

Fourth Sunday of Advent, Yr. A
11/27/2016
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Ahaz answered, "I will not ask for a sign. I will not tempt the Lord."

Which sounds very good and pious. I've been told not to demand signs from God. It is arrogant for a creature to put its Creator to the test. But God had told King Ahaz to ask for a sign. So he was being arrogant to refuse. In his place I would say, "Sure! Okay! How about ..."

So why did Ahaz refuse to ask? Because he was afraid the sign given would confirm what Isaiah was telling him to do, not what he wanted to do. Judah was being invaded by its neighbors. Ahaz would probably lose his life along with his throne, and then what would happen to the dynasty of the House of David? Ahaz preferred an alliance with pagan Assyria over waiting for the help of the Lord.

This is why Isaiah then addressed the House of David, putting the sign and its fulfillment on a larger stage than the immediate crisis facing King Ahaz. Whatever sign Ahaz would have gotten, the House of David was promised the sign of the virgin bearing a child named Emmanuel-- "God with us". A sign like that was looking ahead to the Messiah, the perfect future king, of the House of David but sent by God. The virgin who can call her child Emmanuel is indeed a marvelous sign. If God is with us, what courage we are given faithful perseverance enough to change our lives, to change the world.

God offered King Ahaz a sign to save him from despair, from seeking an apparent solution to his problem at the price of apostasy from the truth. Accepting Assyria as his overlord would take him further down the path into idolatry, which he already was treading by worshiping false gods. He had even sacrificed one of his sons to Moloch, immolating him in the fire.

God has made Himself known to others close to despair, using that same sign of the virgin mother of Emmanuel. We recently celebrated the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, so I can't help but think of the despair of the Aztec Indians after their conquest by the Spaniards. Their own religion involved horrible human sacrifice to keep their gods strong, cutting out the hearts of living victims to offer them still palpitating to the god. The Spaniards put a stop to it, but many of them went on to commit their own atrocities against the native population. Desperation and despair spread among the Indians, some committing suicide to escape what they perceived as a dead end. In a debate with Franciscan missionaries in 1524, Aztec leaders said, "It is a new word, this one you tell them, and because of it we are distressed, because of it we are extremely frightened... Are we the ones to destroy the ancient law? What are we to do, then, we who are small men and

mortals? If we die, let us die; if we perish, let us perish. The truth is that the gods have also died.” (Anderson and Chavez, “Our Lady of Guadalupe: Mother of the Civilization of Love”, pp. 75-76)

Into this desperate situation, the sign of the virgin mother of Emmanuel was given to the Indian Juan Diego. She appeared to him four times between December 9 and 12, 1531. It made a huge impression on the natives, and they flocked to Tepeyac to see her image left on his cloak and to hear the story from Juan Diego himself. She had appeared to one of them, not to a Spaniard. She had spoken to them in their own language, not in Spanish. She looked like one of them, had spoken to Juan Diego with great motherly compassion, and identified herself as the mother of the one true God whom some Indian sages had believed existed though far above, unconcerned about the earth and its human inhabitants. In fact, in her image she is pregnant, and in speaking to Juan Diego referred to her child using titles that the Indians applied to that distant creator god. The Creator, whom they thought did not care, was Emmanuel-- God with them, and with them as one of them, with great compassion for their suffering.

This was enormous good news; the gospel in a picture. Word spread. Hope began to replace despair. Before long the missionaries could not keep up with the flood of Indians wanting baptism.

The sign offered to Ahaz, and given to Juan Diego, the sign of God With Us, continues to touch those in despair. On May 3, 1990, three days before Pope John Paul II beatified Juan Diego, a young man named Juan Jose Barragan came home to the apartment he shared with his mother in Mexico City. His father had abandoned the family. Young Barragan was 19 years old, was not in school, and had drifted into a despairing life of drug abuse. He came home that evening drunk and high and began slashing his head with a kitchen knife. His mother struggled to get the knife away. He went to the window, yelled that he didn't want to live anymore, and threw himself out from the third floor. As he fell his desperate mother called on the help of Juan Diego and the Virgin of Guadalupe. Barragan fell about thirty feet and landed on his head on the concrete. Neighbors thought he was dead and started to cover him with a sheet, but he got up long enough to beg forgiveness from his mother who had rushed down the steps, then he lapsed into a coma.

Scans showed major damage to his spine, neck, and a fracture of his skull that normally is fatal. A priest gave him last rites at the hospital. After several days it was decided to discontinue life support. Instead of dying he began to improve. He sat up and began to eat. More scans clearly showed the skull fracture, but the bone was completely healed with all blood vessels intact. He left the hospital after ten days without so much as a headache, enrolled in school, and today lives in Los Angeles, enjoying what he calls “perfect health”. His recovery was carefully documented by medical science, and none of the examining doctors could think of any natural explanation. It became the miracle required for the

canonization of St. Juan Diego twelve years later.

The life of Juan Jose Barragan – abandonment, anxiety, addiction, despair-- is life as experienced by many today. It is a plague on our society. The miraculous sign given to Juan Diego in 1531 and to Barragan in 1990 is meant for all of us as well-- a sign that God can heal a broken life, can restore hope to those in despair, can save a civilization. May our celebration next weekend of Emmanuel – God with us-- be an occasion of spiritual renewal and new life for you, for those you love, for all of us.