

## A Radical Hope

A Christmas Eve Homily by Pilar Millhollen, 12/24/17

Readings: *The Politics of Jesus: A Hispanic Political Theology* by Miguel de La Torre; Luke 2:1-20

Does anyone know about *Las Posadas*? It means “The Inns,” and refers to a ritual in Latin and Latin American communities that reenacts Mary and Joseph’s search for an inn while they traveled from Galilee to Bethlehem. Nine days prior to Christmas, men, women and children will follow the holy family carrying candles through the streets, knocking on doors requesting lodging and singing Christmas carols. Traditionally, *los mesoneros*, the innkeepers, will turn them away in a ritual dialogue of rejection, but will invite them in for food and drink before sending them back into the night. Miguel de la Torre, a Baptist minister and theologian, talks about *Las Posadas* as much more than a ritual reenactment of a 400-year-old Christmas tradition. Because in an age of increasing homelessness and restrictions on immigration and asylum, *Las Posadas* is a political act of solidarity with all of those for whom there is no room at the inn. Remembering, de la Torre says, is not just a thought process, it is an act. And the enactment of this ritual for Latin communities both affirms the very real-life scenarios of rejection and outsider-ness that the many ethnic groups who we call Latinx face daily, and the most basic nature of God, who calls us to radical hospitality. Especially now, in a year where immigration and refugee asylum has all but come to a screeching halt, *Las Posadas* is a powerful ritual that places the enactors – many of whom are migrants or lack immigration documents – in the roles of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus because it is saying, this story is not *just about* Mary, Joseph and Jesus; it is saying we are all Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. What about the Marias, the Joses, the Jesuses who have fled, who are terrified, who are pushed out of their homes by violence and a history of colonialism, and are turned away in the land of plenty? Miguel de la Torre knows first hand what this looks like, for he came to this country at six months old when his family fled Cuba at the rise of the Castro revolution. De la Torre grew up in Queens and moved to Miami as a teenager, when he began to realize that his identity in this country was not sculpted by him alone. He recalls, “I carried around a switchblade in middle school and took pride in my plummeting grades – because I thought, based on everything I saw on t.v., in the media, every message I got from the mainstream – that this was a part of what it was to be Hispanic and male in this country.” It took until years later, after he became what he describes as born again into Christianity and pastored a small rural white Kentucky congregation during seminary, that he began to deeply question what he had internalized about himself, and about how the Bible, and Jesus, were seen through the eyes of white Americans. From then on, he centered his scholarship in reclaiming the meaning of Biblical scriptures – and the personage of Jesus as a divine liberator – through the eyes of the marginalized. Despite its origins in a minority group, the Bible and Christianity as a tradition have been largely influenced by forces of hegemony, leading to an interpretive lens informed primarily by whiteness, patriarchy, and wealth. History may be written by the so-called “winners,” yet the gospel, which is at the heart of any decent kind of Christianity, was brought to us by a person outside the club of plenty – a person very much situated on the margins of society. De la Torre argues that we cannot come to an authentic interpretation of our scriptures without acknowledging that the one we have called “God with us,” whom some call messiah or savior, some call the son of a divine lineage, and others call a great guru, was himself born and lived as an outsider. It is natural for those in a place of privilege or power to read what is sacred in a way that supports and justifies their own social location; however, too often this type of reading also becomes justification for upholding the status quo when the gospel aims to do the opposite. It is at this point that we must dive a little deeper, and where better to start than with the outlandish story of a homeless family who delivers their new baby in a barn? See, when we romanticize the story of Jesus’ birth through a softened, gentrified, middle class lens it informs how

we see his earthly ministry and death as well – doing a deep disservice to the particularity of this radical story and tacitly agreeing to a picture that serves the needs of the dominant class rather than inspires radical hope in what is possible for everyone else. Like any theologian awake to how God speaks to us in our own time through ancient stories, de la Torre reminds us that “God’s self-revelation to humanity does not occur from the centers of world power but in the margins of society.” So, let’s reclaim this Christmas story by talking about who Jesus was in terms of our own social locations in this country today. What would be the equivalent of Jesus’ birth in the U.S. today? Well, we can start with his parents: Mary and Joseph are a working class family, compelled to travel to their hometown in Bethlehem for a government census in order to be properly taxed. I wonder how much financial burden that cost them just traveling – we may have missed this in our text, because of how Luke downplays where Jesus is actually born – in other words, in a *barn* – but I’m guessing that there were plenty of rooms available in various inns, just not at a price they could afford. What about the families in our country who have suffered eviction, who are living out of their cars or hoping that a relative might have room at the inn for them because even a Motel 6 is simply too expensive? What about the families hoping that they might safely cross the border, praying that they will not be sent back? And what about the census that Mary and Joseph were traveling for? I think of all our brothers and sisters scraping together an income, who are wondering if under the new tax laws they will have enough money to feed and clothe their own children, let alone themselves. Since Mary and Joseph weren’t married, I guess they would be filing singly under this census? I think of the working class families who, like Mary and Joseph, will be hit hardest by this new tax plan that Caesar has enacted in order to gild the lilies of imperial cronyism. But then, on top of all this, there’s Jesus’ actual birth. None of the scriptures go into great detail, but when you think about giving birth in a barn, it’s a pretty dangerous scenario. We don’t know if amongst those animals and the dirtiness, Mary had a midwife, or even some fresh water; all we know is that she and Joseph had to figure this out on their own, wrap the infant in bands of cloth that we can only hope were clean, and lay him in the feeding trough that we know as a manger. How many women and girls, unmarried or without a mate, have birthed their children in similar circumstances? How many families would love the luxury of a hospital birth but simply cannot afford to, or have no access? It is easy – and it is desirable – to rush past Jesus’ birth and get to the multitude of heavenly hosts in the sky, singing and praising God for the new messiah. But even in these verses, the message is given not to the religious and political elites, not to anyone in power, no, the message is delivered to the working class – the shepherds keeping their flocks in fields. No matter who Jesus is for you, savior, rabbi, or guru, what cannot be denied in this story is the divine proclivity to lift up the worth and dignity of those on the margins of society. On this Christmas Eve, how shall we honor the God who brings a radical hope to the least among us? Let us start by casting off the chains of a Euro-centric vision of the birth of this remarkable child and reclaim the story in all its unglamorous complexity. Let us remember who it is that we sing of: poor, immigrant, multi-ethnic, refugee, disruptor of the status quo, disturber of the elite, who became an enemy of the state because revolution does not begin with complicity. This is the one today that we celebrate. This is the one today that we call “God with us.” This is the one today that we look to for radical hope. May we go forth in our own Las Posadas, with the knowledge that every time we open or close a door to the immigrant, the refugee, the outcast, the other, we are opening or closing a door on God. I want you to turn to your neighbor right now. I want you see them, and look into their eyes, and repeat after me: “Neighbor, wherever you have been, wherever you are going, and wherever you are now, I support you. I will fight for you. Because I see God in you.”