

God, Life, and Everything The New PB

You probably didn't catch this giant news last Sunday, what with the Halloween hangovers and Mets making their swan song (for which I am truly sorry).

But something of much more significance, at least for a portion of our society, took place in Washington, DC. Our church, the Episcopal Church of the United States, installed its new Presiding Bishop - or, as we affectionately called him or her, the PB.

The Presiding Bishop in the Episcopal Church is the leader of the national church and is the equivalent of an Archbishop in the worldwide Anglican Communion. Unlike, say, the pope, the Presiding Bishop is elected by the entire church in a triennial General Convention and serves a single nine-year term.

This transition of power was historic. The now former PB, the Most Reverend Katharine Jefferts Schori was the first female primate of a world-wide church. The new PB, the Most Reverend Michael Curry, is the first African American primate of the Episcopal Church.

Neither of these two primates were elected to shatter some sort of ceiling, nor to prove some political point. They were elected because they were exactly what the church needed at the time.

The Washington Post called the outgoing Presiding Bishop "a somber Nevada oceanographer," but she was much more than that. At the time she was elected, the Episcopal Church was in explosive crisis. Not long before she was elected, the Right Reverend Gene Robinson had been elected as Bishop of New Hampshire, setting the church in an uproar because he was only gay and in a committed relationship.

Not only did conservative Episcopalians revolt, but Anglicans from around the world - especially in Africa, South America and, Asia - threatened to eject the Episcopal Church. Many thought that because she was a woman, this would push things to the breaking point. And indeed, many congregations and entire dioceses bolted, creating their own anti-gay, anti-woman denominations.

But something else happened. The church began to heal. Rather than call her somber, I would call her gentle yet firm. We had the honor of welcoming her here at St. James' in 2011 when we celebrated our parish's bicentennial. I stand by my statement that her gentle, healing touch was what we needed when the church was so fragile.

Now, because of her calm approach, we are ready for Michael Curry.

And what a difference!

Since his installation was live-streamed, I watched it online. When he got warmed up in the pulpit, he had the entire crowd at the Washington National Cathedral on their feet applauding more than once. Mind you, these are Episcopalians!

What made him so electrifying?

Several commentators said it was his preaching style which they said bore more resemblance to Baptist preaching than Episcopal. I would suggest they just haven't seen a lot of Episcopal preachers. For me, what made the difference was the infectious combination of hope and joy. Not naive, pollyannaish hope but eyes-wide-open, calculating hope.

In his sermon, he made us laugh by quoting that 20th century sage, Bobbie McFerrin who said, "Don't Worry, Be Happy!" He surprised a few by saying we are not going to do anything new because we have always been part of the Jesus movement - we

are simply going to remind ourselves how good it truly is and encourage ourselves to get out and share that wonder and love.

He cited the beatitudes ("Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the pure in heart. Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.") - certainly not naive - as a guide for our path forward.

He cited the summary of the law ("love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself") and the parable of the Good Samaritan as our marching orders.

This may seem like nothing new for a Christian church. But he did this in a manner that made even the cynics believe that yes, we truly can make a positive difference in the world. And even if we fail, God is still good.

He summarized it powerfully when he said, "The nightmare of this world will be transfigured into the very dream of God for humanity and all creation. My brothers and sisters, God has not given up on God's world. And God is not finished with the Episcopal Church yet."

Now, you may not care about a church that numbers fewer than two million members and may seem "old fashioned" or, ironically, "too liberal." But for me, his infectious call to a new hope, to a renewal of the eternal love which has guided us all along despite the noise surrounding us - that is exciting.

So, dear friends, pardon me my moment of exuberance. I'm feeling pretty good about things right now.