



**Sarah listens to a parishioner while preaching at First Presbyterian Church of Barranquilla. (This is the oldest protestant church building in continental Colombia, it will be 100 years old next year.)**

“We were saved in hope. If we see what we hope for, that isn’t hope. Who hopes for what they already see?” Romans 8:24 CEB

Dear friends,

As Advent season arrives, I find myself searching for an injection of hope. So much in the global landscape inspires despair and consternation. Looking beyond the struggles in Colombia I see reports of war and conflict in places such as Gaza and Israel, South Sudan, Ukraine, and the Democratic Republic of Congo; places of precarious democracy and attacks on individual rights, such as the United States and Argentina; news of the devastating effects of climate change; women in virtually every corner of the globe whose bodies and lives are dealt violence by intimate partners and through armed conflict.

And then I meet these words from Cole Arthur Riley’s *Black Liturgies*: “Be careful what doors you allow cynicism to lock in you. All dreaming is dangerous to those who benefit from our hopelessness.” This reminds me that, much like love, hope is a choice, an action, more than it is a feeling, and that prophetic hope can be powerful.

At the ecumenical encounter I shared about in my last letter, my friend Gloria Laverde called our attention to the chapter of the report from Colombia’s Truth Commission titled, “[My Body Is the Truth](#).” The chapter focuses on the violences suffered by women and members of the LGBTQIA community in the context of the armed conflict. The women’s organization Gloria works with, GEMPAZ, has carried out reading circles in several regions of the country where women come together to read the report and reflect on how their own personal stories connect with it. They also bring troubling biblical texts about rape and violence into the conversation, such as Dinah’s story in Genesis 34 and that of the Levite’s unnamed concubine in Judges 19. Gloria said, “Our peacebuilding grows out of our own knowledge” and lived experiences. By naming these

connections and identifying what is sinful and unjust both then and now, these women claim hope for the possibility of a different future. They are daring to dream a new way into being.

Throughout 2023, in preaching and in Young Adult Volunteer Bible studies and reflections, I found myself drawn repeatedly to one fundamental topic: biblical interpretation. We tend to imagine there is only one way to go about it, or at the very least get settled into our preferred mode of biblical interpretation. When we come together with siblings in Christ from different contexts, cultures, and languages, we see with new eyes and hear with fresh ears.

When I began to live in South America and study the Bible in Spanish in Uruguay and Argentina, I was drawn to the prevalence of the word “justicia.” Where our English translations tend to read “righteousness,” the Spanish will say “justicia.” This transformed my understanding of scripture. Righteousness as I had conceived of it is something one can accomplish individually, it’s a matter of personal piety. Justice, however, necessitates community engagement and solidarity. So now I understand righteousness as being not only a personal state but a way of engaging with the world around us, on the most immediate level of the household and community and extending to the whole of creation.

This understanding was reinforced when I began to study Hebrew in seminary and learned that the source word *tsedeq* has similar implications. My Hebrew professor Melody Knowles often reminded us that, if nothing else, taking the time to study the text in Hebrew would slow us down enough to really pay attention to each word, knowing that each was deliberately chosen and important, committed to memory in the oral tradition and copied over and over by hand for centuries. One could say *tsedeq* is a legalistic term, but the laws of ancient Israel required doing justice by caring for the widows and orphans and foreigners in their midst. Unlike in U.S. society where a person can be “law-abiding” without showing any care for the most vulnerable members of society, in the biblical context doing justice was a requirement for any upstanding citizen.

This active sense of doing justice as an ethical imperative is one of the contributions the churches bring to discussions around peacebuilding. Part of the ecumenical encounter I wrote about last month included dialogue with members of congress, with the government’s high commissioner for peace, and with the peace promoters of the ELN insurgent group. Continuously I heard the ecumenical delegates calling on them all to make ever greater commitments to peace because it is what the common people of Colombia need in order to live out their lives. Holding those in positions of power accountable for their actions and expecting them to act in ways that serve the common good is one way we can be agents of hope today.

In this season for dreaming, I pray that your hope will be strengthened and put into action in ways that transform you and those around you. I give thanks for your support and encouragement and look forward to continuing our connections in the year ahead. May you find glimpses of grace that inspire and sustain you on your way.

In joy, peace, love, and hope,

Sarah