

Sermon for December 10, 2017 (Advent2B) “Carga Larga”

(Based on Isaiah 40:1-11 & Mark 1:1-8)

It was one of those roads you hope you never travel. Winding, narrow, the pavement rough and cracked when it was there at all, and in between the paved sections, bone-jarring ruts and bumps in the red dirt road, which stretched for miles after mountainous mile.

I was sixteen, part of a volunteer work team in Venezuela, and we were headed for a group of villages where we would help repair a school and community center. Our John the Baptist in this wilderness was a Columbian named Antonio, one of our team leaders. His idea of “preparing the way” was to drive as fast & as wildly as he could, while filling our ears with folklore & history, sometimes taking his hands off the wheel to emphasize a point. There, in the back seat of a Jeep, I watched the landscape zoom and veer. On our left loomed a mountainside, and on our right was a drop-off into the valley a thousand feet below. I put my eyes on the road and gripped the edge of my seat for dear life.

The road was terrifying. I had never travelled it before. I wasn't sure how long it would take, or what direction we were going. I wasn't sure what the people would be like in the villages. I was losing my nerve. I was a stupid *gringa* with bad Spanish—what could I possibly contribute? I was too young, too foolish, too unskilled. They wouldn't need me. I would just be in the way. Then I told myself not to worry—the way Antonio was driving, we would all probably die before we could reach our destination.

Just then, Antonio drove around the bend, and slammed on the brakes. A huge flatbed truck was grinding its way up the hill in a low gear, diesel fumes pouring into the humid air. The bed of the truck was piled high with building supplies: cinder blocks, steel beams, plastic and metal pipes, all piled high and strapped together. Draped across the tailgate was a huge yellow sign, the Spanish equivalent of “oversize load.” It read, “*CARGA LARGA*.” I released my death grip on the cracked seat of the jeep. There would be no speeding now—on that skinny mountain road, there was no way to pass. We would now be forced to slow our pace.

The journey changed for us, then. For a while, I watched the truck ahead of us, and wondered about its heavy load. Where was it going? What would all those materials become? Somewhere, someone waited with plans drawn up. Someone waited, eagerly, for that truck's arrival. And at the pace it was travelling, they'd be waiting a while...

Since we were forced into a slower pace, we started to notice the details of our surroundings. There were three other passengers, all volunteers, and Antonio began to continue to act as tour guide, speaking of mountains and rivers, pointing out wildlife and splashes of local color, telling us the politics and culture of the region. He told us stories of the farmers we were about to meet, farmers who tended papaya and cacao trees. Their ancestors had been brought to Venezuela from African countries as slaves, to work in plantations, and they still played African-style drums at village gatherings. They were forming a co-op so they could get a fairer price for their cacao beans, also known as cocoa beans. Oh, and when the beans were set out in the sun to dry, Antonio told us, the whole village smelled like chocolate! My fear faded, replaced with awe of the landscape and excitement about where we were going.

The rest of the journey was a joyful one. The poverty of the people was clear, but so was their determination to make the best life they could for their families and communities. And when we finally reached the village, they welcomed us. I was handed a bucket of paint and a brush, and a little girl led me to a wall I could help repaint. Soon we were laughing and working together, trading words in two languages, the smell of wet paint mingling with the scent of warm chocolate in the humid air. When the work was done, a man showed us how to harvest papaya and limes, then he laid the papaya open with one quick whack of his machete. We squeezed the limes over the sweet coral-colored fruit, then a woman handed everyone spoons and we dug in. I had never seen such a huge papaya, and had never eaten one ripe and fresh from the tree. It was an extravagant feast. It was communion.

The country of Venezuela has changed since my time there. There is a widening gap between the haves and have-nots. There are rallies and riots, cries of corruption and demands for political change. There are people who feel afraid of the police instead of

feeling protected by them. Our two countries struggle with many of the same burdens.

It is Advent. You and I are far from the cacao trees—a cup of hot chocolate is as close as we can get. Yet we are still on a journey. It may not be on red dirt roads, winding through high mountains, but each of you travel your own hard roads, just like the people following John the Baptist into the wilderness, just like Mary and Joseph and everyone crowding the roads, headed for the census in Bethlehem. Sometimes the twists and turns and drop-offs make it feel overwhelming, unbearable. And, on this journey, each one of us comes face to face with that sign: *carga larga*: an oversized load. Whether it's you or someone close to you, we all know someone slowed to a crawl by a heavy burden. There is no easy way to pass by. There is no way around it without risking your own soul.

This Advent, I invite you to ease your foot off the accelerator. Let yourself be slowed down. Recognize the pain in front of you, the burdens being carried. Notice more of the landscape. Turn in your seat and discover your neighbors. Take some time to listen.

Because this isn't about arriving on time. In Advent, it's the journey itself that matters. It's not just a time to “prepare a way” so you can reach Jesus—it is also a time to dismantle the roadblocks you've set up, the things that keep Jesus from reaching you. Prepare yourself, so you'll be ready to meet him. Prepare yourself, so you'll be ready for the welcome, and ready to eat together at the feast.

May this effort be a joyful one, a journey that brings you peace.

May this be a road you come to love.

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