



SUNDAY SERMON

Mi Gente

The week before Christmas, when a group of us traveled to the border - to El Paso, Texas and Juarez, Mexico, our first stop was Annunciation House. A Roman Catholic ministry operating in El Paso for forty years, Annunciation House is currently receiving and assisting an average of two thousand people per week - predominantly women with children who have been cleared by ICE - US Immigration and Customs Enforcement - for entry into the United States.

When Ruben Garcia, director of Annunciation House, met with our group he apologized for rushing but the next bus load could arrive any time. Over many years Ruben has seen numbers surge, decrease, and surge again. Today, most of the asylees - those who seek or are granted asylum - have fled Honduras, El Salvador or Guatemala - countries currently plagued by violence with destabilized governments, rampant drug trade, and human trafficking. Those who get to the border have been on the road for many weeks, usually followed by a number of weeks in US detention while their case was being processed. Most have a family member somewhere in the United States and will stay at Annunciation House for no more than two to three days while contact and travel arrangements to that family member can be secured.

Ruben could not emphasize enough just how poor their guests are, and how desperate. Someone asked Ruben what keeps him going. How do the people at Annunciation House do what they do all day long? "*Mi gente,*" Ruben said. "*Mi gente, mi gente, mi gente.*" These are "my people," he said. "What these people have endured in their countries in Central America, what they have endured in the dangerous trip just to arrive here at our border, what they do every day to care for each other..." Ruben paused, and then said, "they have taught me what it means to be human. They have taught me everything I know about faith and hope. Please go home and tell your people, these are '*mi gente*'" - not only my people, but God's people, every single one.

And suddenly there was a flurry of activity at the door. Ruben looked back to the commotion. Volunteers were gesturing to him. "Are the buses here?" Ruben asked. "Yes!" And with that, my small group of church leaders all quickly stood up to make room for the honored guests who came filing in - hungry, poor, weary young families who desperately needed a shower, fresh clothes, and a cot. The children, so very many of them, although wearing dirty and worn clothing, reminded me of the little children here each Sunday, holding their parents' hands, trusting that they were in a safe place. While staying close to their mother or father, many of the children smiled brightly whenever any of our group waved and called out, "*Hola!*" Their smiles seemed to say, "Someone notices me! Someone cares about me! *Hola!*"

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DATE

The Epiphany
Sunday, January 6, 2019

PREACHER

The Rev. Ledlie Laughlin

Matthew 2:1-12

For me, the trip was heartbreaking. Heartbreaking is not what any of us seek for ourselves or others, yet a heart broken lets in the light, allows the love to flow. For this, I am glad and grateful.

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany. From the Greek, meaning "to reveal," an epiphany is any sudden realization or insight. Specifically, in Christian context, the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles - to the non-believers, those outside the religious tribe, as these eastern Magi clearly were. The Feast of the Epiphany is our reminder that we too might see, that Christ may be manifest and revealed to us in the face of another.

As this story of the three kings has been passed on from generation to generation and retold even today in the church, we imbue it with an aura of light, of warmth, and glory - richly robed travelers bearing exotic gifts, kneeling before the swaddled babe in his mother's arms, with cattle lowing gently nearby.

But I am struck by the fleeting, transient quality of this moment - unlikely strangers come together in unlikely circumstances discover even more unlikely truth - of Christ among them.

Everyone is on the move. The holy family is in a stranger's barn in Bethlehem, more than a hundred miles from their home in Nazareth. Nomadic shepherds wander through with their flocks. The wise men traveling from afar, have lost their way, ask for directions, follow a star. The whole region is on edge, subject to the whims of Roman occupation. King Herod rules with fear and fury, and all Jerusalem with him - especially when threatened by word of a new king. As prophets foretold, Mary has proclaimed: the proud and the rich will end up with nothing, while the hungry are fed and the lonely are loved.

Everyone is on the move. And here, in the hubbub, they see: the manifestation of Christ visible to them.

Our former presiding bishop, Katherine Jefferts Schori, now serving in San Diego on the border with Tijuana, has recently written of the enduring truth of all the journey imagery in scripture. It begins with Adam and Eve barred from the garden, Abram and Sarai wander through much of the Middle East, Moses and his clan leave Egypt for another land, John the baptizer urges road-building through the desert. From there, our journey and human longing are homeward bound - for our ultimate home is in God, and the peace that comes with right relationship and justice. The homeward journey is life's work for each one of us, for all humanity, and indeed all creation.

From Canaan to the Promised Land to Jerusalem, always there are struggles over who owns what and which terrain belongs to whom. Along the way, our scriptural ancestors learn and teach us that the homeward journey is about something more than a plot of land; its about opening your hand to neighbors, whether you love, tolerate, or fear them. The prophets began to teach us about neighbors everywhere, not just our tribal kin. We learned that we're meant to love the strangers, widows and orphans and homeless, and the difficult ones. We began to dream of God's reign, and government that brings justice and peace everywhere, and a home where all can rejoice, give thanks, and live in harmony and abundance.

It seems to me no accident that Jesus' birth is on the road, that those who first recognize him as the manifestation of God-among-us are not his closest kin-folk. Who are my mother, my brothers, and sisters, he will ask when he is grown; they are those who seek to follow the will of God. What is the first and last thing for each of us, but to love God, and to love our neighbor as ourself. Jesus will tell a parable about the sheep and the goats, to remind us of his presence in every person, to align himself especially with the least among us - the hungry, the prisoner, the sick, the naked, or the stranger. "I was a stranger," said he, "and you welcomed me." Or not.

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In place of a New Years' resolution, I've set my heart on an Epiphany resolution. It comes from one of the questions we each affirm in our baptismal covenant: "Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?" To which, we respond, "I will, with God's help." An Epiphany prayer, a little mantra, with which to shape each day. "With God's help, I will seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving my neighbor as myself."

To seek and serve Christ in all persons - *mi gente*.

With God's help, I will. God, open our eyes, our hearts, our arms, that we may see, love, and embrace you in all whom we meet. We may travel far, but need not. We may go to the border, but need not. We are all of us on the move, with you among us. *Mi gente* here among us; the Christ-child waiting to be seen, to be noticed. *Hola, mi gente*.

I'll close with a poem, written by a friend (Carol Shaw, 12.14.18) of the priest who was our guide, who took us across the border and back. It's a poem titled,

Borderland ~

My belly echoes the howling wind,
Fear behind and fear within,
My pack is heavy and it's cold tonight.
Hush, *mi'jita*, don't you cry.

One step and another: it never ends.
Following footsteps around each bend.
Borders ahead and borders behind.
Hush, my little one, don't you cry.

The desert is silent, with a moonless sky.
No warmth, no comfort, no lullaby.
The Jordan is near and the sea is dry
but I -

I fear I've come to die.
Hush, *mi'jita* and say goodbye.

Now step in the riverbed;
Take my hand.
Leave your burdens there
on dry land.
Listen closely:
do you hear that sound?
The rushing wind
over sacred ground?
See my broken body,
taste the holy wine;
let the waters
baptize and refine.

One crossing behind me; more yet to come;
each letting go brings a breaking dawn.
Mercy lives in the borderlines.
So hush, my little one, don't you cry.

