

SERMON TITLE: “Big Faith for a Big World”

TEXT: Psalm 23

PREACHED AT: Coaldale Mennonite Brethren Church

BY: Ryan Dueck

DATE: May 6, 2012/5th Sunday of Easter

Good morning. It is a mixture of very strange and very good to be with you this morning! ☺

For many of you, mine is a familiar face, but for the benefit of those for whom this is *not* the case, I should probably offer a few brief words of introduction.

My name is Ryan Dueck, and for the first thirty years of my life, Coaldale MB Church was my home church. This is where I first went to Sunday School, this is where I attended youth group, this is where I, first got involved in music ministry.

This is where I was first encouraged to pursue higher education (Randy and Darlene Klassen come to mind here!) and where I was given my first opportunities to preach and to teach.

This was the church in which my faith was born and where it was watered and nourished. I owe a huge debt of gratitude to the people of this church for investing in me in countless ways over the first three decades of my life.

Six years ago, after completing my philosophy degree at the University of Lethbridge, our family packed up and moved to Vancouver so that I could attend Regent College—a theological graduate school on the campus of the University of British Columbia.

Our family spend three very enjoyable years in Vancouver—I loved the opportunity to study at a world-class theological school, Naomi loved the big-city life of Vancouver, and our kids took their first steps in the school system in a wonderfully racially diverse context (I think there were at least six different ethnicities represented in their kindergarten class!).

After I graduated from Regent, we had a decision to make. What next?

We applied for a number of pastoral positions back here in Alberta and a few in BC, but for a variety of reasons, nothing worked out. So, we ended up moving even *further* west to take an associate pastor position at a Mennonite Brethren church in Nanaimo, on Vancouver Island. We spent three good years there learning and growing.

Then, this past summer, we moved back to southern AB to take a position at the Lethbridge Mennonite Church. While we miss many things about BC, it has been great to be closer to family and old friends, and we have been embraced by a wonderful church family at Lethbridge Mennonite.

So, there's a quick summary of what we've been up to for the past six years! God has led our family to good places and good people and back home again. God has been at work in our story as a family as we have sought to be obedient and faithful to his call to love God and to love our neighbours as ourselves.

I assume the same is true for you. I assume that, in the past six years, you have been seeking to live faithfully where God has placed you, to love others, and to locate your story—as individuals, as families, as a church community—within the bigger story of God.

One of themes I want to explore this morning has to do with the nature of this bigger story that God is telling in and through his people and his world.

One thing I have discovered over my three-plus decades on this earth, is that it is very easy, in the course of everyday life, for our faith—our view of God and the world—to shrink.

Perhaps you have noticed the same thing.

When I decided to go to university to study philosophy and theology a decade ago, I was asking big questions—questions about the nature of God, human freedom, the problem of evil, the nature of faith and knowledge and morality, etc. I was always drawn to big questions, and I wanted to ask them from the perspective of faith. I wanted a faith that could respond to the tough questions, a faith that was big enough to incorporate all of reality, a story within which to locate everything from my own experience and from my observation of the world.

And it was good to ask these questions. It was good to study and challenge assumptions and work through doubts and issues in the context of others who were doing the same thing.

But, as stimulating as these intellectual pursuits were and are, as liberating as this “big faith” was and is, I have discovered that it is incredibly easy for my faith to quite rapidly shrink down to the size of, well, *myself*.

As soon as everyday life starts to get a bit demanding or mundane or routine or frustrating, the big story of God and his work in the wider world gets reduced to what God is or, more often is *not* doing in and for *me*!

It is easy for me to begin to interpret the life of faith through the very narrow lens of *my* struggles, *my* insecurities, *my* needs and requests, *my* doubts and fears, *my* frustrations and hopes and desires, etc, to the point where I forget that God has people and concerns and projects in the world that go beyond me. Imagine that!

Rather than exhibiting a big faith in a God who is in the process of reclaiming and redeeming all of creation, my faith can look more like a personal self-help strategy whose sole intent is to make my life easier or more comfortable.

Does this sound familiar to anyone? Whether it is due to apathy or busyness or affluence or comfort or complacency or _____, I think it is easy for our faith to shrink down to the size of ourselves.

The good news is that, if we do our best to keep our eyes and ears and hearts open, God can be remarkably persistent and creative in expanding faith that has grown too small. If we are paying attention, we will discover that God is always eager to show us more of the big story of his work in the world.

Sometimes this will happen gradually, in little ways in the midst of our routines. Sometimes it will happen more suddenly when we are wrenched *out* of our routines.

For me, it was the latter.

Many of you know that I recently returned from an MCC Alberta pastors learning tour in Colombia. We spent ten days visiting churches and various other MCC partners and projects, and generally learning about Colombia as a nation and how MCC is at work there.

I didn't know much about Colombia before this tour. I knew that it had a troubled past of violence and political turmoil. I knew that the material conditions were very different than they are here in Canada—that Colombia was affected by poverty and crime in ways that Canada mostly is not. I knew that they spoke Spanish there. I knew that a Colombian soccer player had once been murdered for scoring an own goal in a World Cup game! But beyond that, my knowledge of this part of the world was very limited.

I learned many things about Colombia and the church's work there during this tour, but as I reflect upon my time there, I can also say that God used this time and this place and people to give me a bigger view of God and the world—to push against the borders of my faith that were, perhaps, closing in too tightly.

This morning, I want to reflect upon this idea of a “bigger faith” through the lens of a few stories from Colombia and a very well known passage of Scripture: Psalm 23.

Read text (ESV):

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.*

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
forever.*

On one level, this might seem like an odd choice of texts given what I have been talking about. Isn't Psalm 23 text for funerals?

And given all this talk about thinking only about what God can do for *me*, isn't this Psalm actually a bit individualistic? The Lord is *my* shepherd... he leads *me* on paths of righteousness... even though *I* walk through the valley of the shadow of death...

Psalm 23 is a heartfelt and deeply personal prayer of David. But how does it help us think about a bigger faith for a bigger world?

Perhaps a few stories will help us.

On our third or fourth day in Colombia our group all piled into a van and headed to a region just south of Bogotá to see some of the MCC projects down there.

The farther south we drove, the more the scenery changed. Instead of the hustle and bustle and concrete of a modern city we saw a sprawling hillside of patched together shacks of tin and wood, dogs, mud, and garbage.

We had entered a group of communities referred to as Cazucá—community comprised entirely of displaced small farmers (*campesinos*) that have been evicted from their land, either by one of the many armed groups in the area, or by the big corporations (many Canadian) who want their land for mining or palm oil production. Not knowing where else to go, these *campesinos* flood to the city looking for work and housing.

And so, these *campesinos* flood to places like Cazucá. It is a bleak and dreary place full of poverty and crime and neglect. It is a place that some only spend a few months in before moving on to better things, but where others spend years, decades, even lifetimes.

[FIRST SLIDE]

There is a valley that separates two of the main communities of Cazucá, and at the bottom of this valley is a dirty body of water referred to as Laguna Negra (the Black

Lake). The image that you see on the wall is that of this valley. This is where all the run-off goes, all of the garbage and debris, and, rumour has it, even a few bodies.

Psalm 23:4 refers to “the valley of the shadow of death...”

If ever there was such a valley, I thought, this valley in Cazucá would be it.

How does Psalm 23 sound in a place like this?

There are three imperative statements in Psalm 23—three “I will’s” or “I shall’s” and I want to read them through the lens of this place, this valley.

1. I shall not want (v. 1)

But how can we *not* want, if not for ourselves than for others? How can we *not* want on behalf of the people of Cazucá?

How can we be people of contentment and gratitude in a world of such extraordinary injustice and inequality? Or when we know that so often it is our excess as rich Westerners—our lack of contentment with all of our stuff, our over-consumption—that leads to the kind of problems that we see in so many places around the world?

What if instead of green pastures and still waters we see mud and gravel and garbage and the Laguna Negra?

“I shall not want,” the psalmist says... But we *do* want. All of us.

We want better things for ourselves... for the people of the world, for our children, for the people of our communities, for our families and our church... We want to see people set free from addictions, we want to see broken relationships healed, we want to see people we care about come to faith, we want to see those who are used to getting the short end of the stick experience blessing.

We want many things.

And at our best, we want *good* things—we want to see God’s kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

In a fallen and broken world, it is hard not to want.

Is our faith big enough to acknowledge that our world is full of need, full of injustice, full of inequality, full of unjust suffering and pain AND to embrace our role as agents of God’s healing and transformation?

Can we look at the world with all of its pain and need and still claim a contentment that transcends circumstances and at the same time recognizes that we are to be God's hands and feet and voices to bring about change?

2. I will fear no evil (v. 4)

But we *do* fear evil because evil is a fearful thing. This was evident as we walked through this valley of the shadow of death in Cazucá.

Our guides explained to us that this long path that wound through the valley past the Laguna Negra and up to the community on the other side was not often traveled at night due to the fear of gang violence (only minutes before our arrival, there had been a funeral procession for a young teenager killed in gang violence.)

Indeed, we had to instruct our bus driver to pick us up at a different location than where he initially dropped us off so that we wouldn't have to cross that valley twice. Even in the middle of the day, our presence as a bunch of rich white folks would have been noted, she said, and it probably wouldn't be safe to go back that way.

I will fear no evil for you are with me...

We may not have to contend with the *kinds* of evils that we heard about in Cazucá, but evil is not restricted to Colombia, obviously.

What are *we* tempted to fear? An undignified death? A long and drawn out illness? That our kids will be bullied? Mental illness and depression?

Is our faith big enough to see clearly that there is profound evil in God's good world—personal evil, societal evil, systemic and universal evil—and to continue to follow and trust God through dark valleys where we can't see what's on the other side?

Is our faith big enough to trust that all of the evil that God has allowed into the big story of the world and the evil that he has allowed into our individual stories can be healed and redeemed and incorporated into a future of hope and peace?

3. I shall dwell in the house of the Lord (v. 6)

This is the hope of all who trust in God, but sometimes “the house of the Lord” seems too far off in the horizon.

The house of the Lord, for David and for ancient Israel, was the place where God dwelt, the place where heaven and earth were joined together. It was a place where two spheres of reality collided—the visible realm you could see and smell and touch and hear, and the invisible realm of God and of his purposes and plans for his people and the world.

The house of the Lord symbolized a place of security and safety, a place where fear and unfulfilled longing are no more.

But in Cazucá, other, more familiar houses, dominate the landscape—houses of disrepair and neglect, houses of violence and abuse, houses of hunger and lethargy, houses that are falling apart, patched together with tin and wood and plastic.

Our houses are considerably safer and more impressive than these houses, but they are a long ways from the house of the Lord. Our houses may be made of sturdier materials and have more creature comforts, but they are, at best, temporary dwellings, imperfect refuges in a fallen world.

Whether we are in Cazucá or Coaldale, we, too, long to be in the place where God is. We long for a security that cannot be threatened, for anxiety to no longer be present, for peace and harmony that cannot be undone by a cruel word or a careless action.

All of us dwell in imperfect houses and long to dwell in the house of the Lord.

Is our faith big enough to live with hope and trust in this in-between time when the object of our longing remains beyond our experience?

Is our faith big enough and strong enough to pursue paths of righteousness for Christ's sake, even when hope and trust do not come easily, even when their fulfillment seems a long ways off?

I shall not want, I will not fear, I will dwell.... These words do not come easily in Cazucá.

This valley—this image that you see on the screen—has come to represent for me a challenge to pray this Psalm with both hope, commitment, and obedience AND honesty.

When I read this Psalm through the lens of the people I met and the things I saw and heard in Colombia, I am reminded that Psalm 23 is a prayer that requires big faith for a big world.

It was not easy for David to pray this prayer either. Evil was no less real in his day, nor was temptation any less strong. David knew what it was to be harassed by enemies as well as to surrender to the many wants that plague us as human beings (think Bathsheba!)

David's prayer comes from a place of knowing that this world is broken, knowing that he is broken, and knowing that he needs a shepherd who is good to lead him home.

Near the end of Psalm 23, we read these famous words:

Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life.

It is a beautiful phrase and a beautiful hope. Is it *true*? For the people of Colombia? For us?

A final story...

During the second half of our tour, we traded the cool rainy climate of Bogotá for the sweltering heat and humidity of the northern coast of Colombia. We were going to visit some smaller cities and some more remote villages to hear more stories of displaced people and how MCC and local churches were helping.

One of these cities was called Sincelejo. It was a city of around 250 000 people, 90 000 of whom had been forced from their farms in the countryside.

One night we visited a church called “Remanso de Paz” which means “Refuge of Peace.” It was a church comprised entirely of internally displaced people.

Over supper that night, and over a bumpy ride out into the jungle the next day, we heard and saw their story. We heard about their former life as small farmers, about the terror of the days of violence, about being forced from their land, about the difficulties that they and their children had in getting used to city life.

But we also heard about their faith.

The pastor of Remanso de Paz told us the story of how the church came to be where it was. Initially, many of the displaced people had been meeting in homes for support and encouragement, but eventually they grew large enough that they needed their own space.

One potential site emerged. A garbage dump.

Initially, the pastor was very reluctant to build a church on a garbage dump. It seemed unworthy as a location to consecrate to the Lord. “I fought against God,” she said. “I said, ‘A garbage dump is no place for a house of God.’ But, God began to speak to me, to change me. ‘Why shouldn’t the house of the Lord be built on a garbage dump?’” he said to me. ‘After all, I specialize in renovating things full of ugliness and making them beautiful symbols of hope. Look what I did with you!’”

[SECOND SLIDE]

So today, this community meets for worship on what used to be a garbage heap. They sing songs and share meals. They discuss land reform and restitution laws and how these affect them. They tell stories of their former lives on the land and speak of their longing to return. They teach people in their community and their children about Jesus as the path to peace and the importance of nonviolence in a context all too familiar with violence.

They talk about how, even though they don't always understand it, they believe that God has led them from their farms to the city for a reason, and how they are trusting God to lead them back.

[THIRD SLIDE]

They are what their name says—a *refuge of peace*, a living testimony to the goodness and mercy of God in a difficult place, and a witness to their community that there is an alternative to the violence and despair that is so common.

Their very existence as a church in that place is evidence that they have been followed by the goodness and mercy of the Good Shepherd.

We follow this same shepherd.

We do not face the same challenges and struggles as the people I have been speaking of this morning. In many ways, our lives seem easy compared to theirs.

But our lives have garbage too. We, too, contribute to and are affected by the brokenness of our world. We, too, have ugliness inside of us and we, too, experience the ugliness of a world where God's will is not yet done on earth as it is in heaven.

My prayer for all of us this morning is that we would continue to walk and live and believe into a big faith for a big world—a faith that sees the *whole* world and ourselves clearly and honestly, and chooses to trust and hope and live and believe in a good God.

My prayer is that we would follow the Good Shepherd who leads us through dark valleys... who walks through dark valleys for our sake, as we are about to commemorate in communion... who, to quote Eugene Peterson's translation of this Psalm, "chases after us with beauty and love."

A God who is determined to create good things out of garbage dumps.

May God help us to follow this Shepherd all the days of our lives.

Amen.