

## John and Juan

The Jews had lost their way. Rome ruled the world at the time. For 500 years the Roman Republic rose systematically out of the Italian peninsula. After a civil war, the first emperor was crowned in 27 BCE, named Augustus. The empire would stand for another half a millennium. Rome was the capital, and all roads led there, tracing in from its conquered lands that ringed the Mediterranean Sea. Judea was one such conquered land. Roman rule was everywhere. Government and military personnel were omnipresent. Rome tended to rule ruthlessly.

Life in Judea under the Romans was hard enough for who the Romans were, but the Jews also nursed a rich memory of sovereignty as a nation. They had lost it almost 600 years earlier to the Babylonians, who were succeeded by the Persians and then the Greeks. In the Maccabean revolt they won sovereignty from the Greeks for 47 years before the Romans overran them. The fact that they were once again reduced to an occupied territory rankled them. The ideal of King David and the glory of King Solomon still galvanized the people. This was their secret wish, their deep longing and their hope. The glory of their amazing victory against the Greeks was ashes. Life seemed intolerable.

But then out of the wilderness strides John the Baptist. In preparing the way for the Christ, he called people to an inward way, he came preparing the way for the coming of the Messiah. He wasn't the Messiah, but he was his messenger, his emissary, come to get people ready. He baptized people as a sign of repentance, a turning inward to another way of being Jewish, one of inward conversion.

When the way gets hard God gets moving.

The people of Mexico had lost their way. The world of the Aztec before the arrival of the Spanish was not unlike the world of ancient Rome. The Aztecs had become the dominant military force in central Mexico. Their religious beliefs drove them to offer continual human sacrifices to the gods to keep the sun moving and the earth productive. They would often launch warring raids against neighboring tribes to obtain sacrificial victims. The world belonged to them.

The world of the Aztec after the Spanish conquest was not unlike first century Judea. Reports conflict, but some say that Moctezuma thought Hernán Cortés was the incarnate form of the banished god Quetzalcoatl. Whatever the reason, he received the Spanish force in peace and paid the price of the kingdom. All of a sudden, they were the slaves, the underlings and the servants of the powerful Spaniards and their new religion. The ancient ways of guaranteeing the rising of the sun and the fertility of the earth no longer kept them in power. A new way was forced upon them, at their expense and for the good of the strangers who now ruled them.

Juan Diego, an Aztec man, lived in this chaotic and violent world. Juan Diego had embraced the faith of his conquerors, for not to would have been dangerous. We pick up his story just 10 short years after the arrival of Cortés.

He is going to mass one December 9th at dawn. He passes by the hill of Tepeyac. I've been to Tepeyac. It's a rocky promontory, jutting up out of what was once a marsh. To him it has to be more than just a rock. In Aztec days it was sacred to Tonantzin, the goddess of hearth, child-bearing and all that is nurturing. She stood in stark contrast to the brutality of the pyramids where thousands died at the hands of the priests.

From on top of this rocky crag a beautiful woman calls to him, not in the Spanish of the conquerors, but his own tongue. "Come up here," the woman says, "Come up my dear little one. I am Guadalupe, the mother of Christ, and you are to go to Bishop Zumárraga and tell him that I want a church built here in my honor."

John the Baptist seems to have been fearless before the powerful, but Juan Diego is not so brave. He knows full well that the bishop will not see him. After all, he is a mere Indian, a conquered one, and the Bishop is Spaniard and powerful. The Bishop could have him executed at a word. He tries to beg off, but the lady will not let him. And so, he goes. He spends the day trying to get in to see the Bishop. At the end of the day the expected happens, the bishop won't give him the time of day.

This happens twice more. On the second visit the bishop asks for a sign to prove Juan Diego's tale is true. After all, why should he take orders from a mere Indian man? He is invested with the rich and powerful and is not about to give up that position.

Meanwhile, Juan Diego's uncle has come down with small-pox, the dreaded disease of the European. The man is quickly reduced to his death bed. It is time to find a priest, and Juan Diego goes back to town. He goes around the other way in order to avoid the lady, whose work he has failed to accomplish, but she meets him on the back road, takes him to the top of the hill where beautiful roses are blooming in the middle of winter on the top of a rocky crag. She picks them, arranges them in his "tilma," or poncho, and sends him to see the Bishop one more time. "Don't worry about your uncle," she says.

He goes and again waits all day. It is now December 12th. He finally gets in to see the Bishop. Opening his tilma, the roses fall to the floor, and the image of Guadalupe is emblazoned on his robe. The Bishop is cut to the quick, and, turning away in an instant from his prestige, places the tilma in his own oratory, and hosts Juan Diego that night in his own palace. The next day, Juan Diego the Indian man, tells the Bishop where to build a church.

When Juan Diego finally gets back to his uncle, he, also, has had a vision of the lady, who came to him and healed him of the dreaded disease.

And so, the image of Guadalupe is given to the world. It has become the galvanizing spiritual force behind what it means to be a Latin American believer. A mixture of Aztec and Christian symbols, she is the bridge between the old and the new. Pregnant, she holds within her the

promise of new life, of hope, of the mothering hearth of Tonantzin, coupled with the promise of the coming Christ child. Guadalupe's message of hope has led countless people down the road to empowerment, beginning with Juan Diego. She symbolizes the hope of the oppressed for divine intervention in the injustices of life. She is the first become last and the last become first.

When the world gets tough, God gets going.

This is Advent. Advent is a season in which we recognize that the world has lost its way. It is said, and I believe, that the advent of the Internet is transforming our world as completely as the printing press transformed Europe at the beginning of the Reformation. Old systems just don't work anymore, new untried ones are being experimented with, and no one really knows where it's going. Global warming, whatever the cause (and yes, I believe it is a reality), is transforming our global climate at unprecedented rates.

Reinvented forms of crime are cropping up. In spite of crackdowns and stings, "blue" is available in this town at any time of day or night. The cartels that control the drug trade have pockets deeper than many nations' treasuries. Their military forces are often more powerful and sophisticated than the forces deployed by law and order against them. I have heard tell of situations in this town that ultimately brought the FBI in to investigate cases of human trafficking. It has become the second most lucrative criminal activity in the world after drug trafficking. It is difficult to know if the carrots you ate for dinner last night weren't harvested by someone who cannot leave the job for fear of bodily harm.

The world seems to be falling apart faster than we can patch it back together.

John the Baptist and Juan Diego share a name and a message. The story of John the Baptist is an Advent Story. He is the emissary of God, sent to turn the hearts of the people away from empty hopes of political sovereignty to the God of their ancestors. He calls us to repentance, to a turning of our hearts to look for the coming of Christ. The story of Juan Diego and Guadalupe is an Advent Story. Juan Diego's encounter with the Lady turns him into an emissary, sent to turn the heart of the bishop to God. The story of Guadalupe becomes the catalyst for another way of being human. Many of Guadalupe's devotees call her "milagrosa," "a worker of miracles." It is true. Her first miracle was roses in December on a desert hill. Her second was the converted heart of a bishop, and her third was the empowering of the powerless with a different kind of power. If John the Baptist calls us to repentance, Juan Diego of Guadalupe calls us to hope.

Life is tough—where is God? It is time to look for God to show up. We do that through repentance. As John turned the hearts of the Jews away from the distractions of occupation toward the coming Messiah, and as Guadalupe and Juan Diego turned the bishop from his from his social status to his divine calling, repentance means turning away from all that would distract us, to let God be the primary and fundamental focus of our living. As we walk toward Bethlehem put the coming Christ in front of your eyes and let everything else fall into place behind him. Repent, God is coming.

We do that through hope. As John appeared in the middle of the chaos of first century Judea, and as Guadalupe appeared to Juan Diego in the middle of the chaos of 16th century central

Mexico, so, God will cause something to appear that will show us the way. Look for it, wait for it, expect it—never think that you know when or from where it will come—just know that it will come.

Take heart, God is coming.