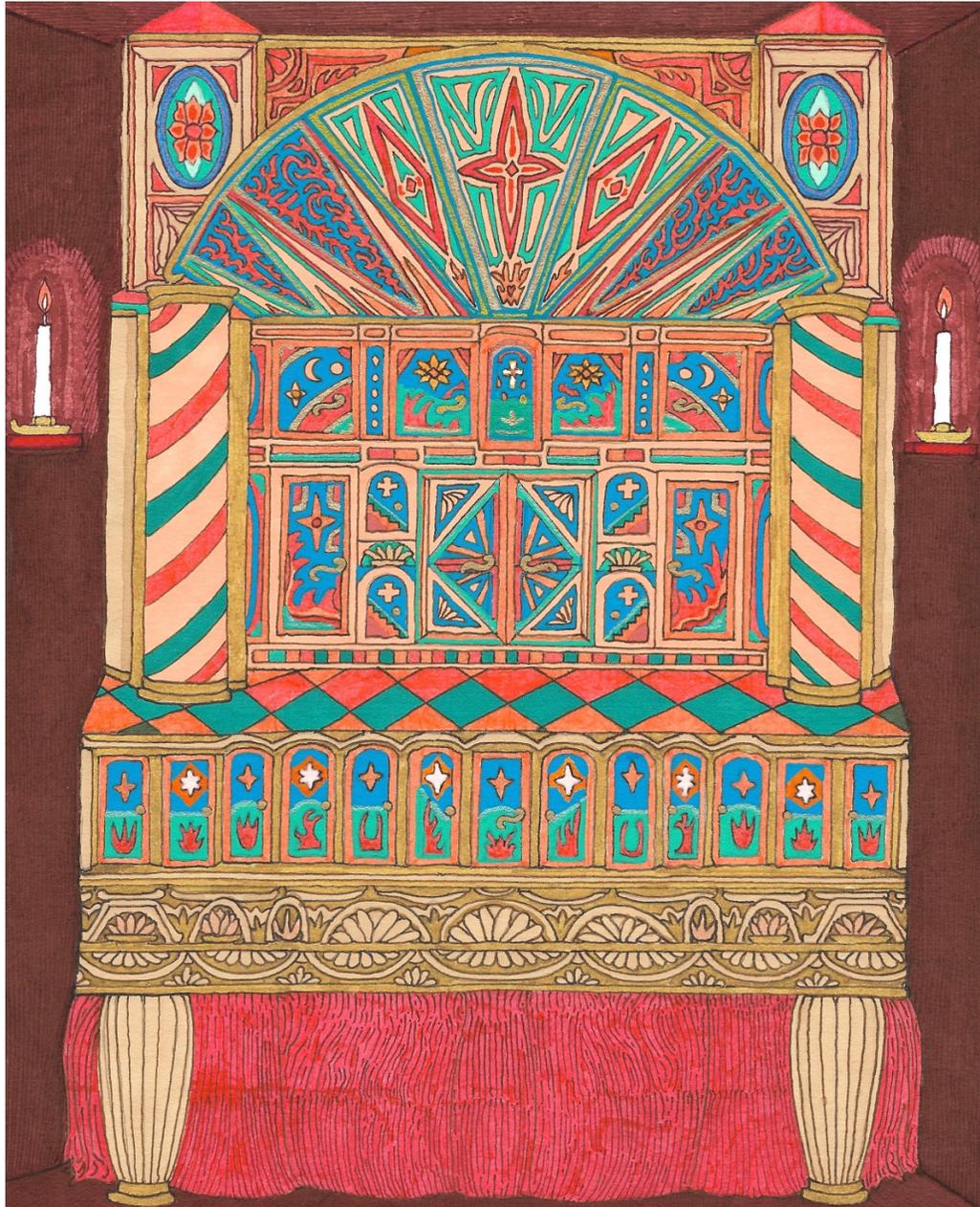


Illumination and Liberation: Advent with St. Óscar Romero



By Cameron Bellm
Art by Casey Armour Jordan

Introduction

Welcome to Advent with St. Óscar Romero. Let's quiet our hearts and minds and prepare to journey, as we do each year, from darkness to light, from a promise to its fulfillment, from the message of the prophets to the living, breathing Word of God Incarnate.

But first, who was Óscar Romero? Born in a small village in El Salvador in 1917, he became a priest in 1942 and lovingly and quietly served his people for over 20 years. In February 1977 he was the surprise choice for Archbishop of San Salvador, and effectively Archbishop of the entire country. He was chosen largely because he was expected to maintain the status quo; no one imagined that he would challenge the country's deep inequality and the increasingly violent rule of the rich and powerful. All of that changed on March 12, 1977, when Romero's friend and fellow priest Rutilio Grande was assassinated by government security forces for speaking out against their harassment and silencing of justice-minded priests. From that day forward, Romero spoke boldly, prophetically, and unrelentingly in defense of the poor, the oppressed, and the victims of El Salvador's bloody regime. Although he was accused of being a communist or siding with guerillas, Romero sided with no one but Jesus Christ. He denounced violence on both the right and the left, and preached instead the radical love and forgiveness of the gospel. In his final homily, he pleaded with soldiers to disobey orders to kill. He was shot to death at the altar the very next day while celebrating mass. In an interview he gave not long before his death, Romero forgave and blessed in advance those he knew would kill him. He was canonized by Pope Francis on October 14, 2018.

Through the deep beauty and mystery of the liturgy, the readings that St. Óscar Romero preached on in 1977 are the same ones we will hear this year in 2022. We are fortunate to have the voice of this saint reaching across time and space to lead us deeper into the Kingdom of God.

Let's set the scene. The year is 1977. The fraudulent election of a military-backed candidate for president in February concludes with a protest at which hundreds of innocent civilians are killed. Paramilitary death squads violently repress any group or individual who speaks out against injustice; the president declares a state of siege and suspends civil rights. Multiple priests are tortured and assassinated, the church in Aguilares is desecrated by the National Guard, and so many people are "disappeared" by the death squads that Romero will hold a special mass just for their devastated loved ones. Advent draws near. The hope of the gospel buzzes in the air.

The year is 2022. Our country groans under the weight of a years-long pandemic and its attendant economic and social fallout. The inequalities and racism of our systems and institutions have been laid bare, and yet, on they continue. We face a horrific refugee crisis, and wars and genocides rage on around the world. Natural disasters and climate change bring disaster after disaster to the ailing earth and its suffering people, most especially the poor. Almost any headline you've read in the past twelve months illustrates this resounding theme: injustice and inequality are everywhere, on a large scale, a small scale, and every scale in between. Advent draws near. The hope of the gospel buzzes in the air.

45 years and thousands of miles stretch between us. But the gospel brings us together.

Romero chose as his episcopal motto the phrase “*Sentir con la Iglesia.*” It’s often translated “to feel with the Church” or “to think with the Church,” but the Spanish word “*sentir*” is so rich that it’s hard to find a one-word analogue. Romero calls us to think, to feel deeply, to experience with the Church, to recognize that our lives, whether in 1977 or 2022, are bound up in the mystery of Christ here on earth.

Illumination and liberation are two terms that appear again and again in these homilies, and they are beautifully bound up in each other. It is the gospel that illuminates every aspect of our lived reality. And it is the gospel that sets us free.

This devotional presents excerpts from and reflections on Romero’s homilies for the four Sundays of Advent and Christmas Day. They are excerpts because the homilies are very long. The texts that we have are actually transcripts of the homilies that were broadcast live each week; they include lengthy commentary on recent events and diocesan news, which were always the framework for Romero’s theological insights. These radio addresses were the heartbeat of El Salvador, ringing out in thousands of homes every Sunday.

Each homily is covered in two sections in this devotional. There are no set days on which to use it—in these busy days of December, just come to the devotional and rest in it two times over the course of a week. Ideally, you will hear the Scriptures on Sunday and then continue to dwell in them as you turn to Romero’s homilies. There is a bit of space for journaling or sketching, but it’s certainly not required. This is your devotional. This is your Advent. Let it take shape however best spiritually nourishes you.

I am extremely grateful to The Romero Trust for granting me permission to include excerpts from Romero’s homilies in this devotional. The full texts of the radio addresses (and even audio recordings) are available on their website (www.romerotruster.org.uk). If you have a chance, I encourage you to read them in full or listen to the timbre of a great saint’s voice.

I am also deeply grateful to Casey Armour Jordan for his gorgeous contemplative art to accompany on us on our Advent journey.

May we spend this Advent drawing ever nearer to the mystery and the majesty of God. St. Óscar Romero, pray for us.

Artist's Statement

There is a distinctive similarity between the way that flowers unfold from the center, and stars shine from theirs. I wanted to explore that phenomenon within the confines of an Advent Calendar—but a calendar as big as a Cabinet of Treasures. The six-pointed star, the eight-pointed star, the sun, the moon and their fiery light, the green grass and the night sky—all make their appearances on the doorways of this Advent Cabinet. Behind each door, the Light and the Source of the Light is all the same. It is our Good Jesus. The Cabinet, perhaps, is Our Lady herself. Treasurer, Dispensatrix, and Mother of all who come to meet her treasure and share in the riches of their love.

There are 28 doors, for the 28 days of this year's Advent. Christ and his Mother are both personal and Cosmic, within us and within all around us, holding us, nurturing us, and sustaining us with the Hope of all Hopes.

Now all that is left to do is Wait.

—Casey Armour Jordan

First Sunday of Advent

November 27, 2022

Day 1

Readings:

Isaiah 2: 1-5

Romans 13: 11-14

Matthew 24: 37-44

Excerpts from Romero's Homily (November 27, 1977) "The Church of Hope"

"...in the second reading, the Apostle invites us to become aware of the times in which we are living. What a beautiful exhortation, for this allows me to tell you, my sisters and brothers, that today the Church marks the beginning of a new Liturgical Year. [...]"

This is a Sunday of hope, a time in which we begin our preparation for Christmas. Thus, the Liturgical Year is a spiritual pilgrimage that begins today, and, as we move through Christmas and the Epiphany, we are presented with the great truth of a God who became man in order to save us. Throughout the whole year we hear the proclamation of the teachings of his gospel and message. The Church pauses and reflects on all these mysteries as she enters into the Lenten preparations and the death of Jesus on the cross on Good Friday, as she enters into the resurrection of Christ and the fifty days of the Easter season when she sings Alleluia in order to engrave in the mind of all Christians the fact that Christ lives. Fifty days after Easter we celebrate Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit that Christ promised, the Spirit that Jesus bought with his divine blood, the Spirit that is poured out on the Church as she begins her pilgrimage. Twenty centuries of history.

Year after year the Church returns to this source. As the Church presents the unfolding of the redemptive mysteries of Christ during the course of the Liturgical Year, she is not simply calling to mind events of the past. My sisters and brothers, I want to be very clear in this idea. The liturgical celebration is not the remembrance of some past event like when we celebrate the 15th of September. That very day, September 15, 1821 is a day in the past, but the liturgy is presence.¹

The Second Vatican Council states: "Within the cycle of a year, moreover, she unfolds the whole mystery of Christ, from the incarnation and birth until the ascension, the day of Pentecost, and the expectation of blessed hope and of the coming of the Lord. Recalling thus the mysteries of redemption, the Church opens to the faithful the riches of her Lord's powers and merits, so that these are in some way made present for all time, and the faithful are enabled to lay hold upon them and become filled with saving grace."² This is like the Israelites who celebrated Passover, their deliverance from Egypt, and even though years and centuries had passed, yet when their families gathered together, they said: "This night we are leaving Egypt." They are

¹ On September 15, 1821, El Salvador and many other Latin American countries declared independence from Spanish colonial rule. This holiday is celebrated every year.

² *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 102.

referring to the present time, and this is liturgy, this is the meaning of the liturgy of the Church—it makes present today, November 27, 1977, it makes present the expectation of the Old Testament, the expectation of the Christ who comes to fulfill his promises.

We are now present before this mystery so that every Christian of good will can enter this Sunday into personal contact with the Christ who came twenty centuries ago but who continues to come through the mystery of the Church's liturgy. [...]

Christ is present and illuminates the realities of El Salvador, the realities of our families and the intimate realities of each one of us. We cannot separate God's word from the historical reality in which it is proclaimed. It would not then be God's word. It would be history; it would be a pious book, a Bible that is just a book in our library. It becomes God's word because it vivifies, enlightens, contrasts, repudiates, praises what is going on today in this society. For example: each one of you has a thousand more things that could be listed here, and it is good that you illuminate these realities with the Word that has been proclaimed today. [...]

My sisters and brothers, these events of the nation, of sin, of the Kingdom of God, of the Church are the events that we want to enlighten with the three readings that we have heard and that could be synthesized with the title: the Church of hope. Yes, let us be encouraged in our hope! The first reading presents us with a luminous goal and the second reading from Saint Paul presents with a path that we can walk in order to arrive at this goal. Finally, in the third reading, Christ presents us with the great surprise that we will encounter at the end of the road.”

Reflections and Questions

1. As Romero reminds us in his introduction, we live every moment of salvation history in every moment of human history—God just carries too much mystery to fit neatly into time as we know it. As we begin Advent, take a few moments to welcome the season, in all the joy that it carries. Dwell in the promise, awaited for centuries. Dwell with Mary in the annunciation. Dwell with Joseph as he leads his young family to Bethlehem. Dwell with the shepherds, startled by an angel bearing good news. Arrive with the wise men at the manger, bringing your gifts to the King: your heart, your soul, your mind, your strength. Return to the nativity as often as you remember it during these holy days.
2. One of the key points of Romero's homily concerns a great paradox of time: how our human history and salvation history are intertwined. It's easy to see the desolation and despair of our modern world and to forget that Jesus is incarnate here, in every moment, in every day. But Advent takes us all gently by the hand to remind us that our anticipation of love and justice will be rewarded, in fact, *are* being rewarded, even if it is difficult to see through the lens of human history.

That Romero sees this so clearly is evidence of his saintly vision, for interspersed with his reflection on the church calendar is his reporting on the news of the week: dissensions

and arguments within the Church hierarchy, disappearances, arrests, killings, torture. To live in such circumstances and to see God's redeeming power superimposed over them, like a double-exposed photograph, is a gift indeed.

Knowing, then, that God is present to us in all circumstances, take a few moments to offer in prayer all the things that you carry with you today, this week, this season, this year. Quiet your mind and sit with those things as you breathe deeply and bring them into the presence of the One who Loves. To remind yourself of God's dwelling with us in all things, open yourself this Advent to a simple meditative prayer practice. For each thing that comes to mind, pray after it, "the presence of God," whether the circumstance is joyful, sorrowful or somewhere in between.

For example,

Tense meeting at work, the presence of God.

Snowflakes scattered across my scarf, the presence of God.

Unexpected expense, the presence of God.

Laughter of my children, the presence of God.

As you move through Advent, you will create a litany of prayer that is unique to your life, your circumstances, your heart. What a beautiful gift to offer to God.

First Sunday of Advent

November 27, 2022

Day 2

Readings:

Isaiah 2: 1-5

Romans 13: 11-14

Matthew 24: 37-44

Excerpts from Romero's Homily (November 27, 1977) "The Church of Hope"

"The first reading from Isaiah places us within the context of the difficult political and social situation which the prophet had to confront. This situation is similar to our present situation. The country called into question the covenant with God, and they wanted to form an alliance with Egypt in order to defend themselves from the power of the Assyrians. Isaiah calls upon the power of God and calls the people to trust in God and not betray the covenant. Then he speaks these words of hope: this Jerusalem, isolated and fearful, is the city that God has chosen. There the light of God will shine, and the Temple of the Lord will be established. The Gentiles and numerous people will stream toward it and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of Yahweh, to the house of God." From there a law will be proclaimed that will rule the people with justice. A true doctrine will change the instrument of war into tools for work. The disorder will be changed into peace and justice and love.

These things appear to be an illusion, and I imagine that as Isaiah spoke these words of love there were many violent groups who wanted to resolve the situation through the sword and power. Yet Isaiah never tired of proclaiming his words of peace.

My sisters and brothers, this is the goal, a goal that was pointed out by the prophets, and a goal that the Church continues to point out. The enemies of the Church, those who do not want her to speak and those who discredit her say: the Church preaches violence and politics and communism—distortions of sin. But those who overcome the powers of evil and listen to the authentic Church hear the echo of Isaiah, the echo of Christ and the echo of the prophets.

We have never preached violence, except the violence of love which left Christ nailed to a cross. We have never preached violence except the violence that we must each do to ourselves to overcome selfishness and such cruel inequalities among us. The violence we preach is not the violence of the sword, the violence of hatred. It is the violence of love, of brotherhood, the violence that chooses to beat weapons into sickles for work. What a beautiful call we are able to make here, my sisters and brothers, when work abounds in our fields—do not change this work into hatred or struggles or bloodshed. Since last Sunday I have been saying that those who harvest the coffee and cotton and sugar cane should make their work a hymn of praise. Do not wait for laws, but may you be inspired in that love of brotherhood that unites the owners of the fields with the workers. May we make our fields a hymn that is sung in honor of God's generosity, the God who gifts us with these harvests. This is our goal, so let us walk toward this peace. [...]

The Advent Season that begins today and concludes on Christmas wants us to understand what I have previously spoken to you about, namely, the meaning of eschatology, the final times. Seven centuries before Christ the prophet Isaiah announced that with the coming of Christ, the Son of God who would become man, the final phase of history would begin. How long will it last? We do not know the answer to that question, but Saint Paul tells us that we are now in that time, that hour. We are close to that time that was first proclaimed by the prophets. Now we live in the eschatological hour because Christ, with his incarnation and resurrection, has placed before humanity the final opportunity to save themselves. Salvation begins on this earth. Salvation means liberation—true liberation from sin, from selfishness, from illiteracy, from hunger—freedoms of the earth that prepare us for the great freedom of the Kingdom of God. [...]

Hopefully these words of Advent, framed in the very intense history of this past week, might be heard above all the murmurings of the earth. The voice of the Lord is clear: Be sure of this: if the master of the house had known the hour of night when the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and not let his house be broken into. So too, you also must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of man will come. [...]

Let us be true Christians, worthy of this eschatological hour, this period between the first and the second coming of Christ, the final period of history. Let us know how to live during this time; that is, let us know that this is not a permanent situation but a passing situation. Let us not become attached and accommodated here. Let us not allow the goods and the power of this earth to rob us of the beauty of the Kingdom of God. As a person is abducted and taken away without leaving behind any trace, so it is that God is coming to take us, but we will be abducted by the love of Christ who bring us for all eternity into his heaven. So be it.”

Reflections and Questions

1. We have the most profound example of the violence of love in Jesus—a violence that cancels itself out and becomes healing, self-giving, restorative. This is a tough question to ask ourselves, but where do we find its opposite, the violence of hatred, in our own lives? Where are we quick to pick up not necessarily a literal sword, but a sword of words, of judgment, of anger?

Romero reminds us that true liberation is liberation from sin and all its effects. Salvation begins on earth, and it begins in our own hearts. Seek God’s forgiveness, and ask for God’s transformative love to turn your swords into plowshares.

2. Returning to the theme of time, Romero encourages us not be so distracted by the temporal that we forget the eternal. Think of the burdens that you carry that keep you from seeing with eternal vision. It’s almost impossible to maintain this vision during the hustle and bustle of our everyday lives, perhaps most of all during these busy days of December.

Try this simple practice this Advent. As you feel yourself tensing up with obligations, worrying about family conflict or school deadlines, or just feeling overwhelmed by holiday advertising, take a deep breath and ask God to gently remove the glasses from your face and give you new ones, shifting your vision from temporal to eternal. It won't necessarily be a magic eraser for our stress, but it's an intentional way to redirect ourselves, to turn our eyes back to God.

3. What a powerful suggestion Romero makes to us, to offer our work and our lives to God as a hymn of praise. As you go about your work this December, most especially the work that is unseen and unappreciated, ask God to help you see it as a prayer that only could speak.



"We have never preached violence, except the violence of love which left Christ nailed to a cross. We have never preached violence except the violence that we must each do to ourselves to overcome selfishness and such cruel inequalities among us. The violence we preach is not the violence of the sword, the violence of hatred. It is the violence of love, of brotherhood, the violence that chooses to beat weapons into sickles for work."

—St. Óscar Romero

Second Sunday of Advent

December 4, 2022

Day 1

Readings:

Isaiah 11: 1-10

Romans 15: 4-9

Matthew 3: 1-12

Excerpts from Óscar Romero's Homily "Christ, Center and Goal of History" (December 4, 1977)

"...Saint Paul, speaking to us in his letter to the Romans utters the words that were proclaimed today on the Second Sunday of Advent, that is, at this time the Church is reflecting on the great love of God who sent us his only Son to save us from all the problems of history. The first words of Saint Paul impressed me greatly as I prepared this homily because I believe that he is giving me an insight for this modest contribution in spreading the Word of God in this very difficult environment of El Salvador.

Saint Paul says: For whatever was written previously was written for our instruction that by endurance and by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. Notice how the preacher of that time had to deepen his thoughts in the Scriptures because there was no other source for the messenger of the Church other than the Sacred Scriptures, the Word of God. This Word of God that was written centuries ago, however, does not remain ethereal, theoretical, disincarnated, but rather the preacher must incarnate the word in the present reality. For this reason Saint Paul [...] is speaking about the endurance and encouragement that we need today in order to live in this historical time. [...]

My sisters and brothers, here we are speaking about the present history, the events of this week, today's events and not only the events that occur on a national level but those events that have a family character. Every family has had their problems during this week. Even more, each one of you and I myself have had our problems, our personal or family difficulties, difficulties in the neighborhood, in the town, in the nation and in the world. The preacher cannot lose sight of these actual circumstances unless one wants to preach a gospel that says nothing to the people of today. [...]

According to Saint Paul in today's reading, the Word of God has to be a work that is rooted in the ancient, eternal Word of God, but this Word must also touch the present scars and today's injustices and abuses. It is for this reason that the Word of God creates problems. People begin to say: The Church is meddling in politics. The Church is becoming communist. These accusations begin to bore and tire us. Once and for all remember that the Church is not meddling in politics but rather her word is like a ray of sunshine that comes from on high and illuminates. What fault does the sun have when its pure light finds puddles and manure and garbage here on earth? The sun has to enlighten all of this. If not, it would not be the sun; it would not be light; it would not find the ugly and the horrible that exists here on earth. Yes, just as the sun enlightens

that which is ugly, so too must the sun enlighten the beauty of the flowers and the other beautiful aspects of nature. My sisters and brothers, on the one hand, the Word of God illuminates the horrible, the ugly and the injustices of the earth and on the other hand, nourishes those of good heart, those hearts that thanks to God are numerous and are illuminated with this eternal light of his divine word.

This is what it means to preach the Word of God today --- a preaching that, as during the times of the prophets, must create problems and awaken hatred and stir up resentments. Indeed, as Church we have become the object of some of the most vulgar forms of resentment. My sisters and brothers, the fact that the garbage feels hatred in the light is what gives glory to the light. To be slandered by those who feel that we are touching on their injustices is an honor. It is for this reason that I tell you that I am not afflicted by these slanders. I thank you for the numberless manifestations of solidarity that have been presented to me during these days. But I tell you again, be joyful and confident that I am not afflicted by all of this; on the contrary, I am honored.”

Reflections and Questions

1. Romero reminds us that it does us no good to elide our problems, to gloss over or put an Instagram filter on our actual lives, full as they are of various struggles and disappointments. By doing so, we actually harm not only ourselves but others, with whom we would find connection and offer encouragement. How can you open yourself to vulnerability and allow God to meet you in your circumstances? What is one small way you can choose to share your real and imperfect life with another person, in a safe and healthy manner? Ask God to reveal it to you and give you courage to speak it aloud.
2. The Word of God is incarnate in our present reality—it is not a faraway thing, but is real and present in this moment. Too often we divide our lives into two separate planes: our spiritual life and our earthly life. This Advent, let’s work toward an integration of the two, toward a realization they are not separate at all. We can start by reminding ourselves, moment by moment, that there is no part of our lives, no part of our history, no part of our hearts that the gospel does not touch. Spend a few moments in prayer with Romero’s beautiful image of the sunlight. Imagine the light spreading like a slow tide over your home, your street, your workplace, your children’s school, your city, your country, the entire world. Rest in this light. Breathe deeply of it.
3. The light, of course, shines on both the beautiful and the ugly. This is the meaning of prophecy, in the Biblical sense: illuminating every part of the world that does not reflect the love and justice of the gospel. Óscar Romero was not afraid to speak prophetically about evil, even though he knew that it would cost him his life. We, too, must not be afraid to let the light of the gospel shine on all that does not bring glory to God. Where can you speak or act prophetically in your life? Ask for God’s guidance as you contemplate this question. Ask for Óscar Romero’s intercession as you seek to shine God’s light on the world around you.

Second Sunday of Advent

December 4, 2022

Day 2

Readings:

Isaiah 11: 1-10

Romans 15: 4-9

Matthew 3: 1-12

Excerpts from Óscar Romero’s Homily “Christ, Center and Goal of History” (December 4, 1977)

“ [...] Isaiah cries out as he sees the kingdom of Judah attempting to enter into an alliance with Syria and the Northern Kingdom and then with Egypt against the threats of the powerful Assyrian Empire. The prophet says: Do you not see that all of this is a betrayal of God’s covenant? Do you want to place your trust in armies? Are you saying that without an army there is no Judah or that without an army there is no Republic? Do you really believe that the efforts of men are able to save Judah from the present situation? Do you not realize that the evil is much deeper? People began to desert God, and injustice began to be established among the people. There were abuses, and all of this became a hindrance. They must convert and return to the Lord, and then there will sprout up a new return of the house of Jesse.

Do you know who Jesse was? Jesse was the father of David, the king who was chosen by God to form a dynasty from which the Eternal King would be born: Jesus Christ. When Isaiah lived, this dynasty of Jesse was losing its splendor. It appeared to be a dead tree trunk, like a tree that had died. The prophet says: God has promised that from this dead tree will come forth a prince who will act with justice.

Listen to the beautiful description that was proclaimed today: “Not by appearance shall he judge, nor by hearsay shall he decide. He will judge the poor with justice and decide aright for the land’s afflicted. He shall strike the ruthless with the rod of his mouth and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked.”

Another beautiful description follows. The prophet uses the upheaval among the beasts of the jungle as a poetic image and says that when the people return to God and place their trust in God rather than in the armies of the earth or the unjust laws of humankind, the following will occur: the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb. He then continues to describe a situation that seems impossible: the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the young lion shall browse together; a child will lay his hand on the adder’s lair, and no harm shall come to him.

My sisters and brothers, these are images that tell us that now the world appears to be a jungle where men have become beasts who fight and beat and destroy others. But when people return to God, when they allow the kingdom of God to enter their hearts, then the lion will not destroy and eat another lion or eat the lamb, but rather all of us, rich and poor, will become

brothers and sisters who sit down together and eat together. We will experience the fatherhood of the Kingdom of God. This is the Christmas that the Church desires. [...]

Good works, Christian hearts, true justice, charity—these are what God looks for in religion. A religion of Sunday Mass but of unjust weeks does not please the Lord. A religion of much praying but with hypocrisy in the heart is not Christian. A Church that sets herself up only to be well off, to have much money and comfort, but forgets to protest injustices, would not be the true Church of our divine Redeemer. For this reason the Church must perish, suffer, and be persecuted, because many people do not understand and are comfortable in their present situation, even priests, and all of this is a hindrance to the authentic kingdom of God.

My dear Christians, this is the Word that the Church once again repeats as the feast of the Nativity draws near: we will not have a new continent by simply changing structures, legislating new laws or repressing through force. This will only create more difficulties. There can only be a new continent, a new people with new women and men when, as Saint Paul tells us today, people renew themselves interiorly, clothing themselves in Christ, converting and changing their hearts as proclaimed by Isaiah and John the Baptist.

My sisters and brothers, I experience a great joy because my word, which follows the same lines as usual, has found support in the prophet Isaiah, Saint John the Baptist, Saint Paul, [and] Christ himself, and the authentic Church that cannot perish as long as she is supported by the authentic Spirit of the gospel. I also experience this great joy because my word awakens all of you, my sisters and brothers in El Salvador, those who are pessimistic, terrorists, and devoted to repression, those who legislate vulgar laws against the people, all of you my sisters and brothers who are Christian and non-Christian, Catholic and non-Catholic, and this Word says that there is reason to hope, that El Salvador can be saved, and that if, as indicated by Isaiah, John the Baptist and the Church, the people of El Salvador open their hearts to love and justice and true well-being, then peace will be found.

My sisters and brothers, I invite you to make this time of Advent a time of preparation for the birth of Jesus, a time in which we sincerely examine our own hearts and then put aside all that which hinders the coming of Jesus into the world --- in fact, in some way each of us is hindering the coming of Jesus. Let us begin by preparing the roads in the desert. May the dry trunks flower and the rocks be converted into children of God! May the people of El Salvador who have become fierce beasts, who struggle one against another, be converted and become sisters and brothers, children of God! So be it!”

Reflections and Questions

1. This week’s readings call us to believe what seems unbelievable. How can a shoot spring up from a dead stump? How can a lion lie down with a lamb? And yet, this is the redemptive work of God--God of the unlikely, God of the impossible. Think and reflect for a moment on the dead stumps in your life and in the world around you. Spend a few moments committing them into the hands of our restorative and regenerative God.

2. Romero challenges each one of us to ask ourselves a serious question: how are we hindering the coming of the Lord? We are all called to partner with God in the work of redemption, but, as he reminds us, that work starts not with public action, but with the transformation of our hearts. Where are the places in your life where you have grown too comfortable, the places where the mighty bell of the gospel needs to be rung? Make an honest examination of your conscience. Offer to God the things that keep you from freedom to engage in the work of the Kingdom. Ask God to lead you on in the great work of restoration of all creation.

Third Sunday of Advent

December 11, 2022

Day 1

Readings:

Isaiah 35: 1-6A, 10

James 5: 7-10

Matthew 11: 2-11

Excerpts from Óscar Romero's Homily "The Church of Salvation" (December 11, 1977)

"My sisters and brothers, the homily of this Sunday could be called the Church of Salvation because the mission of the Church is to save as Christ saved. This is her historical function. As God continues to save in the history of people, so, too, the Church cannot leave aside the concrete history in which she has to develop herself. Therefore, before commenting on the Divine Word in order to illuminate our history and our reality, it is good first of all to call to mind the reality in which we live. [...]

In today's readings I find the following three thoughts that are a summary of my message: 1) only God can save; 2) God saves in the history of every people; 3) the mission of the Church is to make the history of his people a history of salvation. [...]

My sisters and brothers, the object of these homilies is to repeat what the Second Vatican Council says to those who look for the solution to their problems on this earth and believe that they can be resolved through human effort alone, [thinking] thus one day there will be a Paradise here on earth, a Paradise created by men and women. The Church has always said: this is a lie—humanity cannot give the salvation that humanity needs.

With the Second Vatican Council we say: "The Church firmly believes that Christ, who died and was raised up for all, can through His Spirit offer man the light and the strength to measure up to his supreme destiny. Nor has any other name under the heaven been given to man by which it is fitting for him to be saved. She likewise holds that in her most benign Lord and Master can be found the key, the focal point and the goal of man, as well as of all human history. The Church also maintains that beneath all changes there are many realities which do not change and which have their ultimate foundation in Christ, Who is the same yesterday and today, yes, and forever."³

If we look for a summary of today's readings we see that the three readings are saying the same thing. In the first reading the prophet Isaiah tells us: God will come and save us. In the second reading the Apostle James says: Be patient until the coming of the Lord. In the gospel John the Baptist had been imprisoned and sent messengers to Jesus who asked: Are you the one who is to come or should we look for another? Are you the God whom humanity has waited for without whom there can be no salvation?

³ *Gaudium et Spes*, 10.

My sisters and brothers, the salvation that the Church preaches is not a salvation that is found on this earth. For this reason we are disturbed when we are told that the Church is meddling in politics or the Church is communist and subversive. The Church looks with sadness on those liberators who do not have the courage to raise their hopes to the same heights as the Church. The Church disarms all those liberations that are offered by different movements that are not mindful of Christian faith and hope. The liberation that the Church hopes for and proclaims has its starting point in the true liberation of the hearts of men and women, a liberation from sin. For this reason the Church must wait for a God who can forgive sin—the root of liberation. The liberation that the Church waits for is a cosmic liberation.

The Church experiences that all of nature is groaning beneath the weight of sin. What beautiful coffee groves, what fine wheat, sugar cane and cotton fields, what farms, what lands God has given us! Nature is so beautiful! But we see it groan under oppression, under wickedness, under injustice, under abuse, and the Church experiences its pain. Nature looks for a liberation that will not be mere material well-being but God's act of power. God will free nature from sinful human hands, and, along with the redeemed, it will sing a hymn of joy to God the Liberator."

Reflections and Questions

1. How often do we think that we can solve all of our problems on our own? Hunger, war, and injustice all grow from the same root: sin. As we work toward eradicating these evils, let us not forget that we are partners with God in this work. Let us not forget that our end goal is not only to end hunger or war or injustice, but to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth. How can you invite God into the work you are doing? Ask the Holy Spirit to guide your feet as you walk on the path toward the Kingdom, and to guide your hands as you sculpt your own unique place in it, no matter how small it may seem.
2. Due to persistent accusations of alignment with El Salvador's resistance movement, Romero takes pains to remind us that he preaches not a political liberation, but a gospel liberation. Confusing these two types of freedom has a historical and spiritual precedent; the contemporaries of Jesus expected him to set up an earthly Kingdom, and because of this fixation, they missed, at first, the much greater Kingdom he was establishing.

In Romero's younger days, he himself feared that gospel was becoming radicalized in El Salvador. What he came to understand was that the gospel itself is *already* radical. Loving our enemies, selling our possessions to give money to the poor, turning the other cheek, spending our time with the sick and the outcast, seeking the humblest seat at the table, inviting the least prestigious to the banquet. There is no political agenda that's more radical than the gospel. And there is no government that offers a greater freedom than the Kingdom of God.

Let's take a moment to identify our distractions, the places where we stop short of the gospel in our aspirations for the world in which we live. Let's imagine ourselves realigning our compass to the true north of the Kingdom of God.

Third Sunday of Advent

December 11, 2022

Day 2

Readings:

Isaiah 35: 1-6A, 10

James 5: 7-10

Matthew 11: 2-11

Excerpts from Óscar Romero's Homily "The Church of Salvation" (December 11, 1977)

"How beautiful is the song of freedom that we have listened to today in the first reading. [...] Here Isaiah refers to two beautiful scenes in Palestine that had become a desert but that God is capable of planting once again, and thus enabling nature to flourish in beauty. These are images that, according to the prophet, are translated to the human environment and change that environment. Strengthen the hands that are feeble, make firm the knees that are weak ... the eyes of the blind are opened and the ears of the deaf are cleared. The lame will leap like a stag, then the tongue of the dumb will sing ... those whom the Lord has ransomed will return.

This is complete liberation and is exactly what Jesus himself says to the messengers of John the Baptist: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them. Are these not the signs of the coming of the Messiah? Why has the prisoner of Herod asked about this? Has he become pessimistic? No, John the Baptist wants to confirm the faith of his disciples in the Messiah. They returned and were convinced that Jesus was the God who was to come and save the world—but save the world with a liberation that John the Baptist could never have imagined.

[...] The prophet experienced a burning inside him as he saw the injustices all around him, as he saw the abuses of so many people, and he felt that God could not tolerate these unjust situations and therefore he said: "You brood of vipers! Even now the axe lies at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." When Jesus comes with such meekness, he speaks to John the Baptist, the impatient prophet, and like the Apostle James, tells him: "be patient, the sign of the Messiah is goodness." [...]

Second, the salvation of God becomes present in history. The Council says: "As God did not create man for life in isolation, but for the formation of social unity, so also it has pleased God to make men holy and save them not merely as individuals, without bond or link between them, but by making them into a single people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness." The Council continues and says that this people was Israel, and therefore the history of Israel is different from the history of other people because she had a unique guarantee.

We should not be confused here. Israel's history was a theocratic history. God wrote it with his prophets, with his human beings. Israel's deeds and historical events have a prophetic

meaning. What God did to Israel he wants to do for all people. Other people must learn from the Bible, from sacred history. It is the paradigm of all histories. Thus today's first reading we read as Salvadorans, and we desire that as Judah was restored and returned from her exile in Babylon, as the steppes and the desert and the parched land will bloom, as Judah returns and is purified from her social sin and flourishes in holiness and justice, so may salvation return to El Salvador—salvation that awaits the purification of the sins of our history, salvation that waits for the elimination of so many abuses, salvation that waits for the lifting up and the development of so many people who live on the margins of society. [...]

The nation is built upon these plans of God, and the true vocation of my country is to be a nation of salvation. The true vocation of Salvadorans is that we should one day become God's Kingdom, not just baptized in name, but actually Christians, committed to make our homes, our estates, our farms, our ways and our laws structures of salvation where Salvadorans can experience themselves truly realized as Christians, able to adore their God with freedom, with complete freedom, able to proclaim the integral religion that God bids them to proclaim. [...]

This is the nation of Advent, of Christ, the nation that Christ commanded us to offer up through the intermediary of his Church to those who have in their hands the reins, the destiny and the economic, political and social power, so that they might build together with this people of good will. [...] My sisters and brothers, this is the task of the Church in the history of every nation, to make the history of every people a history of salvation.

[...] My sisters and brothers, let us not be pessimistic! With Saint James, the Apostle, I repeat: be patient. But not a patience that is some form of conformity or a patience that is asleep. The Apostle says: be patient and work for your own perfection, develop yourselves and do that which is good, hoping that to the degree that we work together, this history of our nation might become not some copy of the history of Israel, but rather the history of God who worked marvelous deeds in Israel and who wants to do the same thing here in El Salvador [...]. So be it.”

Reflections and Questions

1. “The sign of the Messiah is goodness.” What a completely countercultural message this is to John the Baptist, and to us. How often do we, too, get stuck in outrage about injustice, missing completely the paradoxical gentleness of the redemption that Jesus offers? (I am raising my hand high here, in case you were wondering.) It is true that injustice is abhorrent to God. It is also true that Jesus overcame sin and inequality not with a sword, but with a tender healing touch. How can we, in our anger, choose to make our first steps in love? The redemption that God has in mind is so far beyond what we can accomplish in our human limitations. All the more reason, then, to plug ourselves in to the ultimate source of love before trying to move forward in our own strength. It is a natural thing that we, like John the Baptist, should feel anger. Let's bring that burning anger to God and ask that it be transformed into love, love that burns brighter than anger, love that purifies and redeems.

2. On this Gaudete Sunday, as the joy of the nativity draws near, take comfort in the fact that the redemption of Israel is not some irrelevant artifact of history. God's redemption is present in every age, in every nation, in every city, in every home. As you pray this week, turn the palms of your hands upward and offer to God every dark place in need of light, beginning with the ones inside your own heart. Pray for love to brighten every shadow.

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 18, 2022

Day 1

Readings:

Isaiah 7: 10-14

Romans 1: 1-7

Matthew 1: 18-24

Excerpts from Óscar Romero’s Homily “God Comes to Save Us” (December 18, 1977)

“As the feast of the Nativity draws near, the readings of the Word of God speak to us about this nearness that should fill us with great hope. The title of today’s homily could be: God comes to save us. God is coming and we ought to experience this coming in our thoughts and our confusion. We ought to experience this coming despite the fact that the horizons of history appear to be closed, and, finally, we ought to experience this coming because as God comes, he will open paths of light. The only thing that is asked of us is to believe and trust in God.

In light of this nearness and living the depths of this hope, we have to reflect this joy of our hearts. This joy is not some superficial happiness like that of many others during this Christmas season, but rather it is the profound joy of faith. Again I say that we have to reflect this joy in the realities that surround us because we are people who have our feet planted on the earth, we live in this present historical situation, and we cannot put aside these convictions and these intimate hopes when we feel the repercussions that arise from our situation. [...]

My sisters and brothers, in this environment Christmas arrives. The Word of God cries out on this Sunday that God comes to save us. [...] What does this mean? It means that God is not improvising. When God foresaw the fall of humanity and the rupture of the dialogue that had been established at the beginning of history, he also foresaw a redemption—a redemption in which his Son would personally come to earth.

[...] In the first reading we saw that King Ahaz was afflicted because two neighboring kings [...] had plotted to remove him from the throne. So King Ahaz looked for support from the powerful king of Assyria, whom he hoped would come and defend him. Through the prophet Isaiah, God spoke to the king and told him not to trust in men but to trust in the promise of God, the promise of an offspring of David [...]. God’s promise [...] looks back to the promise that God made to David when he said that an extraordinary woman would be the sign of God’s power because this woman, being a virgin and remaining a virgin, would become the mother of a child who would be called Emmanuel, God-with-us.

How beautiful is the image of Mary, our Lady. Mary cannot be absent from our Christmas hope. A Christmas without Mary would be a Christmas without tenderness. A promise of salvation without a beautiful woman, the Virgin, enchanting and holy, would not be a human redemption because God wants to give his graces to men and women through the tenderness of a

mother. My sisters and brothers, during these days of preparation for Christmas may our hearts grow in love for the Virgin Mary, the mother of Emmanuel, God-with-us! [...]

In the second reading today Saint Paul [...] lays the foundation for an authentic theology, for a Christology [...]. He says that on the one hand, this Christ is according to the flesh a descendant of David; this Christ is man, is in the lineage of a kingly dynasty. God had promised this, and Jesus as man belongs to our history. He suffered like every other human person; he carried in his human heart the anguish of the whole world; he is human. My sisters and brothers, how beautiful it is to think that Emmanuel, God-with-us, is a man, a human person who understands us, who accompanies us, who comforts us, and who illuminates us. On the other hand, Saint Paul says that according to the Spirit of God, this Jesus, anointed by the Holy Spirit and anointed in the womb of the blessed woman who would bear him, is the Son of God. [...]

[...] This means that the redemption planned by God is arriving for everyone without exception. All those who experience themselves as sinners, those who feel that their sins cannot be forgiven—who knows if the one whose hands are bloodied with Father Grande’s murder or the one who shot Father Navarro, who knows if those who have killed and tortured and done so much evil, who knows if they are listening to me?⁴ Listen, there in your criminal hideout, perhaps already repentant, you, too, are called to forgiveness. When I have cried out against violence I have always spoken of the need for repentance because it is this that makes one a child of God. Paul preached to the Romans, a non-believing people where crime and injustice abounded, and he told them that they were also called to participate in this redemption of Christ—this Christ whom the Virgin brought into the world.

My sisters and brothers, this redemption is a redemption from sin. The angel told Saint Joseph: “You are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” This forgiveness of sins is the beginning of Christian liberation. When we struggle for human rights, for freedom and for dignity, when we feel that it is a ministry of the Church to concern ourselves for those who are hungry, for those who are deprived, we are not departing from God’s promise. He comes to free us from sin, and the Church knows that sin’s consequences are all such injustices and abuses. The Church knows that she is saving the world when she undertakes to speak also of such things.

[...] The Church continues to realize the saving plan of God, and she has not withdrawn herself from this task. When she sees in people, in the people of the Americas, this desire for liberation, she incorporates into her mission this desire and struggle for Christian liberation. She says to all who work for this liberation: a liberation without faith, a liberation without Christ, a liberation without hope, a liberation of violence and revolution—all of these are not effective or authentic. Liberation must begin with the redemption of Christ, the redemption from sin. Laws and structures are meaningless as long as people do not renew themselves interiorly and repent of their sin and try to live more justly.”

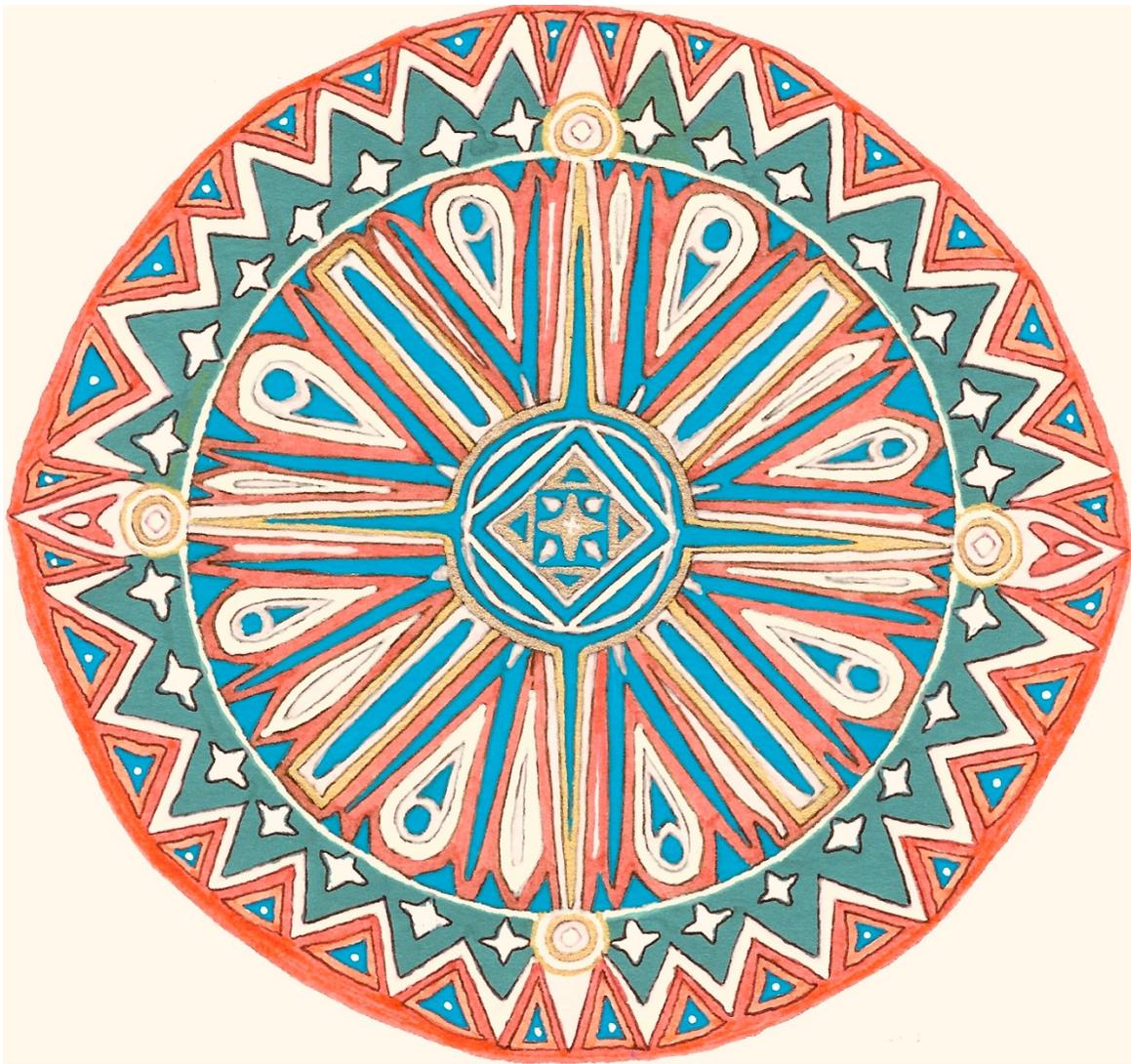
⁴ Fr. Rutilio Grande was killed on March 12, 1977. Fr. Alfonso Navarro was killed May 11, 1977.

Reflections and Questions

1. What a wonderful reflection Romero gives us on the tender and motherly love we find in Mary. During Advent we have the joy of celebrating both the Feast of the Immaculate Conception and the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, calling to mind Mary's central place in the mystery of our faith. As Christmas draws near, and holiday stresses may be ever present in your mind, allow Mary to enfold you in her mantle. Allow her to say to you, as she said to Juan Diego so many years ago, in his own native tongue, "Am I not here who am your Mother?" Rest in her goodness. Let her restore you.
2. Romero speaks here of true liberation, which begins with forgiveness. Redemption comes not from armies or political powers, but from the radical conversion of heart that the gospel brings about. Consider what love, what expansiveness of redemptive vision is present in Romero's address to those who killed two priests, those who have killed and tortured so many others. Consider what radical faith in Jesus he possessed, in order to offer them, too, a place in the redeeming work of God. The beautiful truth is that none of us, no matter what we do or fail to do, are excluded from God's mercy.

Sit with this overwhelming fact for a few moments. Imagine yourself, in all your weaknesses and shortcomings, being overtaken by this tide of love. Then call to mind the people who aggravate you the most, who anger you the most, whose actions you abhor. Imagine them, too, awash in mercy. If you have time, read the conversion story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19: 1-10. Pray with your whole heart for each person you called to mind.

3. One of the great gifts that Romero gave to his people, and to us as well, was the reminder that we are not alone in our suffering. Jesus, being fully human, always accompanies us as our co-sufferer. There is no pain that is foreign to Jesus, no loss that Jesus cannot carry with us. Whatever sorrow you hold in your heart, whatever pain you cannot even speak aloud, know that he is with you in it. Imagine, as your tears fall, that you walk alongside him on the road to Calvary. He will meet you there, and hold you in his arms.



"This forgiveness of sins is the beginning of Christian liberation. When we struggle for human rights, for freedom and for dignity, when we feel that it is a ministry of the Church to concern ourselves for those who are hungry, for those who are deprived, we are not departing from God's promise. He comes to free us from sin, and the Church knows that sin's consequences are all such injustices and abuses. The Church knows that she is saving the world when she undertakes to speak also of such things."

—St. Óscar Romero

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 18, 2022

Day 2

Readings:

Isaiah 7: 10-14

Romans 1: 1-7

Matthew 1: 18-24

Excerpts from Óscar Romero's Homily "God Comes to Save Us" (December 18, 1977)

"[...] The Church today in 1977 and in a few days in 1978 is doing nothing more than that which was proclaimed by Saint Paul: proclaiming the gospel of God, the plan of God to save the world in Jesus Christ. [...]"

My sisters and brothers, the Church is not the bishop and the priests, but rather the Church is all of you, you who have been baptized, you as Christian families, professionals, students, workers, and *campesinos*. When I say here that the Church is prolonging this saving plan of Christ, I want to call upon all of you, my sisters and brothers, and I ask you who are baptized to be enlivened and enflamed with enthusiasm for this plan of God, this plan that no one can detain, a plan that must be realized because God wants to save humanity in Christ. God wants to make Christ known through the Virgin Mary who gave birth to the Son of God, to Emmanuel, to God-with-us. This is a great and holy obligation of all Christians.

Lastly, my sisters and brothers, let us look at the reaction of women and men to this plan of God that continues to be the plan of the Church. We find here some interesting figures. In the first place we find a king who under the pretext of a false religiosity says: "I will not ask for a sign! I will not tempt the Lord." The prophet reprimands the king and says: "It is not that you do not want to tempt God but rather you want to follow your own human plans. You have more trust in the power of your armaments and the king of Assyria than in the plans of God." It was sad to see this rejection of God's promise because only a few years later the King, whom Ahaz had called upon to help him, would invade Judah and lead the people into exile.

This is a way in which the plan of God is rejected and is one way of reacting to God's plan—rejection is a very sad reaction. At this time how many people in El Salvador are rejecting the preaching of the Church, slandering and discrediting her! Jesus can speak to these people the same words that he spoke to the Pharisees: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You lock the kingdom of heaven before human beings. You do not enter yourselves, nor do you allow entrance to those trying to enter." My sisters and brothers, I appeal to your mature judgment and I ask you not to allow yourselves to be seduced and do not become involved in the false religiosity of King Ahaz. In this way you will be able to accept the simple word of the gospel that asks for sacrifice, renunciation, equality and love.

Naturally, this Word is painful, and it is easy to reject it, but, my sisters and brothers, the reaction against God's plan is also shared by those who are good. We have before us a specific

case, and it would be good to meditate on this situation. Saint Joseph is upset: how is it possible that his wife who is such a good person is going to be a mother without any relationship with a man? This is a temptation, the bad faith of a holy and just husband about an equally holy wife. The virgin is also upset and says to the angel: “How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?” My sisters and brothers, the plans of God are beyond human calculations. The angel responds to Mary and says: “Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; for nothing is impossible for God.” We then see the faith of the virgin when she says: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.” In today’s gospel we also see the faith of Saint Joseph who awoke from his dream, accepted the word of the angel and with no doubt and great trust took Mary as his wife.

Saint Paul is also another example. He was a persecutor because he believed that Christianity was a hindrance to his Jewish religion. The risen Christ knocked this persecutor from his horse in order to make him the apostle to the Gentiles. Look, my sisters and brothers, at this example because even with great faith one can still encounter difficult trials. Why does this happen? Why does God permit this? This cannot be of God! Is it not true that each one of us has on many occasions experienced this temptation in our hearts? This is the hour of trial, the hour in which the plan of God wants to assert itself—not because women and men believe that this is possible but because God loves us and nothing is impossible for the love of God. Who would have believed that God would become a human being, would allow himself to be despised and put to death on a cross? This was very possible because without Christ there is no salvation.

Let us have faith, my sisters and brothers, because this is the reaction to the Nativity. We see this in the reaction of Elizabeth who says to Mary: “Blessed are you who believed.” We are invited to profess this same faith, a faith that is more necessary today than ever before. Faith...consists in accepting God without asking God to be accountable to us. Faith consists in reacting to God in the same way that Mary did: “I do not understand this, but may it be done to me according to your word.”

May we pray: Lord, we know that Christmas is your drawing near to us, to this people of El Salvador. We know that our government, our collaborators and our Church are concerned about a better future. We know that no one wants bloodshed, violence or misfortune. Lord, show us the way even though we may not understand this. Give us a sign that you are with us because Emmanuel, God-with-us, is not a promise of the past. We know that God has remained with us and lives in our midst—indeed, this is our great hope during this Christmas season of 1977. God is with us. God comes personally to save us—even though we do not know how, but, yes, God is coming to save us.

Let us have great hope, my sisters and brothers, and let us pray often. Let us make this a Christmas of prayer and a Christmas of supplication! Lord, we suffer greatly. Lord, this people is very troubled. Lord, you who save, you can rely on our good will. We want to be like Saint Paul and Saint Joseph and Mary. We do not want to doubt you like King Ahaz did. We want to be women and men of faith, committed to you, collaborators in the establishment of your Kingdom. My sisters and brothers, in our profession and in our work may each one of us collaborate with

this God. May we be filled with peace, filled with optimism, filled with hope! The Lord will come to save us. So be it.”

Reflections and Questions

1. We are not powerless, no matter what dire circumstances we face. It is so easy to become discouraged and overwhelmed by the great evil that exists in this world. It is so easy to think, “What can I possibly do in the face of war, racism, and corruption?” The danger we may fall into is imagining that we must individually solve these problems—this kind of thinking leads to paralysis, which keeps us from participating in God’s saving work. Whatever your part is, through prayer, through action, through offering up your sufferings for others, do not let yourself be sidetracked from your work alongside Jesus. Your work is holy, and your work *matters*.
2. We all aspire to Mary’s *fiat*, to her “yes” to God’s plan, even without understanding it, even though it would come at great personal cost to her. The truth is that we are all a little more like Ahaz, like Joseph, like Paul. There is no redemption for Ahaz, but for Joseph and Paul, doubt and persecution are transformed into trust and love. Doubt is a natural response to something we don’t understand. But it’s never too late for us to say, like the desperate father in the gospel of Mark, “I believe, help my unbelief!” (Mark 9: 24).

Our human eyes cannot see the solutions to the problems we face, on a global, a national, or even a personal scale. But Romero invites us to accept God without asking God to be accountable to us. Hold in your mind for a moment the things that you cannot see God’s hand in—the conflict that rages in the world or in your family, the illness not healed, the reconciliation not achieved. Breathe those things in deeply. And then exhale them into the loving care of God. This meditation will not solve your problems. But it will draw you closer to the One who walks alongside you in the

The Feast of Christmas

December 25, 2022

Day 1

Readings:

Isaiah 52: 7-10

Hebrews 1: 1-6

John 1: 1-18

Excerpts from Romero's Homily "Christ, Manifestation of God and Man" (December 25, 1977)

“The gospel tells us that the shepherds were invited by the angels to go and adore the child Jesus, and Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart. We gather here in imitation of Mary because for the Christian community the Nativity has no meaning unless it is based on a profound reflection. [...] Indeed, women and men should commit themselves to this event in which God becomes man, not in some transitory way, but taking on a human form forever. [...] Today we are able to present this Christ in Bethlehem in this homily with the title: Christ, the manifestation of God; secondly, Christ the manifestation of humanity; and thirdly, the Church, the manifestation of Christ. [...]

The Nativity has a profound meaning, and in the midst of the Christmas cards and telegrams, I have received some letters that are very sad. For example, some mothers and wives have said: “During the time of the Christmas celebration that the Christian people await with joy, we do not experience the gladness of Christmas but rather the profound sorrow of Calvary because we feel in our hearts this insuperable separation from our children and spouses.” Another similar letter states: “We are anguished and saddened by the cries of our children who wake up during the night and cry out for their parents, but the security forces provide us with no information about their whereabouts.” Many letters have arrived with similar painful expressions. We have tried to do everything that we could with regard to these situations. We have appealed to the judicial authorities, and we are always willing to provide our assistance in these painful situations of humanity.

We have also received letters from the rural areas where people are involved in the harvesting of coffee, etc., and people have denounced the anomalies and injustices of management—bad food, long hours, and discrimination at the hands of those who are supposed to be helping these individuals who are looking for work.

We do not want to forget the workers and the injustices that result from a lack of support. We want to tell them that we are with them in demanding support of their cause. Yet among the workers, we must also admit that they too commit injustices when they rob one another or spend their salaries unwisely or do not care for their families. We invite each one of them to listen to the voice of the Church that during the Second Vatican Council stated: “Christ's Church, trusting in the design of the Creator, acknowledges that human progress can serve man's true happiness, yet she cannot help echoing the Apostle's warning: ‘Be not conformed to this world.’ Here by the

world is meant that spirit of vanity and malice which transforms into an instrument of sin those human energies intended for the service of God and man.”⁵ If in all of our work, whether we are part of management or labor—if we kept in mind the fact that all people work for the glory of God and peace among people, how beautiful would humanity be. The differences between rich and poor would no longer be barriers that give rise to hatred and resentment but rather would become chains that join them together in love and fraternity.

[...] In his beautiful prologue Saint John has told us: In the beginning was the Word ... and all things came to be through him. [...]

Creation was therefore made by the Word, this eternal word of God. Remember when we pray the Angelus and say: The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary ... and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Thus, the Word of God is not a word that reflects the natural world but rather reflects the most intimate life of God. This Word tells us that in God there is a Son, and this Son, the Eternal Word of God, takes on a human form. When we saw this Word pass through this world, Saint John says: “we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father’s only Son. Christ is the epiphany of God.” [...]

Thus, in the reading from the letter of the Hebrews we heard these eloquent words that told us: in times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he spoke to us through a Son. Now there is no need for messengers like the prophets who came to speak about God’s revelations using words like: thus says the Lord. Now the Lord himself has come, the very Word of God.[...]

As circumstances arise, the Word communicates to the Church the appropriate word that she must speak. Thus, as we confront modern inventions and the progress of the human race, as we confront the abuse of human dignity and other difficult circumstances, we have the Spirit of God and the Word incarnated in the Church which reveals to us what must be done and what must be said in the particular circumstance.

Therefore, my sisters and brothers, I am grateful to you for your solidarity with the Church when you say: we are asking the Holy Spirit to illuminate you so that you say what must be said. When we feel that there is a consensus among people, when we feel that there is a joy and a love and a unity we say: this must be the Word of God that is speaking because Christ lives in his people. This is the great mystery of Christ who is the life of God and has come to share with us his truth and his life. [...]

Christ then is the epiphany of God, the manifestation of God, the revelation of God. When we behold the child Jesus in the arms of Mary, let us elevate our minds because we need the great virtue of faith. Mary needed that same faith to see in the child that she nourished with her breasts not another child, but rather the incarnation of God. In her child Jesus, she adored the truth and eternal life and the God-man. For this reason Mary is the model for all those Christians who celebrate the Nativity and who want to deepen themselves in the great mystery of God, of the Father, of love and life and truth who became flesh. The fact the God becomes flesh is like a strange antithesis, an opposing reality—God-flesh, the infinite God and limited flesh, the infinite

⁵ *Gaudium et Spes*, 37.

God wrapped in the flesh of a man who belongs to a people and a history and who desires to communicate this mystery—and we are going to see later that this mystery is a part of each one of us.”

Reflections and Questions

1. Romero reminds us once more that there is no separation between the spiritual realm and the realm of our lived experience, even though one proclaims eternal joy while the other is often marked with sorrow. The paradox of the gospel is that joy and sorrow go hand in hand—one does not cancel out the other. This Christmas, try to live into both of these realities. As you confront the sorrows and suffering of the world around you, recall the radiant promise of the Nativity. As your heart rejoices in Christmas, hold also in your heart all the circumstances in your life and in the world that are still awaiting redemption. The beauty of our faith is that we do not have to pretend that our sorrows are not real or do not matter—they matter deeply, and they take their place alongside the joy of the gospel. Glory be to God, we are able to live fully in both.
2. How beautiful it is that the Church continues to speak the Word of God throughout all the centuries, in every age and in every place. Her message may differ in emphasis depending on the historical context, but the heart of it is always the same: the love and redemption of Jesus Christ. Take a moment to celebrate your wholly unique and individual place in the proclamation of the Word of God.

The Feast of Christmas

December 25, 2022

Day 2

Readings:

Isaiah 52: 7-10

Hebrews 1: 1-6

John 1: 1-18

Excerpts from Romero's Homily "Christ, Manifestation of God and Man" (December 25, 1977)

"[...] I want to speak to you about my second point, namely, that just as Christ is the revelation of God, so too Christ is the revelation of humanity. When we were entering the Mass I heard a seminarian reading section 22 of the document *Gaudium et Spes*, that is, the document that is the Church's dialogue with the real world [...]. In that part of the document it is stated that the mystery of man can only be understood in the light of Christ. What meaning does my life have? Where do I come from? Where am I going? What is the meaning of my intelligence, my ability to love and to be free? What is the meaning of these material goods that God has placed beneath my feet?

When people forget about Christ, all of these human abilities of intelligence, freedom, love, and the ability to dominate and organize the earth become a system of oppression, slavery, hatred and vengeance. When man created in God's image is stained by sin, we then see a most horrible reality. But when in Christ we return to discover the meaning of man and woman then we understand what Saint Paul has told us today in the letter to the Hebrews. [...]

God has sealed men and women with the image of God. [...] This seal is only discovered when the impression, the authentic seal, the original image of God, the Word in which is reflected the divine essence that becomes flesh—when this seal becomes visible in the world. This Word is the perfect man, a man of human and Christian and heavenly virtue, a man whom every person must reflect in themselves if they want to be worthy of their dignity as children of God. Men and women can find no meaning in their vocation apart from Christ—this Christ who said: "I came down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of the one who sent me."

Men and women will find no other reason for their joy and for their existence unless they reflect on the song of the angels: Glory to God. Our life exists for the glory of God, and we do not have to look for political, social or economic advantages—all of this is secondary. In this environment in which we are placed and in which we must develop our lives with all of these political, economical and social relationships, we must seek the glory of God. In the midst of our poverty and misery and oppression and imprisonment, we must never forget that we are sealed by God, that we are the image of God.

Now you can understand, my sisters and brothers, why the Church is so zealous in defending human rights and human dignity and human freedom. Now you can understand why

the Church cries out like a mother who experiences the abuse of her child when she sees the image of God abused, an image that she must restore to its original beauty. The Church acts in this way because she is the prolongation of this seal of God, the seal of the Lord. Let us understand and be aware of our own dignity! We read today from the wonderful document of the Council that God became man, worked with the hands of a man, thought with the thoughts of a man, loved with the heart of a man, and from that point on, we are able to say that our human heart is the heart of God, our human mind can be elevated to God because God came to bring us the life of God when he became man. The God-man taught me how to use my hands and feet.

How wonderful is the passage that was proclaimed in the first reading: How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings glad tidings of freedom to those who are oppressed. Christ is this mysterious messenger who places his feet on the earth and announces to the people and all humankind that Jerusalem will be rebuilt upon the ruins of the people. When the voice of the messenger is heard, people will be filled with joy and hope and optimism.

This is the hymn of Christmas—the messenger comes with human feet to dwell on this earth and with the hands of a child to teach us the way, with hands that will be the hands of the divine Teacher, hands that will one day be nailed to the cross. With the heart of a man this Jesus learned how to love through the example of the virginal love of Mary and the human experiences of his home here on earth. He learned how to love through the example of Saint Joseph, and he learned the meaning of honesty in work. The Bible clearly tells us that he was a man who learned among men and lived among men and wanted to be like men in every aspect except sin. Jesus experienced everything that we experience: weariness, sadness, discouragement, loneliness, happiness, illusions, friendship. Everything that the human heart feels was felt by God in Christ. For this reason Christ is the revelation of man to man himself. My sisters and brothers, let us give thanks to our heavenly Father and to the virgin Mary who collaborated in this great undertaking of making flesh, making human, and giving a human dimension to the infinite love of God.

Finally, I want to share with you my third thought, because we would not have learned these beautiful things twenty centuries removed from the birth of Jesus if there did not exist another institution that was established by Christ, an institution that is called the Church. The Church is the revelation of Christ just as Christ is the revelation of God. The Church reveals Christ to men and women and to all people.

[...] Thanks to the Church, this sealing of God in Christ is presented to people of every age so that men and women can discover and live their true greatness, their true vocation. If it were not for the Church, this flash of the glory of God in Bethlehem would have died there on that night. In subsequent years this event would have been remembered as something that occurred and nothing more. What is beautiful is the fact that in this Christmas liturgy of 1977 the glory of God is being made present as though this were that Christmas night when Christ was born in Bethlehem. And now Christ is not only being born in Bethlehem but also in El Salvador and in all those towns and villages that are in union with our radio station, in all the communities, villages and homes of those who are ill and listening to this message of the Church.

I have the great honor this morning of being the voice of the Church that announces the birth of Christ to the women and men of 1977. I have the honor of telling you that in the midst of all your joy, or better to say I have the honor of telling you the reason for all this Christmas joy. Many people do not understand why there is so much joy, for even nonbelievers celebrate Christmas. Indeed, even the enemies of the Church and those who have slandered and defamed the Church during this past year value the Church because of this Christmas joy. For this reason, I said during my Christmas greeting that in my heart as Pastor I have no resentment, not even for personal offenses. Indeed, no one can take away from me the joy of being able to say to my enemies: Merry Christmas! For you see this is not my message but the message of the Church, who is bringing from Christ this happiness and joy, even though people do not understand this.

But this morning I am attempting to make it possible for you to understand all of this, namely, that the Church, the prolongation of the incarnation of Christ, has a human and divine dimension. The child Jesus has a human body that was formed within the womb of a woman, but he also has a divine dimension that was not given to him by the Virgin but by the eternal Father who sent his Word to become incarnated in these human elements that the Virgin gave to this child Jesus.

Thus, we have the Church that, like Christ, has a human dimension that is given by her to men and women and a divine dimension that is given to men and women by God. We have this wonderful joining together of the imperfect and the divine. Jesus became tired and suffered and experienced human limitations, but as God he did not tire because God is infinite and perfect. The Church, as a human institution, has no reason to be embarrassed by her human defects and, therefore, when the bitter criticism of our enemies places all these defects before the world, there is in reality little to be said because this criticism is so small in comparison to the great sinfulness that there is in the Church. There is misery, and we are as human as you, the enemies of the Church who are capable of so much hatred. The Church is also human and can fall into the sin of not loving. As a human institution she experiences what every human person experiences—she experiences a lack of appreciation, she experiences desire and temptation—the Church is human. Let us not forget that the Church prolongs the humanity, the flesh of Christ in history but as a divine institution the Church is sinless. [...]

My beloved sisters and brothers, we have reflected and asked the Virgin Mary to enable us to understand the mystery of her child. She has summed all of this up through my humble word: My child is nothing more and nothing less than the manifestation of men to men: their dignity and the greatness of God which they bear as images of God. Know how to be worthy of this seal that each person bears. And finally, Mary says: this child that is in my arms is the most beautiful image of the Church that will be prolonged for centuries and that will bring the life of God into the midst of human deficiencies, into the midst of the poverty of the manger in Bethlehem. Jesus said blessed are those who are not scandalized, but who know how to capture the beauty of the light that surrounds all the beautiful realities of the earth. So be it!"

Reflections and Questions

1. Romero calls us to our mission this Christmas: we must act in accordance with the dignity that is granted to us as bearers of the image of God. Oppression, violence, and discrimination, wherever they may take place, is the immediate concern of the Church and the people of God. Ask God to renew today your sense of your mission and your commitment to bringing about the Kingdom of God on earth. Ask God to show you one small place to start.

Today we celebrate the mystery of the Incarnation—that there is no emotion, no human experience that is foreign to Jesus. What a glorious mercy it is to us that the Word of God is not only every psalm, every lamentation, every parable, but actually a living, breathing person, a person who reaches out to each of us with the most tremendous love. Our Christmas joy is not found in every burden being lifted from us, but in the knowledge that we do not bear them alone; our suffering is united with the suffering of Christ. Although it is a great feast, Christmas is often difficult for many of us. Do not be afraid to bring your sorrows to Jesus. He is no stranger to your loss, your heartache, your grief. Let him hold you there. Dwell deeply in the profound richness of his mercy and compassion.

2. Romero reflects at length on the human and divine nature of the Church. Although she can never be free of sin because of her human elements, her mission is divine. As the Incarnation shows us as humans who we truly are, so the Church guides us as humans, in all our imperfection, to reveal the gospel to the world around us. As Romero so beautifully states, “the God-man taught me how to use my hands and feet.”

As you move forward from Christmas into the new year ahead, take a few minutes to meditate on both your humanity and your divine mission. Ask Jesus to show you, too, how to use your hands and feet. Go forth and be the Church! St. Óscar Romero, pray for us!

Further Reading

Romero, Óscar. *The Scandal of Redemption*. Walden, NY: Plough, 2018.

This is a collection of excerpts from Romero's diaries and homilies and is a great place to start reading the work of this great saint.

Walters, Kerry. *St. Óscar Romero: Pastor, Prophet, Martyr*. Cincinnati: Franciscan Media, 2018.

Kerry Walters provides an in-depth biography of Romero with lots of cultural context. This book is also available as an e-book through [formed.org](https://www.formed.org) if your parish has a subscription.

Wright, Scott. *Óscar Romero and the Communion of Saints*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009.

This beautiful biography includes many photographs by Octavio Duran, a Salvadoran Franciscan who was Romero's personal photographer.

About the Author

Cameron Bellm is a Seattle-based writer and contemplative in action. She combines her love of language with a deeply rooted spirituality to compose poems, prayers, essays, and devotionals linking our modern lives with our ancient faith. She is the author of the *Spirit & Verse* column at Jesuits.org and *A Consoling Embrace: Prayers for a Time of Pandemic*. You can find more of her writing on Instagram at @cameronbellm and on her website, cameronbellm.com.

About the Artist

Casey Armour Jordan is an Episcopalian artist, and hopefully one day, God-willing, a priest. His Southern Baptist upbringing in Henderson, TN taught him about Christ, and also how to draw while sitting straight-backed in a church pew, all with his Dad's fountain-pen. God was there then and now. And so is the fountain-pen.

Casey received his BFA in Acting, with an emphasis in Musical Theatre, from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio. He lived in New York City for six years, working as an off-Broadway actor for a little over a year of that time, and spending the rest of it in a not-so-dazzling but humbling career in the food industry. He now lives in Tennessee again, along with green trees and open fields and big blue skies.