

SERMON TITLE: “Love in Action”

TEXT: Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24

PREACHED AT: Lethbridge Mennonite Church

BY: Ryan Dueck

DATE: April 29, 2012/4th Sunday of Easter

Many of you know that for most of the past two weeks I have been on an MCC Alberta pastors learning tour in Colombia. Some of you may even have followed our trip via the MCC blog or via Facebook updates. I hope these have given you some sense of what we were up to.

But I know that some of you are, perhaps, not as inclined to take advantage of the many and varied forms of social media, and you, too are curious about how the trip went.

On the plane back from Colombia, I was thinking about how I would approach the sermon this Sunday. I knew there was no way that 15 minutes would be enough time to deal adequately with all I had seen and heard.

I also knew that my processing of what I had seen and heard was just beginning and that I would quite likely not have anything like a nice, neat, coherent report or package to present. I am still very much in the process of *processing*—a task that has not been helped by spending much of this past week fighting an illness that came back from South America with me ☺.

So, today I simply want to tell a few stories from my time in Colombia, and to frame them around the texts we have heard read this morning.

Those who are interested in a more detailed presentation (pictures, etc) can come out to the MCC Fundraiser at the Coaldale Mennonite Church next Sunday evening (May 6). You can also hear more about Paul Neufeldt’s recent trip with MCC to build sand dams in Kenya!

I should preface these two stories with two big things I came back from Colombia with:

1. A profound gratitude to be a part of a global family of faith
2. A deep sense of pride in the work that MCC does around the world

On to a few stories.

On our third or fourth day in Colombia we all piled into a van and headed to a region just south of Bogotá to see some of the MCC projects down there.

The farther south we drove, the more the scenery changed. The hustle and bustle and concrete of a modern city gave way to a sprawling hillside of patched together shacks of tin and wood, dogs, mud, and garbage.

We had entered a group of communities referred to as Cazucá. It is a community that nobody wants to claim as their own. Bogotá claims it is “illegal” and outside of its boundaries and responsibilities. Soacha, the suburb to the south of Bogotá wants nothing to do with it either.

Why?

Because it is a community comprised entirely of displaced *campesinos* (small farmers) that have been evicted from their land and, not knowing where else to go, flood to the city looking for work and housing.

Usually these *campesinos* are forced off their land by either left-wing guerilla groups or right-wing paramilitary groups who are either acting on their own or who are in the pay of big multinational corporations or various arms of government who want the land for mining or palm oil production or big agribusiness.

But whoever is pushing them off, the story is a very common one. A little subsistence farmer on a small plot of land is a speed bump on the road to big profits, and has to be eliminated (sometimes literally!).

Colombia has the highest number of displaced people of any nation on earth—nearly 5 million, and almost one-ninth of the country’s total population.

And so, these *campesinos* flood to places like Cazucá. It is a bleak and dreary place full of poverty and crime and neglect. It is a place that some only spend a few months in before moving on to better things, but where others spend years, decades, even lifetimes.

There is a valley that separates two of the main communities of Cazucá, and at the bottom of this valley is a dirty body of water referred to as Laguna Negra (the Black Lake). The image that you see on the wall is that of this valley. This is where all the run-off goes, all of the garbage and debris, and, rumour has it, even a few bodies.

There is a road that runs past the Laguna Negra—it is a dangerous road patrolled by gangs and thieves looking for easy targets. It is a road that had, apparently, seen a funeral procession of a local teenager killed in gang violence mere minutes before we crossed it.

I thought of this valley this week as I read Psalm 23 and its reference to the “valley of the shadow of death.” If ever there was such a valley, I thought, Cazucá would be it. Death through violence, death through decay and neglect, death through poverty, or even the living death of being forgotten and abandoned, and having no real prospects of improvement...

There are three imperative statements in Psalm 23—three “I will’s” or “I shall’s” and all three seem an awkward fit for a place like Cazucá.

1. I shall not want (v. 1)

But how can we *not* want, if not for ourselves than for others? How can we *not* want on behalf of the people of Cazucá? How can we be people of contentment and gratitude in a world of such extraordinary injustice and inequality? What if there are no green pastures or still waters, only mud and gravel and garbage and the Laguna Negra?

“I shall not want,” the psalmist says... But I *do* want. I want better things for myself for the people of Colombia, for the people of the world, for the people of my community, family, church... I do not *want* to want... but still, I want.

2. I will fear no evil (v. 4)

But we *do* fear evil because evil is a fearful thing. This was evident as we walked through this valley of the shadow of death in Cazucá. Our guides explained to us that this long path that wound through the valley past the Laguna Negra and up to the community on the other side was not often traveled at night due to the fear of gang violence (only minutes before our arrival, there had been a funeral procession for a young teenager killed in gang violence.)

Indeed, we had to instruct our bus driver to pick us up at a different location than where he initially dropped us off so that we wouldn't have to cross that valley twice. Even in the middle of the day, our presence as a bunch of rich white folks would have been noted, she said, and it probably wouldn't be safe to go back that way.

There is a long shadow cast in the valley of death.

3. I shall dwell in the house of the Lord (v. 6)

This is the hope of all who trust in God, but sometimes the house of the Lord seems a long ways away.

The house of the Lord, for ancient Israel, was the place where God dwelt, the place where heaven and earth were joined together. We, too, long to be in the place where God is—a place of security and safety, a place where fear and unfulfilled longing are no more.

But in Cazucá, other, more familiar houses, dominate the landscape—houses of disrepair and neglect, houses of violence and abuse, houses of hunger and lethargy, houses that are falling apart, patched together with tin and wood and plastic.

These houses can make our longing to dwell in the house of the Lord more fervent... Or they can tempt us to despair. Or both.

I shall not want, I will not fear, I will dwell.... These words do not come easily in Cazucá.

There is great good being done here. There is great courage and creativity and faith and hope being demonstrated by Colombian Christians and by MCC workers, and local churches in this area. It is inspiring work to behold.

But I left this place feeling an overwhelming sense of sadness and anger.

Each night while we were in Colombia, our group would gather in the evening for our devotional and reflect theologically on what we had seen during the day. That night was tough. None of us found it easy to process what we had seen. One of our team members talked about how perhaps the lesson to learn was that we, as a church, could get better at lamenting. Sometimes there are no words for what we see other than, “How long?” How long, Lord? How long will you put up with this?

How long?

A few days later we had traded the cool, rainy climate of Bogotá for the sweltering humidity of Sincelejo and Macayepo closer to the Caribbean coast. We had spent the first part of our tour learning about the Colombian reality of displaced people making their way to the cities, and about the many reasons for why this was the case.

We had seen where the people had come *to* in Cazucá; now we were going to see one of the places that they came *from*.

On Thursday night, we went to a little outdoor church in Sincelejo called Remanso de Paz—“Refuge of Peace.” This church was comprised almost entirely of people who had been displaced during *La Violencia*—the period of conflict over land and power and drugs that had taken over the region during the past decade or so.

We heard the story of these farmers moving into the city, being unable to find work, being unsure of what they were supposed to do in this strange place when all they knew how to do was to work on the land.

We heard the story of how a community was formed—a community determined to be a refuge of peace and nonviolence in a city and a region that was anything but peaceful and had seen much violence.

We heard of how they were growing a garden on their small piece of land in order to help provide for the needs of those in their community. We heard of how they had classes and workshops to learn to make crafts and jewelry to sell at the market. We learned of their desire to find meaningful, sustainable ways to take care of their families in this place of exile.

We heard of how they were educating themselves on issues related to a recent land restitution law that had been passed by the Colombian government, and learning how to advocate for justice and equality.

We heard of their anxieties and apprehensions about their children who, having tasted city life, seemed to have little interest in returning to what was in many ways a primitive and isolated lifestyle in the country.

We heard the story of how the church was formed—about how it was somewhat reluctantly built on what used to be a garbage dump... how it was decided that, while there were certainly more prime places of real estate to consecrate to the Lord, it was perhaps appropriate that a house of worship to the God who specializes in bringing light and beauty out of darkness and ugliness was appropriate.

We ate and sang and held hands and prayed together with these dear people who had everything taken from them and were learning how to sing the songs of the Lord in the strange land of exile they now found themselves in.

1 John 3:16-24 says these words:

¹⁶This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. ¹⁷If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? ¹⁸Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

This is what we saw in Macayepo and Sincelejo and Cazucá and throughout our time in Colombia. Love in action and in truth. Love that went beyond words.

At one place, one of the people we met said that sometimes Christians get into debates about whether our job is to care for people's souls or their stomachs. "We don't have the luxury of such distinctions," he said. "When someone has nothing to eat and nowhere to go, our choices are very simple."

Psalms 23 is, perhaps the most well-known Psalm in the Psalter. It is an expression of praise and confidence in the sovereignty of God—in God's desire to shepherd us through the peaks and valleys of life.

It uses the language of song and prayer to express the hope and conviction that evil is not finally stronger than God, and that goodness and mercy will be the last words pronounced upon those who seek and follow God.

Our passage from 1 John is a call to action—a call to allow the life of the love incarnate (Jesus Christ) to flow through our own lives. It is a call to self-sacrifice and self-denial for the sake of others. It is a call to love not with words, but with truth and action.

We need these two truths together—whether we are thinking about the slums of Bogotá or life in Lethbridge, AB. A firm conviction that our good shepherd can be trusted, even in the darkest valleys, and that goodness and mercy will follow us. And a commitment to act—let our lives and our choices reflect the new creation God is bringing about.

When our supper was finished with the people from Remanso de Paz in Macayepo, the church members sang a song for us. It was a song that they had written since moving from their land into the city.

It was a song they had written themselves that narrated their journey from their farms and homes to the city. It was a story of sadness and pain, injustice and heartache. It was also a song of courage, hope, and joy—courage in the face of overwhelming obstacles, hope in a future of reparations and a return to the land, and joy in the God who had led them and who continued to sustain them in exile.¹

The next day we boarded a rickety old truck and made a two-hour journey out into the country to see the land from which many of these people had been displaced. On our walk back to the truck after visiting this land, I walked behind the pastor—a strong woman whose name I can’t remember—and heard her softly singing the same song they had sung for us the night before.

It was the song of her people, the song of their exile, the song of their suffering, and the song of their unshakeable conviction that God was guiding their paths, fueling their action, and emboldening their witness.

There is a little quote tucked away near the end of theologian Walter Wink’s award-winning book *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*. The immediate context of the quote has to do with Revelation 11 and the prominence of the heavenly song throughout this passage of Scripture.

Here’s what Wink says:

That is why these inveterate and incurable singers cannot help joining their voices with the heavenly chorus, singing, “The kingdom of the world *has become* the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he shall reign for ever and ever” (Rev. 11:15). For *singing about* is a way of *bringing about*.

Singing about is a way of bringing about.

I think that the Refuge of Peace church in Sincelejo would agree.

May God help us to sing well—with our voices, certainly, but also with our hands and our feet and our wallets and our everyday choices—as a way of participating in the kingdom God is bringing about.

May God help us to sing for ourselves, but also for others whose voices are sometimes not heard and require amplification.

¹ For an English translation of the lyrics to this song, see <https://gustavus.edu/peacestudies/courses/pcs211/peacechurches.php>

May God help us to add our voices to the song already being sung by people and organizations (like MCC) around the world who are promoting peace and justice and hope in some dark valleys where deaths shadow looms large.

And may goodness and mercy follow us—*all* of us—all the days of our lives.

Amen.