

Hope springs eternal every March on the practice fields of Arizona and Florida, as America's love affair with baseball is reborn for another year

"Of course I love early spring training," writes blogger Joe Posnanski, "for the same reasons that everyone loves it.

- "every team has hope again..."
- "watching the players do drills in the sun reminds you that winter is almost over..."
- "Most of all, I love the stories..."
- "The aging veteran is trying to squeeze one more year out of his tired body—he looks better than he's looked for years!"
- "The phenom is looking better than the manager ever dreamed—he might actually make the club!"
- "The legend is visiting camp—all the kids ask him questions!"

"The stories rarely pan out, of course...but like many illusions, they're lots of fun."

Friday's sports headline in the Denver Post was "Spring Awakening"

- "Tucson—Outside the Stadium, three college-aged kids played a spirited game of whiffle-ball. Motor homes moved slowly over the gravel parking lot. The air smells of hot dogs and funnel cakes, and the only thing more plentiful than the beer is the sun screen.
- "There isn't a cloud in the sky. It's 67 degrees.
- After four months of snow, it is time for baseball. With the highest expectations in the 18-year history of the franchise, the Rockies opened the Cactus League schedule today against the Arizona Diamondbacks...
- "Nobody will remember this game. The best team in Arizona doesn't receive a Cactus or even buffet tickets at the local casino. This is about a rebirth, about optimism. Everybody thinks they have a chance on the first day of spring training."

Not that it really matters at this point, but the Rockies won 11-1, led by a big home run from outfielder Seth Smith

- "It's not a big deal," Smith said afterwards. "You can write a story about it, but I just want to build on this and go home and play with my daughter."

- Last March Smith was struggling for a spot on the roster—this year he returns as the top pinch hitter in the major leagues

Recent sports page headlines chronicle a bunch of hopeful stories like his

- “Future in De La Rosa’s Hands”
- “Perspective Swings for Spillbourghs”
- “Confidence Rising for Jason Hammel”
- “Corpas Impresses Manager during live Batting Practice”
- “Jeff Francis irons out kinks in Tucson”

For young men like them, hope springs eternal at this time of the year

- They all have talent or they wouldn’t be in the Rockies camp
- They haven’t been tested yet—not this year—but they will be soon enough

Paul’s words to us today about the trials of life are both sobering and encouraging

- “if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall”
- After all, he says, testing is “common to everyone”
- Yet he also promises that God will “provide the way out,” preventing us from being “tested beyond your strength” (*1 Cor 10:12*)

I’m sure the warning to watch out when we think we’re standing resonates with all of us

- Life’s tests can take many forms: strained relationships, financial difficulties, vocational challenges, health crises, and so on
- The times when we appear to be on solid ground can be the most treacherous, because we’re tempted to think we’re in control, that we can handle whatever comes along
- Sooner or later we reach the limits of that kind of rugged independence, and the more we’ve been attached to it, the harder it is to re-orient ourselves

Troy Tulowitzki is one of the most gifted baseball players in the world

- He burst onto the national stage at age 22 with a huge year in 2007, leading the Rocktober surge into the World Series
- But the next year his production dropped dramatically and he struggled with injuries

- Last spring his confidence seemed shaken and he started the season in disastrous fashion

To his credit, cashing those big paychecks didn't satisfy Tulowitzki, and with help from new manager Jim Tracy he turned his season around

- Having been up and down in his short career, Tulo brings a new maturity to the coming season
- He learned humility from being tested and now carries himself with a sense of quiet confidence
- His teammates know they can count on him as a leader, and it looks like they might have a big year

There's no mystery about the fact that, one way or another, all of us are tested in our lives

- When I look around our congregation I see that happening both in dramatic and in quiet ways
- You know your own situations, and hopefully you know something about your friends and neighbors
- I'm sure you're already learning and growing from life experiences, but here's the hard question
- When the really challenging tests come, how exactly does God "provide the way out," as Paul promised?

Right off the bat I want to eliminate one of the most trivial and irritating attempts at theological reflection

- When someone is diagnosed with cancer or suffers a terrible accident or is betrayed in a relationship, people sometimes say, "This is part of God's plan. You don't understand it yet, but someday you will."
- The book of Job notwithstanding, I reject the notion that God is like a puppet-master, pulling strings to see how we'll respond under fire
- The heart of our biblical tradition tells us that God remains present with us through all our brokenness and suffering
- The point is not to understand why your loved one got sick, but to discover how God's presence will help you to cope with the situation and support others as well

Paul describes grace in a collaborative way: it's God's free gift to us, purchased by Christ's suffering on the Cross, awaiting our faith-filled response

- Receiving God's grace is "the way out" of testing, the key to enduring hardships, the strength behind any efforts we undertake
- And it seems to me that this process begins with asking for help
- The starting point for dealing with the trials of life is to affirm that we're not wise enough or virtuous enough or strong enough to handle them ourselves
- Asking for God's help puts us in the right position to find a way forward
- And don't forget about asking for help from other people!
- Remember the story of the man on the roof of a flooded house who prayed for God's help and then refused a ride in a boat?

A second key to finding "the way out" of our trials is to strive for faithfulness and patience

- I mean consciously seeking those qualities instead of being fixed on dramatic results
- Not that amazing turnarounds can't happen, but pounding our heads against the walls of our problems isn't the best approach
- The spiritual discipline of trying to live faithfully, of listening patiently for the whisper of God's word, will never lead us astray
- By all means pray for miraculous healing, but first make sure that you're unconditionally placing yourself in God's hands

Finally, the times when we're most severely tested are the most important times to cultivate gratitude

- God-sightings tend to abound when our hearts are broken open
- I've been seeing that around the church in the past ten days, though it's not anything new
- If you can stop to give thanks for the small blessings that rest alongside your large problems, it will open your heart in ways you might not realize at the time
- God's grace just needs a tiny opening in order to penetrate to the core

Two summers ago we heard a pair of powerful testimonies at the annual "Faith Day with the Rockies"

- Dave Dravecky is a captivating speaker with an amazing story to tell
- After great success as a major league pitcher, he was diagnosed with a cancerous growth in his pitching arm
- He underwent surgery and a rigorous recovery program, returning to the big leagues late the next summer
- In his second start a bone in his arm snapped, ultimately leading to amputation in order to fully remove the cancer

With astonishing grace, Dravecky spoke of his journey through success and illness and putting his life back together again

- With tears in our eyes, our hearts were lifted by his inspiring story of faith
- Then, with what you would call a “hard act to follow,” young Seth Smith spoke to us
- He talked about the trials of struggling for playing time, of being sent down to the minor league team in Colorado Springs, and wondering whether he would ever make it in the big leagues
- Then he caught himself in mid-sentence, going on to say that, “I really have nothing to complain about when I think about what Dave Dravecky went through.”

But Dravecky was quick to respond: “These are your trials, Seth, and those were mine. We each have to deal with what’s right in front of us.”

*“So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful and will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.”*

When the trials come in your life, ask for God’s help, strive for faithfulness and patience, and cultivate gratitude for your blessings.

Hope springs eternal when we can place ourselves in God’s hands.