

Advent 2
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

December 4, 2022
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Trust

In the year 1570, Dominican missionaries began to evangelize the highlands of Ecuador south of the capital of Quito, working their way eastward from the town of Ambato. They taught the faith in Pelileo, Patate, Canelos, and the little village of Baños, where a mere hut with a statue of the Virgin Mary served as a church.

The town of Baños, which means "Baths," sits precariously close to a very active volcano, Tungurahua. In native story, Tungurahua is a beautiful apu, or mountain spirit. The major peaks of the area, Cotopaxi, Altar and Chimborazo, fought furiously over her in dramatic eruptions. Chimborazo, being the tallest and largest, won, and married Tungurahua. Their son is Guagua Pichincha, just west of Quito. But she is emotional and wanton. When she does not get what she wants she spouts lava and rocks and hot vapors. Lava flows from her summit have formed giant basaltic pillars, like what is seen in Frenchman's Coulee near Vantage, WA. The Pastaza River, bigger than the Stillaguamish, though not as big as the Skagit, has cut through these volcanic flows to form a deep gorges, hundreds of feet deep. It is a tough place to have a town.

One night a couple of people noticed that the statue of the Virgin left the hut, carried by two angels, and came to rest at the foot of a thermal waterfall, not far away. This happened several times, each time being replaced to her usual location. Until one evening, while at prayer, the local Dominican priest had a vision of the Blessed Mother, who asked that a shrine be built at the foot of the waterfall, for she would consecrate the water and make it the healer of their diseases. And so, it was done. But on the day that the new shrine was to be opened, the statue of the Virgin was nowhere to be found. Then, one day a lone mule came into town with a box on its back. Nobody knew what to do with the box, so the priest took it to keep for whoever would turn up and claim it. Nobody came for many months, so finally, in the presence of all the people, the priest opened the box. Inside was a larger, more beautiful image of the Blessed Mother, that has become the Roman Catholic patron of the town and center of much devotion. The waters are sought for their healing qualities by millions of people very year, from all over the world.

If you visit the Basilica de la Virgen del Rosario de Agua Santa in the town, you will see that the walls are lined with large paintings dating from the 1700s. They depict townspeople saved from the devastation of eruptions, and people, cargo animals and the likes, falling into the river and emerging without harm. One of my favorites, and a slight variation, tells of a mule who carried the tired and sleeping priest over a one-log bridge across the gorge, leaving clear hoofmarks in the wood. Of course, people healed of their infirmities after bathing in the geothermally heated waters, leave behind their crutches,

etc. They all depict miracles attributed to the Blessed Mother in her desire to protect her children.

The message of Our Lady of the Rosary of Holy Water is simple: Trust. If last week's word was "wake up," this week's is "trust." Again, we see it in the lessons. Isaiah writes to a people in exile asking them to trust the word of the Lord that a root will spring from Jesse to restore justice and peace on the earth. The violent will no longer abuse, the weak will no longer fear. Paul writes from Rome about how both Jew and Gentile find salvation by trusting in Christ. In the Gospel lesson, John the Baptist baptizes people for the forgiveness of their sins. When the proud and self-righteous come to him he rebukes them. "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth fruit worthy of repentance," in other words, trust in God's mercy, and don't think Abraham is going to help. If God makes children through Abraham the stones are resource enough. But God wants people to trust. Trust is not haughty or self-sufficient. Trust is humble and open and vulnerable. Trust is the core of a heart open to God.

It has been said that Christians today are functional atheists. Not that we do not espouse a Christian doctrine, we do. Not that we do not practice the essentials of our tradition, we do. But it is often hard to see how God makes any difference in the way we live during the week—especially these days. As Advent marches toward Christmas (and we have seen Christmas advertisements since before Halloween,) what overwhelms our minds and hearts is the story that we all know—or think we know—about Christmas. We see little cute babies (that look at least 3 months old) wrapped in perfectly white blankets nestled in a 19th century manger (no manger today looks like that) while peaceful and astoundingly clean animals rest nearby, and a holy glow emanates from the place, putting Bethlehem on the cosmic map for millions. Shepherds come, reverently, maybe on their knees, cradling a lamb, in holy awe and with a glow on their faces, and three royal men appear, get off their camels, who miraculously stay put after their masters have dismounted, and bring glittering boxes with the three gifts, then disappear into thin air—and they are inclusive, for one of them is African, to be sure. And we smile and embrace and sing songs that make us feel warm and fuzzy inside, while sipping expensive eggnog (with or without) sprinkled liberally with nutmeg. And it's all a big box wrapped in pretty paper, with a pretentious bow on it glittering in green and red and gold, that contains only those things over which we believe we have total control.

We have successfully sidestepped trust.

So, what does it mean to trust? The people of Baños had to evacuate the town in 1999 because tumultuous Tungurahua was at it again. They cannot trust the mountain. They can trust in the Mother of God. There are modern bridges across the gorges now. They trust the bridges, but they do not trust the other drivers! You can shoot the rapids in rafts now, but you have to sign the normal waivers that indemnify the agencies that set up these

adventures from damages that may include death. They trust their rafts, but they do not trust the river.

There is plenty in our world that does not deserve our trust, because like Tungurahua, they do not have other peoples' best interest in mind. The stock markets of the world are amazingly vulnerable to irrational fears, alternately lifting and destroying the fortunes of millions of people around the world. Laws created to protect, often work out putting at risk vast swaths of our population. Our OPOP team will tell you about how the justice system is not really very just. Our government's policies about the southern border (Canadians are too much like white people in the US, so they are no concern) violate essential internationally affirmed human rights. Back on All Saints' Sunday we heard from Kay Knott how three generations of Boarding Schools made their own language a thing of fear.

In whom do we trust, then?

My thoughts go back to what that Roman Catholic monk told me so many years ago about Mary. She is a good Jewish mother who keeps pointing to her Son. Trust, my good people, in the Son of Mary. Trust that his message of self-giving love truly is the truest thing in the world. Trust that his ways of mercy and compassion really are the strongest thing in the world. Trust that his gift of creation, and the astounding beauty of his own gift of life leading to transformation, is the bedrock and bar for true beauty.

Then go out into the world and live in a way that bears the fruit of that trust.