

# Peace Be with You and Me

July 12, 2015

Texts: Psalm 23

Ephesians 2:11-22

I'm normally around here quite a bit, but I have been in Puerto Rico the past 4 months. I seem to spend time in several different worlds. Sometimes they feel pretty close together, and sometimes they seem to be separated by a gulf. This one feels like a gulf. I wrote this sermon in Puerto Rico, and it seemed to make sense there. I hope it does here as well.

Many of you already know that I went to Puerto Rico to work with birds, specifically a sharp-shinned hawk. A sharp-shinned hawk is a very small raptor, about the size of a kestrel or a scrub jay. In North America, there are lots of them. They breed mostly in Canada and Alaska and pass through our area on their fall and spring migrations.

They have a close relative, the Puerto Rican sharp-shinned hawk. It is endemic, which means it is found only on that island. It does not migrate, just stays in the mountain forests. Because it doesn't migrate, it is even smaller than the North American ones, with shorter wings and tail.

There are not many of these birds left in the world. A 1980s study estimated their total population at about 250 birds. A 1990s follow-up study put their number at about 40% lower, only 150 birds.

The 1980s and 90s studies resulted in them being officially listed as an endangered subspecies by the US Fish and Wildlife Service. In 1997, Fish & Wildlife published a full plan to study, monitor and protect these birds. The bad news is, the report simply sat on a shelf. Not a thing was done.

In 2011, a grad student named Julio Gallardo decided to look at these sharp-shins for his dissertation. After three years of study, he was alarmed by the lack of birds he found and published a plea for action last fall.

In winter, The Peregrine Fund got involved. This is a small nonprofit whose mission is to save critically endangered raptors, like they are doing with the California condor. They were outside their budget cycle, and the mating season had already started, but they decided to do what they could this year, and follow up for 2 more years.

This is the pilot project I went to work with in February – basically an effort of a few volunteers with little funding and some remote guidance from Julio and Russell Thorstrom of The Peregrine Fund. For 3 months, it was me, a 27-year-old named Kristine, and some local help.

Our job was to spot as many birds as possible, then do our best to find their nests and monitor their activities until the young are fledging, or flying. The birds live in tropical mountain forests, rarely flying above the tree canopy. Given this, their size and their secretive nature, they are very hard to find. The forest is quite dense, and when it rains, the steep clay mountainsides become extremely slick. We didn't know if we'd see many birds or find any nests at all.

It was both exciting and stressful to be working with such endangered birds. I am an experienced hawk bander and nest watcher, but I have an old person's legs. On our first attempt to hike into a territory and find a nest, I failed. The bushwhacking demanded more than my body could take. We had to change our plans.

Kristine has great stamina and perseverance. So she would trek through the forest trying to find nests, and I would monitor the ones we found. We would both scan for display flights and explore possible territories by driving all over the place until roads ended, searching for sharpshins.

Some of this went well. Early on, we had 2 nests to monitor and about a dozen areas to search.

Some did not go so well. Kristine was in charge, but communication between the two of us and between us and the bosses was poor. Each of us fell short of the other's expectations.

To me, she was a control freak; her way was the only way. She failed to communicate with me, though she texted constantly. She had no patience. She gave me little credit for my experience and knowledge, and the fact that both texting and GPS were pretty new to me. She had no sympathy for the orientation I never got from the bosses.

To her, I was old, weak and not driven enough. I couldn't hike or bushwhack well enough. I was self-centered. I didn't contribute ideas or recommendations as good as hers. My learning curve was too slow. When I went to the field without carrying backup batteries for the radio or GPS, that proved my ignorance.

We needed an intervention, but nobody was around to intervene.

So, one day I started one. Let's clear the air and see if we can improve the way we work together. We talked about our roles, and how we understand them. We talked about screw-ups and misunderstandings. She kept hitting on my failings, point by point, the ones I'd apologized for many times, and the ones I just considered differences. I assured her it was a two-way street, but I refused to go back point by point to *her* failings.

That was step 1 for us. When you want to make peace, don't keep rehashing the past. Recognize where you have come up short, acknowledge it, apologize and resolve to do better. Don't harp on the other person's weaknesses. Don't replay old offenses, let them go.

That talk got us started. I went out of my way to ignore slights, to celebrate her successes, to be thoughtful and actively nice. Before long, I realized she was doing the same. Some of it was the talk. Some of it was that she was not finding nests, so she wasn't quite as self-assured. Some of it was that we were making conscious efforts to get along. Some of it was flat-out grace of God.

When Kristine's 90-day leave from her job was up, she left Puerto Rico to return home. We'll never be best friends, but we learned to respect each other. We parted with hugs, wished each other well, and this past week we exchanged chatty emails.

When Kristine left, 2 new volunteers came, Tim and Sierra. Both are about 24. I resolved to do better, and they arrived without the mental baggage. And since we ate somewhat alike, we agreed to each cook one community dinner a week. Cooking for each other and eating together helps! They hiked and looked for nests, and I monitored. But every now and then, I hiked with them, and they got one nest of their own to monitor. I mentored but refused to dictate; once I screwed up, but I backtracked and apologized, and we moved on. This relationship worked well.

Then we got the news that our long-awaited US and Puerto Rican permits had come through. Tim would be able to climb the nest trees, Sierra would be able to treat the chicks for a nasty parasite that threatens them, and I would be able to band both young and adult birds. We celebrated and made plans!

The next day, we learned that we would NOT be able to do any of those things, because the language in the permits specified that the bosses had to be there in person for it to happen. The authorized people listed were Julio in Mississippi, Russell in Idaho, a 3<sup>rd</sup> person in Virginia, and Kristine back home in Canada.

That was not a good day. We were mad at Fish & Wildlife for the language. We were

mad at Russell and Julio for not listing at least one of us as a primary on the permit. One untreated chick died. Every bird went unbanded.

Still, we had a job to do. We had to let go of our frustration and our anger. We focused on the positives, like how well the chicks were doing, and kept going.

**This is** a good project. We found and monitored 8 nests, including 15 young birds fledging. We saw maybe a third of the entire population. Only one study of these birds has ever been more comprehensive. We built a solid base of data for next year's follow-up. We have a lot to be proud of. And I have many fond memories, most of them about the birds, the mountains, the fabulous views, but also my co-workers.

I have delivered several sermons on peacemaking in this church, mostly focused at a group or national level. I found it hard to be a peacemaker when I was one of the conflicted parties, and it was one on one. I had to admit that despite how much I *think* of others, I can come across as self-centered. I had to admit that I was unable to do the hard hiking I thought I could do. I had to admit that my memory is less reliable than it used to be. I had to consciously work at being nice, paying compliments, staying positive.

That's my point today. Peacemaking is absolutely essential in this world. But it's sure not easy when you're in the middle of it. I was glad for the conflict resolution training I'd received years ago, and while confronting the problem was not at all fun, the outcome was positive. I worked harder on this piece of my retirement than I expected to, both physically and emotionally. I hope whatever I do next year will be easier, but I'm glad I went. And yes, I have some photos and lots of stories about the birds.

Psalm 23 has always meant a lot to me. God walks with us, watches over us in our trials, comforts us, helps us create peace. As Paul wrote the church in Ephesus, break down the dividing walls. Don't be strangers and aliens. Make peace. It can be done, and it's worth the effort.

**Amen.**