

A few months ago during sharing time, I spoke about the peace accords in Colombia and how they were drawing to a close. After a war of more than 50 years, a war responsible for displacing 6.4 million people (second only to Syria), the FARC guerrilla group and the government planned to cease hostilities and the FARC would demobilize.

While the final version of the peace accords was being signed in a grand ceremony in late September, I was on a plane headed to the capital city of Bogota. I awoke the next morning to exultant headlines in the newspapers. Colombia is at peace!

That evening I attended the 25th Anniversary celebration of Justapaz, the peace agency of the Colombian Mennonite Church. The event was packed with pastors, church members, and peace workers. Given the events of the night before, the celebration turned into an evening of praise: “Look how far God has brought us!”

Justapaz has its origins in advocacy for conscientious objection in Colombia. As violence rose in the 1990s and early 2000s, Justapaz began to invest more time and energy in human rights documentation and accompaniment. For many years they recorded human rights abuses suffered by Colombian Protestants specifically, who often experienced threats, violence, and displacement in their roles as community leaders and pastors.

The name of that project was *A Prophetic Call: The Colombia Churches Document their Suffering and their Hope*. Released annually, the Prophetic Call report featured all the human rights abuses they’d collected over the past year, followed by a section entitled ‘Seeds of Hope.’ In this section, Justapaz outlined small signs of hope, seeds, that they had found in their documentation—communities that were resisting, communities that had found ways of beginning to heal the trauma, displaced families who had been able to return to their land.

In the four years we lived in Colombia, it was this spiritual discipline I admired most in the Anabaptist churches there, their insistence on identifying seeds of hope (however small), and of God’s presence in the midst of suffering.

At the 25th anniversary celebration I attended, the peace accords were praised as resonating with the gospel of reconciliation and the example of forgiveness found in Jesus. Finally there was something to work for and support that was bigger than just a seed! The atmosphere was positively heady.

Six days later I was back in Goshen and millions of Colombians were trekking to their local polling places to vote in a public referendum on the peace accords. The question was simple: "Do you support the final accord to end the conflict and to construct a stable and lasting peace?" To most everyone's surprise, the "No" votes won...by .9%.

Soon more details started coming out:

- The regions in the center of the country, where the cities are concentrated and where there has been relatively little armed conflict in the past 15 years, voted against the accords, while regions that have suffered the most displacement, violence, and death in the same period voted overwhelmingly for the accords;
- Only 38% of Colombian voters had even cast a ballot;
- On the Caribbean coast, which had in general supported the accords, Hurricane Matthew had flooded transportation routes and suppressed voter turnout;
- Those who had led the "No" campaign had based much of the campaign on false information spread over Twitter and they had no immediate proposals to offer the negotiators of the peace accord. They had led the opposition largely because the proposed accords undermined their business interests and threatened to reveal their ties to illegal armed groups.

The grief following the referendum was immense. In the offices of Justapaz, who had worked tirelessly to support the accords and offer a Protestant Christian perspective to the process, the staff pinned yellow butterflies above all the doorways, along with a

quote from Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *100 Years of Solitude*: "Tell Mauricio Babilonia to let loose the yellow butterflies in Macondo; the war is over."¹

But the war wasn't over, and although the imagery was intended as a sign of something to hope for, it seemed to me the opposite. A mockery of such hope in the first place. As my former colleague Anna Vogt wrote, "People kept on reminding me of the resilience of Colombians; moving on from tragedy is what they do best. Just for once I would like them to have a day when nobody has to be resilient or put things back together, a day to simply rest in a new Colombia before getting back to work."²

Were we back to seeds again???? How long must we be tending seeds, Lord? Is it wrong to even hope for something bigger than seeds? Will we never see the overturning and scattering and filling of the Magnificat?

Mary begins her song in the first chapter of Luke with praise—my soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior—followed by the motivation **for** her praise—an expectation that God will soon deliver her and all those who find themselves on the losing end of history. Mary proclaims a radical status reversal that will precede God's restoration.

But it is not just Mary. Luke places echoes of Mary's song throughout these first two chapters: Zechariah, Simeon, and Anna also proclaim that God's redemption is at hand. Expectation runs high.

In Luke's time, there were high expectations within the Jewish community for divine intervention and deliverance. And Luke plays to this expectation throughout his narrative. The birth narratives of Jesus and John the Baptist are extensively narrated

¹ Anna Vogt, "Peace in the Street and the Time of the Yellow Butterflies," *The Llama Diaries*, Oct 16, 2016, <https://thellamadiaries.com/2016/10/16/peace-in-the-street-and-the-time-of-yellow-butterflies/>.

² Ibid.

and interwoven in this chapter to highlight the fulfillment of God's promises that would be present in Jesus. But all of the sudden, in Mary's Song, the tone and structure completely change. We are invited to STOP, to consider the meaning of what is happening in the story and its cosmic implications.

Usually in Advent, I get caught up in this expectation, feeling that the overturning of the world and its restoration are indeed near at hand.

But this year, the Magnificat looks different to me.

This year, instead of hearing the Magnificat as a victory song, I hear it as a lament and a challenge to location of my hope. In the face of Aleppo, rising hate crimes in our country, careless disregard for the natural world, and the failed Colombian peace accords, Mary's Song this year is like a bell ringing "All is not right" "All is not right". We seem so very far from restoration, and yet our longing for it deepens. As in Psalm 80, we cry out, "How long, how long, how long?"

In that place of deep longing, it is all too easy to misplace hope. In desperation, my hope leaps around, grasping for something to hold on to: a peace accord, an election, a policy, an organization or organizing itself. And indeed, the structures and policies that shape our lives and the lives of our communities are incredibly important and very worthy recipients of our time, money, and efforts. After this year, I believe that more firmly than before.

But that is different than the location of our eschatological hope, our ultimate hope. In addition to serving as a lament, this year Mary's Song reminds me where my hope belongs. In the Magnificat, the main actor is not Mary and not us. The main actor of the Magnificat is God. God is one who scatters, overturns, tears down, and fills up. Liberation theology has often held up Luke's gospel as an example of how God is on the side of the poor, and rightfully so.

But there is another liberation in the Magnificat, and that is that we are liberated from our own crushing expectations. God will realize this restoration, this radical status reversal, with or without us. We are invited and compelled to join, but it does not depend on us, our systems or our mechanisms.

This theme shows up throughout scripture and is not certainly unique to the Magnificat. What is unique is that Mary is singing this song. Mary, who is pregnant with God's Son, God-with-us. While we are not God, in Jesus God is also profoundly in us and among us and with us, accepting within the span of a human life the same limitations we face in confronting the disparities of wealth and poverty, hunger and fullness, power and exclusion.

Luke makes it clear throughout his gospel that this is where we should place our hope, in the work of Jesus and his Spirit in the world. But Luke also makes clear that the ultimate fulfillment of such hope is not yet here. Instead Luke suggests that our salvation depends on our engagement with the themes highlighted in the Magnificat, reflected most clearly in Jesus' life and teaching. The radical reversal of the Magnificat does not depend on us, but our salvation depends on it. And according to Luke, that salvation and redemption in the present look like, of all things, mustard seeds and grains of yeast.

Since the failed Colombia referendum in October, a lot has happened. Some of it very hopeful. University students organized peace marches of unprecedented attendance and diversity. The government and the FARC renegotiated the accords. Congress ratified the accords in record time, and the courts approved a special "fast track" to begin implementation without months of legal process. The president of Colombia even won the Nobel Peace Prize.

But it doesn't feel like there is much room for celebration. Communities that live in regions where the FARC is set to demobilize are experiencing an influx of other illegal

armed groups, eager to fill the power vacuum. The number of peasant leaders killed in Colombia has risen dramatically in the past year, and especially in the months since the referendum; most of the victims have been leaders of left-leaning political organizations in rural areas. The renegotiated peace accords gutted much of the rural land reform that had been proposed (and gave legitimacy to large landholders, many of whom are implicated in the widespread displacement of peasants by armed groups.)

So we are back to seeds, those sometimes small acts and signs of hope that contain within them the potential to blossom forth restoration in abundance. Any eschatological hope that had been temporarily misplaced to the peace accords has been properly reoriented, and the Anabaptist churches, who have long worked in terms of mustard seeds and grains of yeast, will continue to do what they do best. Caring for victims, speaking a truth that challenges the powers that be, healing trauma, and witnessing to the location of a hope that cannot be done or undone by peace accords or political negotiations.

Before the referendum, Mennonite Central Committee collected statements on the peace accords from Colombian Anabaptist church leaders. At the time, one stood out to me as being less effusive than the rest. It came from a Mennonite Brethren church leader in the Chocó, an Afro-Colombian region that has been shamefully neglected by the state ever since the colonial period. He and his community have little reason to place their hope in any state initiative, as admirable as it may be. Yet he still offered a cautious word of hope, identifying the accords as a “big step for Colombia” along with some suggestions for improving its implementation in his region. He concluded by saying, “*Colombia should be congratulated for this progress towards peace, which will be complete with Christ in our hearts.*”³

In retrospect, his comment stands out to me as the most truthful, resonating deeply with Luke’s gospel and Mary’s Song. Our ultimate hope is not in peace processes or

³ “Colombian Anabaptist Perspectives on the Peace Accords,” *MCC LACA*, Mennonite Central Committee, Aug 30, 2016, <http://www.mcclaca.org/colombian-anabaptist-perspectives-on-the-peace-accords/>.

elections or policies, as valuable as they may be. Our hope is in God-with-us, in God's redemptive action through Jesus, a hope that requires our participation in the radical reversal sung about by Mary and prayerful discernment of the presence of mustard seeds and grains of yeast.