

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
“On the Job Training: Listening to the Shepherd”  
Rev. Amy Morgan  
April 17, 2016

Psalm 23, John 10:22-30

We stopped the car when we saw the missiles. Pointed at us. Anti-aircraft artillery. And fragments of a United States Air Force U2 spy plane.

Last week, I traveled with my family and several members of this congregation to Cuba, a country that has been more or less off-limits to US visitors for more than my lifetime.

During the first few days of our journey, we had been met with nothing but hospitality and kindness. People said they welcomed Americans and hoped for an end to the embargo. They saw the conflict as a clash between governments, not people. Up to that point, I couldn't really understand why Cuba was our enemy.

But when we pulled up to the monument to the Cuban missile crisis, when I read the history from the Cuban government's perspective, that all changed. The chronology of the Cuban missile crisis outlined at the memorial emphasized the Soviet support of the Cubans and the position of Fidel Castro in the final accord reached between Cuba and the United States. It failed to mention that Castro did not get what he wanted, namely, an end to the embargo and the return of Guantanamo Bay to Cuban territory. We learned that the country would soon have a week-long holiday celebrating their victory at the Bay of Pigs. I saw billboards calling the embargo the largest genocide in history.

And suddenly it became inescapably real to me that we were in the presence of our enemies.

We encountered the missile display on our way to see El Cristo de la Habana, a 66 foot tall statue of Christ, dedicated just fifteen days before Fidel Castro entered Havana with the revolution that would push much of Christianity out of Cuba. We were being hosted by a Presbyterian pastor who happened to be the moderator of the Presbytery of Havana. She shared with us the hardships her people faced because of the embargo. She told me that her school and her community had raised her to believe that Americans were the enemy, but that her feelings had changed after a visit to the US where Americans came to her aid in a time of trouble.

Later that afternoon, we arrived at Pastor Izett Zama's church in Los Palos, which literally means, “the sticks.” It was truly in “the sticks,” a small town of 8,000 people, with buildings in every state of disrepair you can imagine. Several church members were at the church door to greet us, and they ushered us into the small fellowship hall where they laid a table before us – a table filled with rice and beans, papas rellenas, chicken and fried plantains. And, of course, a heaping of flan for dessert.

In Cuba, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm arose again and again. God rested us in the green pastures of Vinales, a UNESCO Biosphere national park, with breathtakingly beautiful organic farmlands. God restored our souls with the kindness of strangers and the company of friends and family. We felt the presence of the Great Shepherd's comforting rod and staff through an unnerving car ride and all of the uncertainty that comes with new experiences, language barriers, and travel in a forbidden land.

But when our Cuban sisters and brothers fed us, laid a table before us in the presence of our enemies, their enemies, I truly understood the heart of this Psalm, and the meaning of Jesus' words in this passage from John. They were listening to the voice of the Great Shepherd, laying this table for us.

It is beyond remarkable that they were able to do this, to follow Jesus, to hear his voice over the propaganda of the Cuban government. In the first years after the revolution, the Cuban church struggled to survive. The government's official position on religion was the Marxist belief that it is a drug for the masses, and most of the country's clergy fled. Even after Fidel Castro relaxed his position on religion, many Cubans had been convinced that faith was nothing more than a comforting myth, and professing faith in God still inhibited advancement in certain fields of work. Like those gathered in the portico of Solomon, many Cubans felt that if Jesus was the Messiah, things would be different, better, for the people who followed him. It would be clear and logical to see the truth. It should be as plain and simple as communism – work hard, share everything, everyone is equal.

But the sheep hear the shepherd's voice, and they follow him. Even a Communist revolution could not snatch the sheep out of the shepherd's hand. Many had to flee. Some had to go underground. Most churches continued for years without pastors. But the church has not perished in Cuba. These Christians understand that "belief" is not simply a matter of logical intellectual assent. They are critical thinkers and well-educated, but they know that true belief is an experience of deep trust, as sheep trust a shepherd. They have experienced God's grace and provision, they have experienced the comfort of the herd. They have not simply made a decision to follow Christ, to sacrifice for others, to be in community. They have listened, they have heard, and they have followed. The sheep hear the shepherd's voice and follow him.

In the Presbyterian Church in Guinness, they follow him by sharing with the community American music – rock, folk, and jazz – and by showing movies. This may seem an odd sort of evangelism to us, but to a people who have been forbidden these entertainments for decades, it creates a strong point of connection and is bringing people into the church in great numbers.

In Los Palos, they are following the shepherd by building a community center. With the recent change allowing Cubans to buy and sell property, the church has been able to acquire a building across the street where they are putting in a library and study room, conference rooms, and places for children's crafts and activities. They've started a soccer team, and they have a ministry for women experiencing domestic violence. From their meager food rations, they serve meals to 20 seniors in their community twice a month, none of whom are members of the church. They provide dance therapy for the elderly and

bring in psychologists to treat depression and other mental illnesses. Their vacation bible school draws over 100 children and is run by this church of about 100 members. They are developing a cultural center for their community, putting on plays, bringing in bands, hosting poetry readings, and teaching music and painting.

At the end of our time together with our Cuban Christian family, we gathered in a circle, our group of Americans and about a dozen church members, to ask and answer one another's questions. We asked what they loved most about their church. They told us they loved that it was a community of love, committed to caring for one another and for the larger community. They asked about the mission projects of our church, and we talked about Alcott and AAIM, our partnerships with local non-profits, and our Mexico and Kenya missions.

And then I asked them what they want the churches in America to know about the Cuban Presbyterian Church.

They said that they want us to know that they are strong. They are committed to love and justice. They want peace and an end to the conflict between our countries. They want us to know that they are our sisters and brothers in Christ, our friends and not our enemies. They want us to know that they don't think Americans are their enemies, either. They want to partner with us in serving the people in need in their community.

At that point, my cup overflowed. Many of us dabbed tears from our eyes as we closed our gathering by pairing up to pray for and with one another and commit to continuing relationship. In most of the pairings, the partners could not understand one another's words because of our language differences. But the meanings were clear, nonetheless. They would pray for us, our church, our ministry. And we would pray for them, their church, their ministry. We would pray for the oil of healing to be poured out on the brokenness between our two nations.

The setting of today's passage from John, the Feast of Dedication, is known to us by the more familiar name Hanukkah. It remembers the Maccabean victory to reclaim Jerusalem. While this victory continues to be celebrated by the Jewish community, the conflict over the Holy Land continues to this day, more than two thousand years later.

The community from which we received the gospel of John was in conflict with parts of the Jewish community, and that enmity is reflected throughout John's telling of the Jesus story. Here, it is "the Jews" who are set up against Jesus, depicted as those who do not "believe," who do not trust, who do not hear the shepherd's voice. This, too, is a conflict that continues to this day and has led to catastrophic losses for the Jewish people and for all humanity.

Conflicts may never cease. Enmity may not come to an end. But if we keep sitting at tables set before us in the presence of our enemies, perhaps we can hear the voice of our shepherd and follow him.