

Feast of the Virgin of Guadalupe

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We are here this morning to celebrate the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Most of us know the gist of the story. Some 460 years ago, an elderly Indian man named Chauhltlatoczin ["Juan Diego" in Spanish] had a vision of Mary, the mother of Jesus, at Tepeyac, a squalid Indian village outside of Mexico City. Mary directed Juan Diego to tell the bishop to build the church in Tepeyac. The Spanish Bishop, however, dismissed the Indian's tale as mere superstition — he was, after all, an Indian — but then, to humor Juan Diego, he insisted that he bring some sort of proof, if he wanted to be taken seriously. So, three days later, the Virgin Mary appeared again and told Juan Diego to pick the exquisitely beautiful roses that had miraculously bloomed amidst December snows, and take them as a sign to the Bishop. When the Indian opened his poncho to present the roses to the Bishop, the flowers poured out from his poncho to reveal an image of the Virgin Mary painted on the inside of the poncho. That image hangs today in the Basilica of Guadalupe in Mexico City and is venerated by thousands of pilgrims from all over the world.

Guadalupe is a "vision" story and like all such stories tells us something about God and something about ourselves. More precisely, it tells us how God wants to be among us. So what does this vision story tell us?

Let's take a closer look at the story. First, consider the locales. Mexico City, stronghold of the Conquistadors, hub of the Spanish empire in the New World, center of the arts and culture, site of the Cathedral and therefore the religious center of the new world. It was there in the Cathedral that God's presence was most dramatically memorialized. In contrast, we have Tepeyac. A poor village of conquered Indians on the farthest outskirts of Mexico City. No power, no wealth, not even a church; of no significance to anyone — certainly not to the Spaniards or their God. In fact, according to the story, Juan Diego was trudging off to attend Mass in Mexico City when he had his vision.

Significantly, Mary appeared to not as a white-skinned, blue-eyed, blond-haired European Madonna but as dark-skinned, brown-eyed, black-haired "Tonantzin," the revered Indian Mother, and she spoke to Juan Diego not in cultured Castilian but in his own Nahuatl language. She came as a defeated Indian and spoke in the language of the powerless, disenfranchised and despised Indians. She was then and is today, "la morenita" — the brown one. Her message to the Bishop was that God's church should be built out on the fringes of society, amidst the poor and the down trodden. In other words, the vision challenged the powerful conquerors, the Spaniards of Mexico City, to change their way of thinking and acting. It challenged them to move out from their position of power and influence to the periphery; to leave their magnificent cathedral and build God's house in Tepeyac because that is where God prefers to be — among the poor and the despised, far away from the center of power and culture and education and the arts.

The vision also tells us something about ourselves: that we generally listen to people who look and act important. That the people to sweep the hallways or fry the burgers or paint

the numbers on our curbs do not really have anything to say to us. The vision challenges us to listen to the people who do not look or act like us.

Juan Diego's vision of where God wants to be or whom we should listen to should come as no surprise to us. Throughout history, God has consistently chosen to be with poor people. We know that our God "hears the cries of the poor." While it is true that God loves each and every one of us, there is a special place in God's heart for the poor and the powerless. In that respect, Juan Diego's message is a restatement of Jesus' vision of God. Jesus talks about his work as bringing good news to the poor, release to captives and sight to those who do not see. In other words, the Guadalupe vision translates Jesus' first century, Palestinian vision of God into one that addressed the situation in 16th century Mesoamerica and 21st century San Francisco.

The challenge for us is not to lose our bearings in the midst of papers and exams and Christmas preparations. Rather let us hear the message of Guadalupe, the message of Gospel and do all that we are able to do to see that God is brought out to the poor and the broken hearted in our communities. Let us rethink who "counts" and who speaks to us of God.

Let us go to the table of the Lord where the poor, the meek, the suffering and the persecuted are particularly welcome, knowing that this is what God wants us to make of our world.