

Sermon: Our Lady of Guadalupe's Message**Scripture: Isaiah 61:1-11; Luke 1:44-56****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: December 11, 2011**

One day not long ago – in the 16th century of the common era - there was a Mexican peasant man who was winding his way from his own village to attend an early morning mass in Mexico City. He was a recent convert to Christianity and was filled with the love of God, Juan Diego was, but also walked with a heavy heart, for he and his people lived only decades ago under the harsh oppressive thumb of the Aztec Empire but now were living under an even more oppressive rule of the Spaniards.

It was December 9th 1521 and Juan Diego was walking the road to Mexico City passed Tepeyac Hill lost in thought when suddenly he was stopped in his tracks by the most intoxicating sound of birds singing as if from heaven. As he stood still enrapt in their song he heard the lovely voice of a young woman and opened his eyes to the vision of a dark skinned Mary saying “Juanito, the most humble of my sons, go to the Bishop and tell him to build me a church on the hill so that my people may come and I may therein exhibit and give them all my love, compassion, help, and protection for I hear their lamentations and will remedy their afflictions and sorrows.”

It sounds familiar doesn't it? It sounds like Moses' epiphany when God tells him that he heard the cry of his people oppressed in Egypt and wanted to set them free. It sounds like the words of Isaiah – “he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives.” It sounds like Jesus himself quoting Isaiah “ the Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor and recovery of sight for the blind, and to liberate the oppressed.” This is the theme of God's appearances in our scriptures. The epiphanies of God tend to proclaim God's mercy and concern about those living under the weight of injustice, as though, if we can believe it, the way things are is not the way God would have them be, that our human systems of inequity and violence, of the few benefiting off the backs of the many, of rules that favor one race and class of people at the expense of others, is actually of central importance to God. This is what our scriptures seem to say.

“Go tell the Bishop to build me a church, Juanito,” Mary says some 1500 years after her Jesus' historical presence, “ a church where my hurting people may come for

love, compassion and protection” Jaun, like all prophets who hear the voice of God, resisted at first, saying – “who am I to do what you need, to speak to the Bishop?” But with some coaxing he went and did as Mary had asked. Of course the Bishop was little amused and dismissed him with hardly another thought. A few days later though, Juan walked by Tepeyac Hill once again on his way to visit his sick father but this time he snuck around the back-side of the hill in hopes of avoiding Mary, but he heard her lovely voice again, climbed to the top of the hill and there, despite the winter cold, he found a large cluster of rose bushes in full bloom. “Put these roses in your cloak Juan,” Mary insisted, “and go again to the Bishop. This is a sign for him that what I ask for has truly come from me.” And so Juan Diego filled his cloak with the roses and went again before the bishop. Before the Bishop could protest he opened his cloak and the roses spill onto the floor at the Bishop’s feet. But what is more, as the roses fell from Jaun’s cloak there was left an imprinted image of Mary, Mary of Guadalupe. The Bishop saw it and believed and built a church there on the hill, a church that for over 400 years has been one of the most popular pilgrimage sites of the Christian world. And there in that church still sits Jaun’s cloak with Mary’s image on it, inexplicably intact after all these years.

Throughout the centuries Our Lady of Guadalupe has been invoked in the struggle for workers’ rights, fair treatment of the poor, respect for indigenous culture, liberation of the oppressed, and other efforts to manifest God’s justice in this world. In 1810 in fact, another hugely significant date for the Mexican people, Father Miguel Hidalgo took the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe from the front of his church and led a great procession of the Mexican people chanting “long live the Virgin of Guadalupe” which initiated their struggle for independence from Spain.

This is the origin of the feast day that we will celebrate with our sister church here in Charlotte and hopefully a good number of our Latino brothers and sisters who are the migrant farm workers in our community tomorrow at 11am at our Lady of Mount Carmel. We chose this day because the men we talked to said with a twinkle in their eyes, that of all the days of the year, this would be the one that they would love to be gathered for. I will be giving the homily for the service, which makes me laugh a little bit, I have to say – me being a Protestant, white, non-spanish speaking person, preaching to a group of Mexicans about the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the high holy day for

Mexicans. That takes some gaul, I'm thinking now, as I'm starting to prepare it, but which I wasn't thinking when I first offered myself.

And yet the reason I can do it is because there is nothing essentially inconsistent with my own faith and what I find in this account. And in fact it's a beautiful story that highlights the heart of Advent; that the coming of Christ is not this spiritual coming that ignores the issues of the world and points towards some higher interior spiritual plane of existence or an other worldly promise, but in a remarkable way God is made manifest as caring about the problems of our world, caring about the people who are hurting and captive, lost and lonely. This is how Our Lady of Guadalupe is manifest to Juan Diego and it is wholly consistent with our Lord and Savior, whom she raised. Advent is about the dawning of justice and mercy in the affairs of the world if it's about anything.

Just listen. In this season of the advent of Christ we hear these words read "God has sent me to proclaim release for the prisoners". Release for the prisoners. We know something about that in our country, don't we? That hits home, for the prison industry is one of the fastest growing industries in our country right now. Did you know that proportionally we lock up more of our citizens into prisons than any other country in the world. Do you realize – I just was made fully conscious of this at my Clergy Convocation in New Orleans – that there are private contractors who hire out prisoners for cheap labor and make money off of them which gives incentives to lock people up and there are lobbyists who press legislatures for tougher laws on minor crimes to fill their businesses. (from globalresearch.ca article by Vicky Palaez called "The Prison Industry in the United States) And yet "I have come to bring release for prisoners," we hear in our sanctuaries in the season of Advent. The image of Mary on Tepeyac Hill reminds us that it's exactly the prisoners who are a vast majority African American and Latino who God loves with an enduring and motherly love.

In the season of the advent of Christ we hear Mary's words from the Gospel of Luke: "He has filled up the hungry and sent the rich away empty" and we can guess that God cares and greatly about the disparity between the rich and the poor in our country which is growing greater every day. I mean, if our advent scriptures tell us anything, God might really care that a CEO's pay of the biggest and most influential corporations in our country is on average 475 times that of the average worker (CEO Pay Rates: US vs

Foreign Nations, by Adam Choate, Dana Rowzee, Jerrod Tinsley, November 17, 2005). This apparently has to do with God's coming, that, for instance, the Pew Research Center found in 2009 that while the Household Median Net Worth of whites in our country in 2009 was over \$100,000, that the net worth of Latino and African Americans were well under \$10,000 (<http://pewresearch.org/2069/housing-bubble-subprime-mortgages-hispanics-blacks-households-wealth-disparity>>). If Mary and Juan Diego and Jesus have anything to say, we've got to realize that God is troubled by such racial disparity. Isaiah said it in a rather raw way by saying God hates robbery and wrongdoing and loves justice. Therefore we might take a page from Isaiah and say that God hates what Bank of America has been doing in declining and canceling loan modifications for over 680,000 families, making it impossible for them to stay in their homes (see www.thenewbottomline.org; Bank of America Continues to be Bad for America; Nov 2011). But to the contrary, we could also say that God must love how let's say NRG Systems treats their employees and how the Ben and Jerry's Foundation fosters grass-roots movements toward justice and peace, to say nothing of how Joseph, Mary and Jesus would have loved Ben and Jerry's ice cream!

But the point is that God is not indifferent to what is going on in our world, our communities, our homes. God cares. That's a huge part of the revelation of our sacred scriptures; that God, the Creator of all that is, cares AND particularly about those powerless ones who are hurting, oppressed, mistreated; those prisoners and undocumented laborers, and single women of color, and the men out on the side of the street asking for change. Strangely enough God cares and asks us to care. "Come to me all you who are weary and heavy-laden and I will give you rest." "Cloth the naked, visit the prisoner, feed the hungry and when you do this to the least of my brothers and sisters you are doing it to me!" "Build me a church where my hurting people may come for love, compassion and protection for I hear their lamentations and I want to remedy their afflictions..."