

Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe

December 12

Zec 2:14-17

or

Rev 11:19a; 12:1-6a, 10ab

Judith 13:18bcde, 19

Lk 1:26-38

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Hill Country

The volcanoes and mountains around Mexico City are stunning to see during this time of the year since they are covered with snow. In December of last year, I had the blessing of spending Christmas in Mexico for eight days. I visited an Augustinian brother and priest, Fr. Jose Wilbert Ramos of the Mexican Province. His large, rural parish in Ocuituco, state of Morelos south of Mexico City is a 16th century Augustinian church and cloister, the very first Augustinian foundation in the Americas. After Christmas, I traveled with four families from the parish to Mt. Popocatepetl, which the Mexicans fondly call “Popo,” an active volcano which rises up to 17,802 feet. We caravanned in two pick-up trucks and the trip took almost seven hours one-way, through paved roads, a highway and then dirt roads through beautiful pine forests and a national park to the slopes of Mt. Popo. When we got there, we hiked a bit and had a delicious lunch of tacos, *carne asada*, salsa, *tamales* and marshmallows roasting on an open fire. It was a wonderful gathering and sharing and I experienced the hospitality and generosity of these humble families, in the foothills of a volcano.

In Luke’s gospel today, after the Archangel Gabriel’s announcement of the birth of Jesus to Mary, “*she set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah*

where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.” She obviously did not strongly dislike climbing hills, navigating the back country, nor tackling roads and paths less traveled. She set out shortly after the beginning of her own pregnancy to visit her cousin Elizabeth in the hill country of Judah. What a tough teenage girl she was! The hills of Judah rise up to 3,000 feet above sea level and its valleys are deep. Whether on the back of a donkey or walking, she would have had to be in pretty good shape, to say nothing of the courage it would take to face the dangers of the road – dust and wind, heat and cold, steep climbs, and perhaps, robbers. Mary, of course, was highly motivated – overjoyed to share the good news of God’s loving compassion with Elizabeth and to hear about her cousin’s unexpected good fortune of pregnancy in her old age. That would have kept Mary going when things got tough on the road.

In December of 1531, Mary traveled to the hill country again, in Mexico. The trip – this time from her heavenly home – I dare say, was a bit easier! According to the 16th century account of the apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Juan Diego, a poor Native American, first became aware of Mary’s presence when at Tepayac hill he heard singing like that of beautiful birds. A voice at the top of the hill called him and he climbed up. There she was, a pregnant Aztec mother, more lovely than any human woman with garments shining like the sun. She said to him, not in Spanish, but in Nahuatl, the Aztec language: *“Hear and let it penetrate into your heart, my dear little son: let nothing discourage you, nothing depress you. Let nothing alter your heart or your countenance. Also, do not fear any illness or vexation, anxiety or pain. Am I not here who is your mother? Are you not under my shadow and protection? Am I not your fountain of life? Are you not in the folds of my mantle, in the crossing of my arms? Is*

there anything else that you need?" She also asked that a church be built there so that in that hill country she could continue to pour out God's compassion and love, to give protection, good counsel, and perpetual help to all peoples.

Mary continues to devote her life to sharing God's love and compassion to everyone. No hill is too steep for that love to climb. No person too poor to receive it. In fact, Mary and her son Jesus seem to feel at home in the back country, in the hills with the poor, the oppressed, the sick and the lowly. In this season of Advent, it is nice that we do some Christmas shopping and decorate our homes with trees, lights and ornaments. But it is even better to decorate our lives, our hearts with God's presence, with his word, with love and prayers. That's what Jesus Christ wants from us, the best way to prepare for his coming. We ask for Mary's help to decorate our lives, give generously to others and come closer to God.