



January 2024

Dear friends,

Please enjoy this reflection from Petra Gonzalez, a member of Fellowship Reformed Church in Holland, MI, who took a trip this past fall with myself and a group to Frontera de Gracia.

Where is God at the border?

Where is God at the border? This question, posed by Angel, challenges us to seek where our Lord resides in a place often labeled as dangerous, desolate, and fraught with fear. Initially, my thoughts on where God might be at the border were simplistic—focused on pastors and shelters. However, upon experiencing the reality firsthand, I departed without easy solutions, yet I found brothers and sisters in Christ, all seeking hope, safety, and a sense of home.

Arriving in Juarez

From the moment I crossed the border into Juarez until the time I crossed back into the USA, a flood of emotions overwhelmed me. Streets were filled with cars but devoid of people. Children's playgrounds, meant for play and laughter, lay silent, while the U.S. National Guard stood watch across the river. Dense neighborhoods, packed with homes, were strangely empty, void of life on the streets. The stark contrast was palpable. A year ago, parks and paths along the border were occupied by tents and people. Yet, this November, due to concerns about Ciudad Juarez's image, regulations forced people into hiding within buildings, leaving parks and streets deserted. However, beneath this surface lay thousands of individuals hiding, waiting, and clinging to hope.

Amidst this, an undercurrent of organized crime looms, watchful, camouflaged, and potent. Fear is pervasive, yet the deep desperation and hope for a better future compel these families to these lands. Amidst it all, I saw God in the breathtaking beauty of the mountains surrounding the city, as well as in our steadfast driver skillfully navigating the streets.

At the Border

Our visit to the border revealed a visible wall fortified with three layers of barbed wire, added by Texas in recent months to deter anyone from crossing the border. At one location in Juarez, a gravel hill separates the highway from the wall. Beyond this hill lies a gravel plain leading to the river, the official border demarcation between the two countries. Upon our arrival, a group of young men stood poised to walk toward the U.S. border. As we ascended the gravel hill to view the border, they descended toward the river. Simultaneously, a family of five swiftly joined us atop the hill as they glanced toward the accumulating U.S. military presence. Walking toward

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the water, the young men departed, and the family hesitated, choosing not to proceed. As we advanced, over six military personnel gathered, engaging in an intense exchange across the river, their aggressive demeanor and coded language targeting members of our group who did not fit their perceived citizen profile. We felt a surge of fear as they questioned our motives for visiting Juarez, which were simply to build understanding about the border situation. As our hearts raced, encountering such hardened souls at our country's border, we expressed gratitude for their service and were beckoned back by Pastor Samuel. Later, we discovered the young men were Coyotes, human traffickers paid by immigrants for transportation. Leaving, the family remained, once again left in waiting—so close to the border, yet still so far away. Here, I saw God in the smile of a little girl with her family, eyes filled with hope, as she waved to me.

Embracing the Foreigner

We encountered three shelters where pastors courageously answered the call to shelter foreigners. Their resounding "yes" wasn't based on physical or financial resources but upon unwavering faith and trust in our Holy God to provide. In each shelter, they carved spaces where diverse families, individuals, and cultures coexisted while awaiting their appointment to enter the USA. These spaces fostered areas for worship, communal cooking, shared meals, and—my personal favorite—spaces for learning. The classrooms, though modest in size, radiated beauty with their vibrant ambiance: they were adorned with the creative books, toys, and children's artwork left by the temporary residents. At one shelter, a woman engaged a group of children in the sanctuary, teaching English and fostering camaraderie among them. Languages harmoniously intertwined as they crafted new words in a foreign setting, awaiting their entry into the land of their dreams. Witnessing their laughter and shared learning within a sacred space was profoundly moving. I saw God in the courageous 'yes' uttered by the many pastors in Ciudad Juarez, despite their financial and spatial constraints. Following this 'yes,' the Lord's divine providence stepped in, bridging the gaps they could not fill.

Where is God at the Border?

So, where is God at the border? He operates through the Holy Spirit within a network of courageous individuals who say "yes" and trust the Lord's provision. Out of these responses, impactful work unfolds, reshaping the lives of those navigating the uphill journey of immigrating into the United States. Amidst the complexity and heaviness of this place, the Spirit's presence is unmistakable. God is seen at the border in the faces of its people, particularly in the children and parents. He resides in the churches and their leaders, serving as a beacon of joy and laughter amid arduous voyages. Moreover, God manifests himself in the majestic mountains encircling the city, reminding us of his grandeur even in the valleys of life.

Prayer Requests:

- Pray for the people of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, and El Paso, Texas, as they care for those waiting at the border.
- Pray for pastors, leaders, and volunteers at the different shelters across the border, for strength each day, for patience and love as they continue serving the least of these.
- Pray for health in this winter season and safety for those waiting at the border.

Amen,

Angel