

# “Mira! Mira!”

Psalm 98:1, 4-9

Sermon notes from the Pulpit of  
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL  
Cuba Sunday/Music Sunday May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2024  
Matt Matthews

Psalm 98:1, 4-9

- 1 O sing to the LORD a new song,  
for he has done marvelous things.
  
- 4 Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth;  
break forth into joyous song and sing praises.
- 5 Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre,  
with the lyre and the sound of melody.
- 6 With trumpets and the sound of the horn  
make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD.
- 7 Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;  
the world and those who live in it.
- 8 Let the floods clap their hands;  
let the hills sing together for joy
- 9 at the presence of the LORD, for he is coming  
to judge the earth.  
He will judge the world with righteousness,  
and the peoples with equity.

As I hope you all know, we have a sister-church relationship with the Iglesia Presbiteriana-Reformada en Luyanó, Cuba. When their pastor, Daniel Izquierdo, or members of their flock are able to travel to the States, we host them and welcome them to speak in worship and Sunday School. Because we can more easily afford these trips, the religious visas, the airfares, and the other costs associated with travel, we try to send a small team every year. This year, Libby Sternhagen, Andrew Schwenk, Brandi Lowe, my friend John Warren, and I went to Havana to see our old friends. We brought your love with us in the form of donated items like toothbrushes and monetary gifts. Thank you for not allowing us to go empty-handed.

First Pres has meaningful, personal mission partnerships with many friends around the world: in Indonesia (Farsiana & Bernie), the Congo (Dave & Kristi), South Sudan (Bob & Kristi), the Mexican/US border (Mark & Meriam), the Carribean (Vilmarie & Jose), the PEB/Sangla Hill Girls School in Pakistan (Veda), and with our friends in Cuba. Trips to these places remind us that we are part of a global church.

Because we go to Cuba about annually, we get to know our friends better. We are actually forming and maintaining relationships. This trip offers more than it requires insofar and time and money.

Visiting our Cuba friends takes my breath away. The poverty. The music. The spirit of the people. When people ask me about our trips, I'm reminded how these trips also take my words away. As Evan Hanson on Broadway sings, *words fail*. I know this: every time I go to Cuba, the simple word “world” takes on deeper meaning. The same is true for the words “home,” “welcome,” “hospitality,” and “church.” My interpretation of such seemingly simple, simple words changes. And so does my heart.

God has blessed our hermanamiento, our sister-church relationship. I sing with the psalmist: *O sing to the LORD a new song, for God has done marvelous things.*

My contribution to Cuba Sunday is this stream-of-consciousness entry from my travel journal. It's called "Mira, Mira". The word mira means "look."

Look,

I see decay everywhere, rubble, building facades crumbling off right into the street, paper, cans, plastic bags piled in the ditches lining the shoulders of the pitted roads. I see an obstacle course of potholes called roads, and I watch swerving cars weave widely around them. I see old cars belching diesel. Some appear to be powered by charcoal stoves, but this is a joke, because such a vehicle doesn't exist—except, if anywhere in the world, in Cuba where they possess the ingenuity to repair everything, to make something out of nothing by *atándolo con alambre*, tying it together with wire.

I see young couples on front stoops flirting, kissing. I see old people sitting on front stoops watching young people on the other side of the street. Old men face off playing dominos. Or they sit alone in doorways watching the blue skies surrender to night. Young women sit on the back of low powered motorbikes and mopeds holding tightly onto the men driving. In Cuba, no one holds on to me. I see cocky dogs a little too thin cruising the streets, strutting like Columbus, eyes darting, conquistadores looking for gold. I see people holding hands.

I see people smile back when I say *Hola*. The hawkers around Viejo Habana sell cheap refrigerator magnets, discounted cigars, t-shirts, kites, flags, paper cones of fried chips. I see them coming a mile away. They see us turistas coming from across the ocean. The buskers try to sell a song. Kids oblivious to the efforts of their elders chase after a soccer ball. No one cuts the grass in ill-kempt parks. Few pick up the trash. One woman, however, earnestly sweeps the sidewalk in front of her house, sweeps the gutter, sweeps away the young men coming to kill time with her daughters.

Breezes lift the smog out to sea. On still days, the smoke lingers like a grey-yellow-orange scarf cinched too tightly around the neck of the city. I see thriving plants and colorful flowers. I see feral cats who, like the perros, need a bath or a firehose. I don't see the stereo from which the loud music blasts, but its owner mistakenly thinks I want to hear his song. I see Chinese buses are among the few new vehicles on the road. I'm told I will not see a Cuban on any of those tinted window buses unless she is driving or tour guide. From some streets, I get a glimpse of the ocean.

I see Yahimi sitting in the rocking chair that is too big for her small body. Neuropathy seizes her with waves of pain. Her physical therapist comes three times a week. I see her undefeatable smile, her tenacity. Last year she took us on a brisk walking tour, showing us the sites around the Plaza Vieja. With her withering stare, she ordered the beggars to leave us alone, and they obeyed. Last week she walked by herself from her front door to the kitchen without help, but barely. I see hope and fire and an ocean of kindness in her brown eyes. I see a fighter, one tough cookie.

I see Pastor Daniel taking one faithful step after another. I see his wife's vivacious smile and delight in her wild laughter. Some people see the Cuba that once was, or the Cuba they've heard about, or the Cuba they hope for. Many of their grown children have left Cuba for Europe and Miami. Their grandkids are growing up far away in the land of shopping malls and grocery stores warehoused with food. They tell me acquiring travel visas and affording

airfares is nearly impossible. I see their sadness. Do I see resignation? I see crowds gather at the ATM in the front of Banco Municipal.

I see the old women dance, whirl, and move their hips. I see their flashing eyes. I see the young women they once were moving their skirts like a storm over oceans. The old men sit in plastic chairs along the walls, too shy to dance. I see my teenaged self in these elderly wall flowers. I watch the people come to church on bright Sunday mornings, doors flung open wide, light and breeze streaming in. I see them hug their friends and go out of their way to greet us curious strangers. I watch them pray, join in the litanies, sing the hymns. I close my eyes.

Look,

I see angels.

Mira, mira.

*O sing to the LORD a new song,  
For God has done and is doing a great thing.*