

MAYFLOWER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH  
3901 NORTHWEST 63RD STREET  
OKLAHOMA CITY, OK 73116  
REV. CHRIS MOORE, ASSOCIATE MINISTER  
405-842-8897  
cyasunday@mayflowerucc.org  
[www.mayflowerucc.org](http://www.mayflowerucc.org)  
© by Richard Mize

November 14, 2010

Psalm 9:15-20 & 10:1-12

**“LAS NACIONES, LOS MALVADOS Y LOS DEBILES EN LA FRONTERA”  
("THE NATIONS, THE WICKED AND THE WEAK ON THE BORDER.")**

*Jesucristo esta presente!* Jesus Christ is present!

*Jesucristo esta presente!*

*Buenos dias y bienvenidos a la frontera.* Good morning and welcome to the borderlands. Yes, Mexico is 1,000 miles away, but changing demographics, and certain local leaders and state laws, have forced the issue: Oklahoma has become a borderlands state. Fortunately, our faith, our tradition, and I'll bet most of our experience tell us: *Jesucristo esta presente* — Jesus Christ is present at all borders, inviting us to cross. He stands at all walls, inviting us to tear them down, to demolish all obstacles that keep us from loving God and loving one another — *cada una de las demás* — every single other.

But, I'm getting ahead of myself — and relax, I will not stand here, or at the Border Patrol checkpoint at Nogales, Arizona, and shout for them to tear down this wall! It's our wall, you see, not theirs. But maybe I will after another trip or two to that wall — that ugly, ragged seam sewn to divide, not to mend, a wall erected in fear, which is neither faith NOR works, which tears peoples, families and lives apart every single day.

And the scary U.S.-Mexico border, and its fearful people *y personas*, needs both: faith and works.

But why am I talking about the border? A few weeks ago, as part of my seminary studies, I spent a week in Tucson, Arizona, and a few days and nights across the border, in Nogales, Sonora. It's the biggest Mexican city on the border between Juarez, across from El Paso, and Tijuana, across from San Diego. Nogales has about 300,000 people. It went from small town to boomtown in the early '80s when U.S. factories rushed to the Mexican side for cheap labor and easy regulations.

Our host was Borderlinks, a Tucson group that is the institutional legacy of the early-'80s Sanctuary Movement — *Movimiento Santuario*. Churches dared back then, in the name of Jesus and

justice, to give safe-haven and protection to Central American refugees. They were streaming across Mexico and stumbling into Arizona, as well as Texas, New Mexico and California. Just like today. They came mainly from El Salvador and Guatemala and their civil wars, and Nicaragua and its Sandinista Revolution. Central America was a mess in the last years of the Cold War. U.S. hands were all over it. U.S. churches, as the hands and feet of the Lord, responded with Sanctuary. Some pastors and activists served time for it. That gives you an idea of the kind of people we were hanging out with, and a glimpse of the kind of seminary Phillips is, and may I add: Glory, hallelujah. Thank God for Phillips' tiny yet white-hot blue flame.

Back to the border. It's a mess, partly because of the sins of our political fathers, partly because both countries are falling so short of the mark in justice today.

I think today's Scripture reading provides a great snapshot for framing the situation. Of course, Psalm 9 and 10 are not prophecy, and even if they were, they weren't written for us, here, today, in 2010. But Psalms 9 and 10, probably written as one piece, are perfect for a talk in church about the violence and tragedy of the borderlands. The passage is somber. It's a liturgy. It has praise and thanksgiving, a cry for justice, a complaint about the success of the wicked, lots of prayer, and it concludes with confidence. Finally, Psalms 9 and 10 form what scholars call an individual lament, a poem, written in the voice of a single person crying out to God. Hebrew Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann sees it as the kind of conflicted cry that is inevitable in an out-of-balance society where the reality of God is taken seriously. Further, it's the voice of one who is nowhere else permitted a social voice. Let me stipulate that God is taken seriously by people in both the United States and Mexico. Let me suggest that we hear these verses in the voice of the ones who are nowhere else permitted a social voice: *los migrantes*, the migrants.

See if you see what I see in this ancient text.

Psalm 9, verses 15 to 17: *The nations have sunk in the pit that they made; in the net that they hid has their own foot been caught. The LORD has made himself known, he has executed judgment; the wicked are snared in the work of their own hands. The wicked shall depart to SHE-ol.* Now, NAFTA has defined the borderlands for 25 years, since well before the treaty went into effect in 1994. Nothing wrong with free trade, if it's fair. But, what is truth? What is fair? The North American Free Trade Agreement is in place to free up the flow of goods and capital between the United States and Mexico. But just goods and capital. Not people. For people, it's the opposite: Goods and capital come and go but an ugly wall is going up to keep the Mexican people, and Central Americans, put. Is that fair? They are congregating at the border. Desperate hundreds and thousands, already survivors of treks through treacherous Mexico, survivors of out-of-control drug gang warfare, they brave crossing the desert every day to get to *Los Estados Unidos*, the United States. They come for a chance at life and abundant life.

I do not here knock NAFTA per se, or efforts to foster trade. I do condemn the worship of the false god of individualism, especially the hypocritical reverence for an ideology of freedom for goods and capital — that old false god of Mammon. It gives lip service to liberty yet actually ensnares individual others.

Mexico is a failing nation; the government has surrendered whole countrysides to the drug cartels. Gangs have taken over cities. You hear the news of massacres in Juarez, the gun battles in Tijuana.

One day when we were in Nogales, banner headlines in the papers screamed: “Two Killed and Beheaded.” “Murder Warning.” “Beheadings on the Rise.” Just last week, the U.S. Consul ordered its staff around Nogales to travel in armored cars, if they travel at all. On the U.S. side, militarization of the border continues. The Border Patrol, despite more funding, more staffing, more attention, shackles them, catches migrants — I did see it with my own eyes. But it patrols in vain. The migrants, and U.S. ranchers and landowners, and fearful others, cry out. The psalmist said: *The nations have sunk in the pit that they made; in the net that they hid has their own foot been caught. ... Rise up, O LORD! Do not let mortals prevail; let the nations be judged before you. Put them in fear, O LORD; let the nations know that they are only human.*

Wow! Let the nations know that they are only human? Wouldn't THAT help heal this beat-up old world and teach it to sing in perfect harmony! Because humans, you see, not just nations, everyday people, not just drug lords, are sunk in the pit that the nations have made of the borderlands. Not just in statistics, not just in policy discussions, not just in the abstract. But on the ground of the Sonoran Desert of Mexico and southern Arizona.

Tightened border security to the west around San Diego and to the east around Juarez since the 1990s has made the desert what it is today: a death trap. Migrants, propelled by push factors of poverty and fear and drawn by pull factors of life and hope, headed for the backcountry. There, in the desert, many of them meet harm and death from exposure, but also from followers of another old God, a cohort of Mammon: Belial (Beelee-ul). Nothing so darkly prince-like as a Satan, with his designs and schemes. No, Belial, the lowest of the low, the wormiest of the worms, who loves sin for its own sake. Belial, as Milton wrote in “Paradise Lost,” “whom a Spirit more lewd Fell not from Heaven, or more gross to love Vice for it self.” Belial, whose present followers rob and rape and murder for one reason: Because ... they ... can.

Psalm 10, verse 8: *(The wicked) sit in ambush in the villages; in hiding places they murder the innocent. Their eyes stealthily watch for the helpless.* We tend to make metaphors out of biblical violence. I see no need to here. This was no metaphor then, when they chanted or sung it in the Temple at Jerusalem. It's no metaphor today. It's real robbery and rape, and gang rape, and murder, in the Arizona desert. It's a migrant group a few days into a two-week stumble they were told would take just a few hours, robbed of the shoes off their feet, the shirts off their backs and their cash — their life savings — at gunpoint or knife point. Thugs know the borderlands are out of control and they take advantage of it because they can.

Psalm 10, 9 to 11: *They lurk in secret like a lion in its covert; they lurk that they may seize the poor; they seize the poor and drag them off in their net. They stoop, they crouch, and the helpless fall by their might. They think in their heart “God has forgotten, he has hidden his face, he will never see it.”* It's a man shot dead, then robbed. Murders murder. Because they can. It's a woman, or a little girl, gang raped on a filthy mattress left under a rape tree — they actually call them rape trees! You can tell

them in the desert by the women's underwear hung on tree limbs as ornaments. As prizes. In Sonora. And in Arizona. In Arizona. Rapists rape. Because they can.

Now, Chris told me, "Be sure to include some good news!" And this is it. I have been redeemed. My trip to the border, and my studies of the issues, have redeemed me, delivered me, from ignorance. I didn't know what I didn't know. And others are being delivered, too. Every delegation on a Borderlinks trip comes back from Tucson and Nogales with a head full of information and a rattled heart. They have seen and heard and met, they have shaken hands with and hugged — neighbors, strangers, others. They really do come back transformed.

Transformation came as we helped Father Peter Neeley serve meals to deportees at the Kino Border Initiative dining room, in Nogales. Father Neeley told us that most of the people we would meet would never have exchanged pleasantries, let alone had a conversation with, a white American. That surprised me a little, until I thought a minute. Then, when he told us that for sure none of them had ever been served a meal by a white American, one not out to condemn, or harass, or judge, but only to serve and to listen — and to try to speak to them in their own language — I realized I was entering sacred space, border space, where *Jesucristo esta presente*.

Those faces are seared into my memory: surprise, gratitude, "it's about time," some narrowed-eyed suspicion — but above all an attitude of: *Bien, bien, pero yo tengo hambre*. Good, good, but I am hungry. We formed a line and started serving soup to deportees sitting at tables. "Cuantos mas?" How many more, I asked some men at a table when passing out bowls. "Cuatro," one said. A few minutes later, I asked, "Mas tortillas?" More tortillas? "Si, por favor," another man said. "Gracias." And there was transformation. They had never had a conversation with a white American. The fact was: I had never exchanged pleasantries, let alone had any kind of conversation with, a Spanish-only-speaking Hispanic. Gone is any reluctance to use my 30-year-old high school Spanish, especially if I have a language dictionary. Communication, words, face to face — the seeds of *Transformacion*. Transformation came again later as we were visiting with some more deportees, abused women, at *Casa Nazareth*, a shelter by the same Jesuits who run the dining hall. A few of the women told their stories. The Border Patrol caught one just outside Phoenix after she'd made it across the desert; she'd lived for years in the United States but had gone back to Mexico on what used to be a more or less routine trip; now she was separated from a grown daughter with cancer in Los Angeles. The patrol rounded up another woman with some others, and amid the chaos of arrest, detainment, shackles and deportation, she'd been thumped around some and separated from her teenage daughter. Just everyday women from across Mexico, with everyday stories of trying to cross the border, which literally takes a lifetime for most people if they try to follow the law.

A few of the Phillips group started asking them some questions. It was an intimate environment, this place on the margins of the border, where *Jesucristo esta presente*. All of us in chairs along the walls of a small living room in a fifth-floor walkup apartment, shouting distance from the border and its ugly wall. Chicken boiling in a pot on the stove in the next room. Bunk beds peeking from the shadows of a bedroom where a child slept, exhausted from the ordeal of the desert. A large crucifix, too big for the space, looming high on a wall. And the stupid question that started to come to mind as we visited with these pious, hurting, desperate women was something like: "How did your faith survive such an

ordeal?” Or, “Where was God in all this?” And, *gracias a Dios*, thank God, before I could get such a cool, detached, meaningless question formed in my mind, the Spirit of God seemed to say to me: “*Cierra la boca!*” “Shut up! These my children’s faith is a matter of fact. These women here, in this place, are cradled in the very arms of Christ — in the form of that Catholic sister’s hands and heart and YOURS.” The transformation? Deliverance from always thinking abstractly about the sacred and holy: There is no Christ apart from the Body of Christ. Practically speaking — *praxis-ly* speaking — our hands and hearts — my hands and heart and yours — are God’s in Christ. As we left, I took the young sister’s hands and said, “*Gracias. Tu tiene los manos del Señor.*” I was trying to say: “You have shown me how to be the hands of the Lord.” I think she understood. *Jesucristo esta presente* — Jesus Christ is present at all borders, inviting us to cross. He stands at all walls, inviting us to tear them down, to demolish all obstacles that keep us from loving God and loving one another — *cada una de las demás* — every single other. To say that *Jesucristo esta presente* is to stand against the world and its walls and to oppose, in the name of Jesus and justice, obstacles and laws and policies and attitudes that keep us from loving strangers and neighbors and God.

*Jesucristo esta presente!*

Amen.



Copyright 2010 Richard Mize