with in college.
The call at first resembled the Ninth Step in AA,
where one makes amends,
but was more comprehensive, and convulsive.

I made fun of you, the engineer said.
Your impracticality, your idealism.
But I've lived to see cracks in the dams, the beaches gone, clogged rusting rails, E coli
and mercury in the faucets, billions of gallons of untreated sewage,
brownsites under houses, sinkholes in roads,
and people freezing, or baked in blackouts.

I told them the cables were fraying,
that the bed wouldn't hold SUVs.

They didn't want to hear. There was no money.
The Feds laughed. It was my job. I'm fifty.
I buried the memo.
I realized there is no rationality
or rather that everyone's rational, each
in his or her own short-term way.

Then after it happened, I thought of you
and I called to say I'm sorry.
The ex-roommate tried to be upbeat.
He employed the male convention
common when someone calls after thirty years,
of talking as if you'd spoken yesterday.

He knew he could say nothing useful.
Was touched that someone like the engineer
would regard a humanities type,
still, as a keeper of values.
He imagined a new artistic movement,
a return to the Constructivism of the '20s.
Scientistic, elitist, slightly scolding,
it would have the quixotism that guarantees
the life and death of a style.
With poems about Wiring or Solar Panels;
a detailed, impersonal novel called
The Distribution of Stress.

The Second Reading is a poem by the Berkeley poet Julia Vinograd, whose piece
in the *Discoverer*, our congregational newsletter, seemed to delight so many of you. It's
called *American Dream*, and it was written in 1997.

I've been trying to remember America
when Walter Cronkite of the handsome white hair was president
and there weren't any politicians.
When fireworks and immigration were both legal;
we *wanted* everyone to want us,
it proved we were the best.
I held a sparkler, the Statue of Liberty held a torch, I expected my light to grow into hers.
I remember when boys who wore baseball caps
played baseball.
There were maps full of geography
but they were the past.
We had fast food, fast cars and movies
of the slowest kiss in the world,
the one that's still going on
but I can't see it anymore.
America. I grew up believing it worked
even though it didn't work for me.
Like all the sad housewives
sure their neighbors' marriages were happy,
watching afternoon soaps in empty houses
with the blinds pulled down.

It might even be better now
in the dark where nothing works.
We're all scared and the birthday cards
painted on the sky peeled off long ago.
No more pretending.
Everything's broken from promises to plumbing,
it's not just us anymore.

Sermon

These are apocalyptic times. What do I mean by that? Well, about two hundred years before Jesus, and for a hundred years after, there was a form of literature called apocalyptic literature, a true sign of those times.

Other forms of literature have come down to us from that era which we all can recognize. Poetry. Letters. Novels. Essays.

But apocalyptic literature is not like any of these forms. First, unlike letters or poetry, it's a temporary form. It only seems to surface during a time of great cultural transition, when anxiety is high, the future unclear, and all the ordinary signs of the times have shifted. Second, it's highly fanciful and exaggerated, almost like some of the more popular forms of science fiction in our own era. The Book of Daniel in the Jewish Bible, and Book of Revelation in the Christian testament, for example, are works of apocalyptic literature, and both books are filled with dire warnings, threatening predictions, strange creatures, over-the-top dramatic fantasies and wonder tales. They were never meant to be taken literally in the first place, but they do evoke the anxiety of a particular time and era very well.

Walking through the library or bookstores this week, in 2009, I am convinced that we are living in another apocalyptic age. Apocalyptic literature is everywhere. I find hundreds of new books promising horrors and gloom galore, and shaking scolding fingers at everyone. One fellow confidently predicts a great war between Turkey and Poland in the year 2050; another, atomic war in Iran, and still another, the complete conversion of all Middle Eastern Muslims to right-wing American Christianity. I find books describing the end of the world according to the Mayan Calendar in 2012, or books predicting planetary crashes, or announcing a reversal of the earth's magnetic poles. There are predictive portraits of America reduced to a Western version of Bangladesh during its hardest years in the seventies, whole populations reduced to starvation and street sewage.

And of course, there are long shelves of books playing the blame game. It appears that we have reached the final form of that game...everyone is blaming everyone else for everything, period. And they are using the most vile, purple-in-the-face intemperate language I've seen since the era of the Reformation five hundred years ago, when the Protestants were flinging mud in buckets at both the Pope and the Jews, and the Pope was busy confidently spitting venom toward the Jews and the Protestants.

Two thousand years ago, apocalyptic literature placed the blame squarely on Satan, or the Devil, or some other historically rooted character, like Nebuchadnezzar, or the Emperor Nero with his name spelling out the terrifying number 666. Today, the blame is placed on folks decidedly lacking hooves or horns or special numbers. One book actually offered a list of the hundred figures he felt were *screwing up* America (*his* words in the title), complete with little biographies. These vile folks include (some of you may be surprised to know,) Harry Belafonte, Barbara Walters, Dan Rather, Julian Bond and Diane Sawyer. And another apocalyptic writer is sure that the present president is entirely and personally responsible for the stock market plunge, all by his lonesome. He breathes. It tumbles.

But just because this sudden return to apocalyptic literature is over-the-top, and rather bizarre, does not mean that the world we live in now isn't different from the world we lived in two years ago at this time.

The lay offs are real. The stock market downs and ups are real. The collapsing industries, what few seem to be left in this country that is, are real. The people being thrust from their homes and sent to live in their cars are real. The upswing in theft, break-ins and packed shelters is real. And for many, the over-the-top apocalyptic literature *and* media of our era, however nutty, express well their very real anxiety, fear and discouragement. For many, the famous American Dream that we have heard of all of our lives has cracks in it. Large, and very real cracks.

Julia Vinograd wrote her poem *American Dream* long before the present apocalyptic era. But she too notices a real difference between what she was seeing when she wrote the poem, and what she remembers from her childhood:

I've been trying to remember America when Walter Cronkite of the handsome white hair was president and there weren't any politicians. When fireworks and immigration were both legal; we wanted everyone to want us, it proved we were the best.

Distorted by emotion, sure, but it's an authentic portrait. Walter Cronkite was one of the most trusted newscasters of the day; and when President Kennedy was shot, many hung on to his voice and image as security. "President Kennedy died today at 1 PM Central Standard Time," he said, choking back tears, almost unable to go on. But he did, and those of us alive back then hung on his every reliable word.

There weren't any politicians, she says. Well of course there were. They just weren't making Willy Horton commercials, or digging up dirt on each other day and night, or lying through their teeth. Or were they? she wants us to ask.

She goes on with her romantic portrait:

*We had fast food, fast cars
and movies of the slowest kiss in the world,
the one that's still going on*

Now, if we didn't already think she was both being romantic and, *at the same time*, calling that romanticism into question, she makes it plain here by bringing up that slow movie kiss, the very emblem of romance.

And then, just to make sure we get it, she uses painfully clear English: *America. I grew up believing it worked even though it didn't work for me.*

Let me repeat that. *It didn't work for me.*

The American Dream, she is saying plainly, may sound lovely. But it just was never meant for everyone. It was only meant for some.

And I am telling you that this has been true, folks, from the very beginning of the American Dream. One of our own spiritual ancestors, one who claimed to be Unitarian in his theology, and yet one who both kept slaves and enjoyed long slow kisses with them, to wit, Thomas Jefferson, told us so from the very beginning in 1776.

All men are created equal, he famously wrote. *They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, and that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.*

Jefferson was brilliant, but in this case, his memorable words were entirely based on earlier writings by others. He partially quoted the philosopher John Locke, who wrote of "life, liberty and Property." And the phrase "All men are created equal" was actually Jefferson's translation from his immigrant friend Fillipo Mazzei's Italian motto: *Tutti gli uomini sono per natura egualmente liberi e indipendenti. All men are by nature equal, free and independent.*

Nevertheless, from the very beginning of our nation, despite the clear language, all people were not considered to have been created equal. In short, it didn't work for them. White males with some land, is what "men" means in Jefferson's document. Not women. Not men or women with darker skin. Just propertied males of European ancestry.

That was the original form of the American Dream. It was a great improvement on the English Monarchy, to be sure, but in no way can it be considered entirely democratic, since well more than half of the populace wasn't even allowed the chance to vote in our foundational documents.

So there were a few cracks in the system at the very beginning. Like small cracks in a windshield, or a dam, these small cracks, barely noticed, start to spread until the windshield or dam become dangerous things. In the first poem, *Amends*, poet Pollack talks about two men, college roommates, who talk after 30 years. One is an engineer, the other in the arts. The engineer calls his friend after the bridge he has been trying to repair collapses.

I made fun of you, the engineer said. Your impracticality, your idealism. But I've lived to

see cracks in the dams, the beaches gone, clogged rusting rails, E coli and mercury in the faucets, billions of gallons of untreated sewage, sinkholes in roads, and people freezing, or baked in blackouts.

I told them, says the engineer, talking about his bosses, his company, his government. But They didn't want to hear. There was no money. The Feds laughed. It was my job. I'm fifty. I buried the memo.

Of course. Very few want to hear. And at some time in our life, I suspect we all bury the memo. The memo that Jefferson didn't write. The memo Mazzei didn't speak. The memo even Martin Luther King had not seen in written form, only as light pouring through a crack in the clouds on the day of his famous speech about the American Dream. This memo:

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that, by nature, all women, children and men, of what-ever color, ability, origin or education or capacity for love, propertied or not, healthy enough to work or not, smart or smarter, are created equal, and that they are endowed by the Spirit of Life with certain inalienable rights, and that among these are love of life, liberty, the capacity to cooperate with others to pursue happiness and health for all, including self, and for the common good.

The engineer felt bad that he hadn't tried hard enough to make himself heard. He actually confesses to his artistic friend, as if the idealism of the artist trumped his own idealism. But the artist knows otherwise. In his words of the poet...*He knew he could say nothing useful.* Because he too had not read the memo, and had buried his ideals in what he ruefully dismisses as *poems about Wiring or Solar Panels; a detailed, impersonal novel called The Distribution of Stress.*

The artist too had seen all the cracks in society, the tendency to put profit before people, to treat real human lives as means to an end that does not benefit more than a few. You cut corners because coming out ahead is more important than relationships with your brothers and sisters on earth. You tighten the belt, not because living simply is better for the environment, but because you can pack away more for yourself. You never question the ethical decisions of the authorities that run your place because you are not free to do so...you can get yourself fired, since liberty and the pursuit of happiness is for them, not you.

In other words, if you want to talk about freedom and liberty for all, then you have to put human values first, human welfare first. All humans. Not just a few.

The bright diamond of the American Dream has some cracks in it, cracks that were there at the beginning, but which have gotten larger, and which in our present apocalyptic era seem rather frightening and depressing.

But I say light is coming through those cracks, like it came through the clouds around the Washington Monument when King was speaking. And that thus this is an era for hope

and goodwill, because now those cracks are evident to everyone who has the courage to look up from their very real problems for a moment or two.

Like the diamond cutter in the story, we have little reason to court despair, despite the hardships of this era. For the cracks in our way of life could serve to reveal a rose hidden in the middle of it, as in our story this morning. If we remember to reach out to each other, like the two men in the poem who talked to each other after a collapse; if we remember that engineers need artists, and artists need engineers, that men need women and women need men and all variations on gender for that matter; if we remember that all colors of human beings need all other colors of human beings, and that people of differing abilities need each other, if we remember that the American Dream is far greater if it's for everyone and not merely a portion of the population, and if we remember that this dream is not about getting for ourselves, but the building up of the common good where everyone benefits in some way, we have every reason to be glad in these days.

Jefferson wrote his words based on the words of Mazzei and Locke. I now offer again this declaration for the present age, based on the reworking of Jefferson's words. Call it a memo, as I did, or a declaration, or a vision of a rose locked in a cracked diamond, it doesn't matter. But here it is again:

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that, by nature, all women, children and men, of whatever color, ability, origin or education or capacity for love, propertied or not, healthy enough to work or not, smart or smarter, are created equal, equal! equal! and that they are endowed by the Spirit of Life with certain inalienable rights, and that among these are love of life, liberty, the capacity to cooperate with others to pursue happiness and health for all, including self, and for the common good.

Offering

Let this time set aside for music be also a time
set aside for giving and receiving, for as we move within the beauty of the music, let us
also thrive within the beauty of generosity.

Vernal Alleluia

Spring does not bring justice.
We ourselves have to tinker it together daily,
a little at a time. Alleluia.
Spring does not really spruce up the
fallen down house with sudden geraniums.
No, we have to bring our nails, our paints,
and sweat a little. Alleluia.
Spring does not write policies or
require honesty or encourage courtesy.
We have to do those things
with all of our clumsiness, insecurities

and doubts in tow. Alleluia.

No, spring does not bring peace.

But we cannot claim our wisdom unless we live it into being ourselves. Alleluia.