

A shower in the desert

At a migrant shelter in Tijuana, I met a woman who was about to give birth.

by [Isaac S. Villegas](#) in the [December 2022](#) issue



(Photo by Karl-Hendrik Tittel / iStock / Getty)

I volunteered last year at a migrant shelter in Tijuana, Mexico. One day a woman arrived from Guatemala. She was pregnant, within weeks of her due date, she told me one evening in the best Spanish she could put together. She was from a Mayan community in the mountains, and Spanish was her second or third language. We were chatting while sorting through piles of clothes. I was on *ropa* duty that day, which meant that after the community meal, I unlocked the storage room with all the donated clothing and, one by one, residents of the shelter lined up for an opportunity to pick out new clothes.

She really needed a new pair of shoes, she said. I walked her over to the shelves and rummaged through the stacks to find a decent pair in her size. As we poked around at the options, which weren't ideal, she glanced over at a huge stash of shoes on the

floor and giggled to herself. I looked over and laughed, too.

The mound in the corner was made up of high heels—stilettos and platform shoes. She asked me if anyone picks from those, and I said no, that's why the pile just gets bigger and bigger. I tried to explain the cultural phenomenon called "Southern California," how the donations come from nice people in wealthy neighborhoods in Los Angeles and San Diego, and how I guess they hadn't quite thought through what it's like to try to walk through the desert in stilettos. We both shrugged and laughed as I handed her a pair of very reasonable Nikes that looked like they might fit.

Later that evening a long-term volunteer stopped by the *cuarto de ropa* and asked if I could pick out some baby outfits. She'd decided that the shelter should throw a baby shower for the soon-to-be mom. So I stayed late that evening, sorting through boxes of clothes, picking out the cutest onesies and newborn outfits and pondering how the world has come to be the way it is, where the best option some people have for survival is to leave their ancestral land, their family and community, and risk everything at the border.

The next day, as we gathered for morning prayer, our cohort of eight volunteers decided to pitch in some cash to buy a cake and party supplies for the grandest baby shower celebration the migrant shelter had ever seen. We passed around a basket as the priest led us through the morning liturgy, which concluded with a lively rendition of Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah." I'm not sure I would have considered the song appropriate for prayer, but a month before I arrived a volunteer had convinced the young priest from Vietnam—who, mind you, hadn't at that point in his ministry needed to learn English—that Cohen's song was suitable to sing as a kind of benediction.

The priest took out his guitar—he'd learned the tune at the volunteer's request—and we held hands and swayed together for our Leonard Cohen sing-along. Even though the priest didn't know all the words, he led us as we offered to God our broken hallelujahs.

That night there was a celebration, with all the newly arrived guests gathered to offer gifts to a woman they'd never met before as she prepared to welcome a child in the shadow of a society that couldn't care less about her life or her child's. But there, in that Tijuana shelter, among strangers from everywhere from Syria to Nigeria to Ecuador, we had a party with balloons and streamers, cupcakes and hot

chocolate, music and dancing.

A week later, after I'd returned to the United States, a friend from the shelter texted me pictures of the newborn. She let me know that the mother and infant were healthy. The lead priest of the shelter was committed to letting them stay for as long as needed, until she was ready to try to cross the border again, this time with a child.

This is the world into which Jesus is born, with Mary and Joseph far away from their home, in a neglected corner of society, left to celebrate with strangers. The shepherds from the fields offer the only gifts they have, words: the words from the angels, the promises of God, news of hope. And "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19).

With the shepherds and animals gathered around her child, she receives their words as treasures and keeps them in her heart for safekeeping, to be there for her when she will need them again, when she'll need the strength of God's promises for her plight.

There is so much to wonder about, so much to ponder—about what has happened to us and what has happened to our world. During this season of Advent and Christmas we find ourselves with Mary—bewildered and exhausted, searching for words to treasure, to hold onto, to keep with us, to reassure us. Words as gifts of hope, as reminders of the promises of God.

The Christmas gospel is this: despite it all there is joy, there are celebrations, there are baby showers in shelters and people who look out for each other and strangers who do what they can with what they have. This world is held in God's care, every life held by God.

There are always good reasons to sing a hallelujah, even if we don't know the right words.