I couldn't find a church, so I went to a stadium.

I had moved to the San Francisco Bay area from Boston months before, but had not yet found a faith community. (Everyone was off meditating, I guess.) So instead, I bought a ticket to the Red Sox-Giants game and took the Muni trolley down King Street to SBC Park.

I found instant communion with a guy in a Red Sox jersey -- No. 5, Nomar Garciaparra's. He was from Rhode Island, the accent was good and thick, and by the time the trolley stopped in front of the stadium we had decided that the Sox need another closer and that Nomar needs to get his swing back -- and fast.

Once inside, we all stood for the national anthem. Someone threw out the first ball. I cracked open peanut shells and squinted to see Johnny Damon, the Sox leadoff hitter, crouch in the box. (I remembered the opening procession into church in Boston, the crucifer leading the way, and how the choir filed into the stalls after bowing at the altar.)

Sundays in Boston, I heard about a guy named Jesus -- sharing a last meal with friends, dying, rising to life again.

The Red Sox had their own well-known story. They haven't won a World Series since World War I, but they're almost always good enough to make you think that maybe, maybe, this is the year. In this story, no one rises from the dead, but we fans keep coming and the Sox keep playing, daring life to throw us all another curveball.

Before the game in San Francisco started, I'd snuck over to the first base line to see the players up close. There was the bleach-blon德 Kevin Millar, the loopy left fielder whose "Cowboy up" slogan helped spur the Sox to within a couple of outs of the Series last year -- before Aaron Boone took Tim Wakefield's knuckleball deep in extra innings, and my heart sank as the white cowhide dropped into a sea of ecstatic Yankee fans.

On this afternoon, as on that terrible night last October, the starting pitcher was Pedro Martinez. And now he was warming up right in front of us. I stood amongst the K-men, guys painted in red, each of them grasping a sandwich board sign to count Pedro's
strikeouts. We hollered at him and Pedro smiled, tossing his Afro under his cap, rubbing his red glove against his face, then hurling another pitch to catcher Jason Varitek.

When Pedro was done, the stocky catcher lingered, bareheaded, and knelt down on the grass. He bowed his head, while all around him the stadium exploded with flashbulbs and noise and music. Then he crossed himself, stood up, and trotted to the dugout.

Here by the Bay, the lion could lay down with the lamb, for I shared my bleachers seat with a Yankees fan. When a bare-chested Giants fan a few rows away pulled out a huge wooden noisemaker and cranked it above his head, it blasted our eardrums.

"How did he get that thing past security?" the Yankees fan asked me.

Me and the guys with caps jammed on backward, two-fisting beers, arm in arm with gentle mothers in windbreakers and Topsiders -- we were the Red Sea that rose and dipped with every pitch, worshipping in the wilderness. We didn't have to know each other's name. We knew the story of the Sox. When they did win it all, it would be the most wonderful thing in our lives, the kingdom of heaven found on this earth.

In the eighth inning, Trot Nixon's single squirted between two Giants to tie the game. We surrounded Mr. Noisemaker, waving imaginary cranks, screaming, embracing strangers, no wooden pews separating us. I raised my arms and laughed so hard I choked on my peanuts.

Minutes later the Giants' Edgardo Alfonzo hit a two-run shot, and we sat in silence. The Sox lost, 6-4. Mr. Noisemaker twirled his crank again.

As we walked down the ramps, back to our cars and trains and worries, I heard someone chant: "Let's go Red Sox. Let's go Red Sox."

"The game's over. Isn't that a little late?" one Giants fan rasped in my ear, but not too angrily.

Because all of us had drunk from the cup that day. A mystery that I had heard about in sermons -- how God does crazy, unexpected things with us and through us, and how we need to keep showing up -- had drawn us to SBC Park.

And when an unknown Giants pitcher, a kid just up from the minors, had out-dueled the great Pedro, we were reminded that the story is never over, that we can begin again, our hearts broken and full and open all at the same time.

"Let us go forth rejoicing in the power of the spirit," my priest would say at the end of our services.

I swear I heard the PA announcer say the same thing.

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