

The Feast of Guadalupe
December 14, 2008

Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, CA

God's Unlikely Messengers:

A Sermon Preached on the Occasion of the Feast of Guadalupe by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

The time is 1531. The place a hill just outside Mexico City. Juan Diego, a peasant farmer, is on his way to mass. Suddenly he hears a strange sound coming from the crown of the hill. Bird, glorious birds, singing the most beautiful music. He turns aside to investigate. He sees a young woman—brown like him—dressed in a blue cloak. At her throat a cross. Under her breasts the black sash Aztec women wear when pregnant.

She speaks to him saying, “Know and understand, you the dearest of my children, that I am the ever holy Virgin Mary, mother of the true God through whom one lives, of the creator of heaven and earth. I have a living desire that there be built a temple, so that in it I can show and give forth all my love, compassion, help, and defense, because I am loving mother to you, to all who are with you, to all the inhabitants of this land....I will hear their lamentations and will remedy all their miseries, pains, and sufferings.”ⁱ

Then she sends him on a mission. He is to go to the bishop and tell him to build her, Guadalupe—the brown Virgin—a shrine. The audacity of it all. Juan Diego. A peasant. An Aztec. One of the conquered. Sent to the conqueror to tell him what to do. No wonder it takes some time to get an audience with the bishop. No wonder he's met with skepticism. No wonder the bishop dismisses him.

But Guadalupe won't let Juan Diego off the hook. When he suggests she send another, one more powerful than a simple Aztec peasant, she says to him, “Listen, my son, the dearest of my children...I have many messengers and servants...but in every aspect it is precisely my desire that **you** be my entrusted messenger....”ⁱⁱ

Back Juan Diego goes to the bishop's quarters. A poor man. An Aztec. They pay no heed to him. He's left to wait until the end of the day. When the bishop finally hears his story, he asks Juan Diegote to get a sign from Guadalupe. On his way back home, Juan Diego meets the Virgin once again. She promises him that the next day he will receive a sign to bring to the bishop.

But in the night, Juan Diego's uncle turns deathly ill. Early the next morning, Juan Diego goes in search of a priest to give him last rites. This time he avoids the path to Guadalupe. He doesn't want the Virgin Mary distracting him from his urgent errand. He gives her wide berth. But she's on to him. Again he hears the singing of the birds. Again he meets la Virgen on the path. She assures him that his uncle is already healed. She tells him to go up the hill where he'll find the sign he needs. There at the top of the hill he finds roses blanketing the arid desert landscape. Roses in December. At five thousand feet. That's a sign to please a bishop! He fills his cloak with flowers and goes off to meet the bishop.

As he opens his cloak and drops the flowers at the bishop's feet, people gaze intently at his cloak. There on that rough cloak of cactus fibers is an image of a woman—the sun radiating from behind her image. She wears a cloak of blue. There's a cross around her neck. Above her breasts the black sash Aztec women wear when pregnant. She's brown. Just like Juan Diego.

You don't have to dig very deep to find images of Guadalupe in Sonoma. You see her image in posters, on cars, in offices and in homes. Some wear her image every day. Some have Guadalupe tattooed on their skin. Others wear her on a medallion around their neck.

What is her power? What is her attraction? What is her draw?

In part the answer lies in Guadalupe—in the form she took and the compassion that she showed. Remember, she came to Juan Diego as one like him—a brown woman wearing the sash that Aztecs wore, bearing symbols of his people and the cross that knows no borders. Remember her claim to be a loving mother to the people of the land. And remember her promise of compassion. No wonder people wear her close to their hearts. Hers is the image of hope.

But there's something else at work as well. Take a look at the man she chose to be her messenger. Juan Diego. A member of the conquered race. A man who lived through all the violence of that conquest and all the tragedy in its wake. A man cast aside. A man others overlooked. And yet it was to Juan Diego la Virgen de Guadalupe said, "in every aspect it is precisely my desire that **you** be my entrusted messenger...." Hers is the image of transformation. Hers is an image that gives power to the powerless.

What does la Virgen de Guadalupe have to say to you and me, living as we do, thousands of miles and light years away from that arid mound just outside Mexico City? "A lot," I'd say. Particularly to us living, as many of us do, as people of great privilege and power. Educated. Confident. People who have a roof over our heads and enough food in our pantry and maybe even some money in the bank. People who speak the language of power. What does Guadalupe have to say to us? Perhaps the same thing she had to say to that bishop.

Guadalupe reminds us that our Lord came to us in a stable and died for us on the Cross. She turns our gaze to the faces and voices of the ones people often overlook, push aside, ignore. She reminds us that God speaks to and through those whom the powerful dismiss—the least of these Jesus calls them. Guadalupe invites us to listen to voices we otherwise might not hear—the solitary voice, the voice that challenges, the voice that confronts, the voice that calls for justice, the voice that cries for mercy. And when we do, when we listen to those other voices and act on what we hear as that bishop did so long ago, we join with la Virgen de Guadalupe and with God in giving birth to something new and wonderful—a meztizo world that not only blends the new with the old but in the process creates a more just and compassionate world.

ⁱ Virgilio Elizondo, The Future is Mestizo, p. 61.

ⁱⁱ *ibid.*, p. 62.