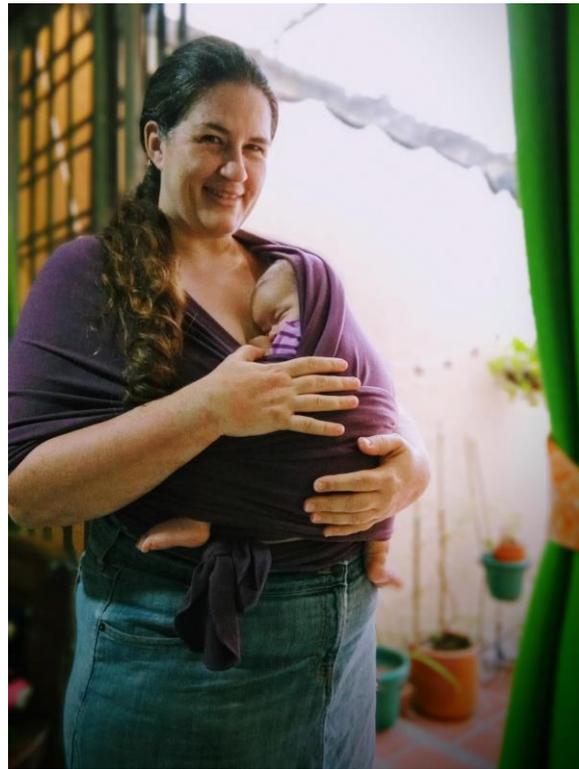


Dear friends,

What a gift to take this moment to reach out and share a word of thanks with you as 2022 begins. This year has been hard and painful in so many ways for people around the world. Covid led to the death of three people particularly known and beloved to me, and it's devastating to think of the millions who are grieving and experiencing this intense sorrow because of similar losses. I hold this aching world in my prayers and in my heart as best I can. Somehow at the same time, this year has brought some of the greatest joys I have known, mainly surrounding the birth and first months of my daughter Neyda Margaret. I pray that there have been glimmers of joy and delight in your life, too.

I'm grateful that the Presbyterian Mission Agency offers a relatively generous family leave policy when compared to the very low bar set in the United States, and I was able to focus most of my energy on recovery and mothering for the first several months of Neyda's life. This season of remote work served us well because I've been able to fit these competing responsibilities together fairly well so far. Neyda loves to see my colleagues' faces on Zoom (and they seem to enjoy hers, too) but I've learned I need to keep her out of reach of the keyboard—my computer can't handle her energetic keystrokes!



My first in-person activity since the Covid-19 pandemic began was an international seminar on peace, human rights, and sustainable development hosted by the Reformed University here in Barranquilla. It was good to reconnect in person with friends and colleagues after a year and a half or longer since we'd been in the same space, and the presentations were meaningful.

One of the sessions was an afternoon discussion with individuals from the FARC guerrilla group who signed the peace accords. Now that five years have passed and the implementation of the accords is still far from completion, it was valuable as ever to hear directly from some of the individuals who chose to radically re-orient their approach to life in hopes of better achieving their priorities, laying down arms and focusing primarily on sustainable development in rural communities. I have met one of the presenters, Lucas, a number of times on visits to Tierra Grata, one of the rural communities where ex-combatants were initially settled after the peace

accords were signed. On my last visit before the pandemic I also met his partner, who was pregnant at the time. They came to Barranquilla as a family for this conference with their two-year-old daughter, who brought a different quality of life and vibrancy to the seminar.

This little sister was delighted by all the attention. She moved happily back and forth between her two parents, unaware of the political dynamics surrounding her family but secure in the feeling of love and protection that encircled her. I imagined my own daughter a few years from now attending conferences on human rights and sustainable development with me. Visiting this little girl and the other children growing up in Tierra Grata. Learning to see all people as human beings first and questioning the impulse to label others.

Christ's birth was "good news of great joy for all people," not just for those considered good or worthy by anyone's estimation. And it was shared with the marginalized ones like the shepherds first, before the rich or powerful heard. This is something we see over and over in the gospels, those who would draw a line between the in crowd and the outsiders find they have actually painted themselves onto the losing side, because that's simply not how God's mercy and love works. My prayer is that we might be ever more prepared to release our ideas of us and them, in and out, and simply rest in the knowledge that God loves the entire cosmos with wild abandon and intimate transcendence.

I give thanks for you and pray that you be strengthened by and centered in love in these days as we prepare for the gifts and challenges that await us in yet another year. Thank you for being part of the cloud of witnesses that supports me in this beautiful calling of mission service. I'm not sure yet when we'll be in a position to travel to share with churches in person again, but I hope that we can be in touch in the year ahead and would be happy to arrange a time to meet over Skype or Zoom.

May hope, joy, and peace find their way into your life this season and stay with you throughout the coming year.

Love,
Sarah

