

Guatemala Sunday

December 8, 2024

Buenos dias, mis amigos! Good day, my friends. I am delighted to share this time of celebration for our Guatemala Companion relationship with you.

Thank you, Rev. Barb, for inviting me to give the sermon today. I am honored, humbled, and rather nervous! I thought this was a good idea until Rev. Barb told me she had confidence that I could connect my sermon with the Gospel for today. And then I read the Gospel.

I asked myself: How do I go from John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness about salvation with my sharing stories about our Guatemala Connection? Yikes!

I did what I usually do when I'm anxious. I sat down and had a conversation with God. "Please guide me, as I'm not sure I know how to do this. I don't want to let Rev. Barb, our St. Peter's folks, or our beloved Guatemala friends down."

And God responded with an image of the least favorite room in my house – my basement! Really? I went there and remembered there was a filing cabinet filled with my beloved deceased husband's sermons – all in order. I found the folder for today's lectionary reading and will share just a bit of one of Frank's sermons with you.

This feels right as Frank is the person God chose to lead us at St. Peter's on our spiritual journey to Guatemala.

From the Gospel:

".....the rough ways shall be made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

Frank wrote, “What does salvation mean to the individual believer – you and me?

We were created for salvation. We were created to be sons and daughters of God, formed by God’s own hand, created in God’s image, with God’s own breath breathed into our lungs.

Salvation is also THE EXPERIENCE OF CHRIST’S PRESENCE IN OUR LIVES TODAY – the birth of the Christ child within our hearts.

Frank asked: “Can you look into a mirror and see a man or woman or a young person in whom Christ lives? Just as importantly, can others see the life of Christ being lived through you?”

My response is that I have the gift of seeing the life of Christ here at St. Peter’s Church every time I come to this place. Today I would like to share where I have also seen the life of Christ during our 14 trips to Guatemala.

SLIDE ONE:

We begin this morning with witnessing the face of Christ in some of our 44 beloved Guatemalan children who are able to attend school with our scholarship help.

SLIDE TWO

Rev. Juan Mejia

Juan grew up in a very humble village called Campo Dos in the mountains of the Northeast part of Guatemala where one of our small churches is located.

Juan was ordained as a priest last year and now serves three of our other churches, quite a distance away. Juan and his wife Sylvia have two married sons and a daughter. Sadly, last year one of Juan’s sons and his

wife lost a child during childbirth. Thankfully, we were able to help them with resources during this crisis.

Juan wrote to us, saying: “I am very grateful to God for all his blessings, for the gift of lifemy family and for the ministry he has given me to be able to exercise here in the Episcopal Church of Guatemala, thanks to you also to all of you brothers and sisters of the Companion Church of St. Peter in Pennsylvania who have supported me morally, spiritually, and financially thank you, thank you, I don’t have anything to pay you but I know that our Lord Jesus Christ will reward you.

SLIDE THREE:

“I also want to express my gratitude on behalf of the children and each of the families for the support provided this year with the scholarships for each of the children who benefited. They have been a great help to families with limited resources. Thank you so much. May God bless your lives, families, and ministries.”

SLIDE FOUR:

I thought it would be fun to show you one of our scholarship recipients. Rev. Juan’s daughter Gabby recently graduated from secretarial school and is now working as a bilingual secretary!

SLIDE FIVE:

Luis Carlos Linares:

Luis came to Guatemala from Venezuela in 2016. He has been the minister at two of our companion churches and has been attending classes at the seminary in Guatemala City (which is about four-hour trip each way). Yesterday Luis sent this message:

“I share with you that thanks to the Lord Jesus Christ I was able to finish the formation process and have passed all the courses with satisfactory grades, which brings me closer to being a priest within the Episcopal Church of Guatemala”.

This is quite an accomplishment, and it feels like a privilege for us to accompany Luis on this important spiritual journey.

Luis says what brings him joy is preaching good news to the poor. He spends some time playing guitar and finds this is a good way to connect with people.

Luis wrote: “We want to ask for help so that we can carry out beautiful activities that aim to cheer the hearts of those children who are forgotten and suffer extreme poverty.

An illustration of this statement: One of our clergy a few years ago shared this information: The majority of men and women in Luis’s congregation in the mountains tap trees for rubber to earn about \$8.00 a day. When it is raining, and they can’t work they don’t earn anything.

Luis wrote: Unfortunately, in this area the youth are being lost in vices and we want our congregation to be a place where they can be given an alternative to recreate healthily.

Thank you very much for the support you give us. The truth is that you have helped us to carry out all the activities and help in the congregations. You are always in my prayers, and I hope that you have me and the people who are part of the congregations that I serve in your prayers. I convey all the thanks of the congregations and the people who receive help from you, our companion church of St. Peter’s.

SLIDE SIX:

Bishop Ramon Ovalle:

The diocese of Guatemala has a new bishop who was consecrated on Nov. 24.

In June, before the election, Father Ramon Ovalle met on zoom with our diocesan companion committee.

He said, "As a candidate my main thoughts are that peace and unity of the Church will be sustained no matter who is elected as Bishop of Guatemala. If God calls me, I will attend that call and work for the Church. I love my Church and my Diocese".

I learned that after the election, Bishop-Elect Ramon traveled throughout the country, visiting all the churches to learn the concerns of the priests and their parishioners.

I've known Bishop Ramon for many years and look forward to his ministry as Bishop.

SLIDE SEVEN:

During our pilgrimages to Guatemala, we were introduced to UPAVIM, which stands for Unidas Para Vivir Mejor. (United to live better)

Barbara Lorraine, on a visit from Texas to Guatemala in 1989, learned about the women and children living in squalor in the red zone part of Guatemala City called La Esperanza (hope).

SLIDE EIGHT:

Barbara was moved to help the women and 25 years later this place is a sanctuary for the women where they have learned skills to support their families, a Montessori school and a medical clinic (that has a microscope carried in one of our backpacks on a trip to Guatemala!)

SLIDE NINE:

After our service we will provide special Guatemalan food for our fellowship time and you will have the opportunity to do some Christmas shopping of crafts made by women who every day are creating in this sanctuary of UPAVIM better lives for their children, despite the fact that they still live outside the walls of UPAVIM in poor living conditions, with gangs, violence, and poverty.

SLIDE TEN:

Christ truly lived in the life of Father Greg Schaffer and this hospital in the village of San Lucas Toliman symbolizes the impact of Father Greg's ministry. During one of our visits there, Father Greg told us the story of one of the most interesting ways God worked in his life. Shortly after Greg was ordained a Roman Catholic priest in Minnesota, he received a letter from his bishop to the clergy in the diocese about a small mission in Guatemala that needed help. Greg spoke with his spiritual director about his quandary as a new priest receiving a letter from his bishop about something that he was not at all sure about. Father Greg's spiritual director suggested Greg at least acknowledge the letter. It turns out, Greg was the only priest who did so and thus began his new journey.

SLIDE ELEVEN:

Father Greg went, listened, and today there is a school, hospital, a women's center where women learn skills to support their families, and coffee plantations, where workers are paid living wages better than fair trade prices. We have some of this coffee available at our sale today. God quietly spoke in a letter and Father Greg listened.

SLIDE TWELVE:

I invite each of us to notice the experience of Christ's presence in this man carrying the coffee to be processed. During our trips through the countryside of Guatemala I was deeply moved each time I witnessed someone like this man doing what he could to make a better life for his family.

SLIDE THIRTEEN:

You will have the opportunity to see more images during the slide show during Communion with photos sent to us by Rev. Juan and Luis Carlos.

For now, we close as we began by witnessing the Christ's presence in our beloved Guatemala children who are able to attend school with our scholarship help. During the past 21 years, we have been able through education to break the chains of poverty for some of our beloved children in Guatemala, helped with resources for medical emergencies, and prayed for and with our companions. You are invited to join our ministry in any way you feel called and I give thanks for your genuine listening during our time together this morning. It is a privilege to share this journey with you.