

# “Empire and the Cross: Sowing the Seeds of Hope”

## Good Friday Service – Lawrence Livermore National Nuclear Laboratory

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Sermon by Rev. Deborah Lee



Rev. Deborah Lee, preaching outside the Lab on Good Friday, 2016 on “Sowing the Seeds of Hope”

EXACTLY THREE WEEKS AGO at on March 4, I arrived in Honduras. It was 36 hours after Berta Cáceres had been brutally murdered while sleeping in her bed in the middle of the night. One arm and one leg were broken as she fought her attackers, then she was shot in the forehead, death squad style. It was ironic that they had broken her arm, as she was referred to by the [BBC](#) as “the woman who twisted the arm of the World Bank and China,” referring to the year-long protest she organized of the indigenous Lenca community of Rio Blanco against the building of one of the largest hydroelectric dams (without the community’s prior consent) on the Rio Gualcarque, causing China and the World bank to pull financing of

the illegal dam construction. This dam would have been used to divert water to gold mining projects and to be part of a regional energy network to take transfer the power of the river to richer countries further north. Her killers shot her and (Mexican environmental activist Gustavo Castro) to make sure she would be doing no more arm-twisting of international financiers and foreign investors, threatening the profits of the richest [10 families](#) in Honduras.

I had not met Berta, not even known her name, but I decided—the very day the world heard about her murder, to go to her funeral — to be with those with whom we have been accompanying in Honduras. Fr. Ismael ‘Melo’ Coto, SJ, Fr. Cesar, Osman, Pedro Landa, Jennifer, faith activists who had launched a [campaign](#) called “Mother Earth – Defending Our Common Home,” bringing people of faith in partnership with the struggle to protect indigenous lands and the natural resources of Honduras. In doing so, they were putting their own lives at risk. Father Cesar, whom I met last August when I traveled to Honduras with 16 faith leaders on a [Root Causes Pilgrimage](#) to investigate the root causes and root solutions to the forced migration of thousands of children and families, driven from their homes to seek protection and survival. Fr. Cesar and others spoke to us about the steady displacement of communities and threats to activists, defenders of the land and human rights, opposing efforts to appropriate land for mining and hydroelectric projects. “It’s a miracle that we are alive to talk to you,” they told us.

So when I heard Berta had been killed, my mind immediately went to our friends as they would be absorbing this tragic news. Berta had been their sister in the struggle. She was young, tireless, fearless, a force of intelligence and inspiration. My friend Jose Artiga who had helped me co-lead the pilgrimage said, “We should go accompany them for the funeral.” Yes, we could send a card, or email message. But if you lose a close family member, wouldn’t you rather your friend come in person to accompany you?

So we left on a plane for Honduras that day. When we got there, we saw our friends — devastated, exhausted, shocked, disbelief. The thought crossed my mind, that perhaps this is what Jesus’ friends and disciples, the witnesses and survivors, might have experienced that day after his capture and death. They spoke in hushed tones. Sadness, anger, and a creeping feeling of terror and fear was palpable. If they could do this to Berta, they would certainly do it to any of them. It was hard to sleep. They were extra vigilant. Grieving and supporting her family, organizing a public repudiation, disseminating accurate information, gathering the community, planning the funeral.

There was little information, as they tried to piece together, what really had happened. The government had been ordered to protect her by the Organization of American States and now she was dead. They had failed to investigate the numerous death threats against her, and had themselves last year, framed and trumped up charges of sedition against her calling her a terrorist for dissuading foreign investments. Now, the government had arrested one of Berta’s colleagues, putting out accusations that someone from COPINH, the organization Berta had co-founded, might have killed her, seeking to discredit and sow internal conflict among COPINH. Seeking to distract and divert attention from the real culprits.

As we drove the four hours to the mountain town of La Esperanza, Berta’s hometown, for her wake and funeral, they remembered and recalled the other martyrs who had been killed, [over 100](#) since the 2009 coup which was enabled by the US and then Secretary Hillary Clinton: Alta Gracia, Carlos Escalera, Juan Pérez, Williams Alvarado. Cristian Anael. Madrid Muñoz. Carlos Antonio Luna Lopez. Jeanette Kawas, [Maité Reyes Gonzales](#), Bertha Julia Trinidad, Olga Moncada, Teresa Luna Flores. Just last year, Tomas Garcia and Margarita Murillo. And since Berta’s death, there has been one more, Nelson Garcia. Names I had never hear of, martyrs of the land and rivers struggling so that the natural resources and beauty of Honduras could be shared and enjoyed by the majority of the Honduran people, not transnational mining companies, hydroelectric power companies, banana and palm oil plantations.

Berta’s murder, they said, was an ecological assassination. An attempt to silence her message calling us to “Wake Up to the rapacious capitalism, militarism, racism and patriarchy that is guaranteeing our self-destruction. Wake up, for there is no more time.”\*\* Her assassination was an attempt to silence her critique against empire: the Honduran and US military, international corporate interests, and oligarchic political forces willing to privatize all of Honduras. She would not be quiet. She would not stop. Her assassination was an attempt to stop the organizing and awakening of the consciousness and power of the Lenca, Garifuna and other indigenous people of

Honduras. When they realized that a small community of several thousand could stop one of the largest international dam projects with a yearlong roadblock formed with rocks and prayers, farmers and families, they were emboldened and the resistance grew. They showed that it *was possible* to reverse the course of destruction and empire. “I’d rather die of hunger here, than migrate,” more than one of them said.

Berta was crucified. Like the crucifixion story told on Good Friday about a poor Jewish peasant from Nazareth. The itinerant preacher, healer and critic of Empire, organizing to awaken the consciousness of a beaten down people, telling them that they had every right to challenge the military, economic, and political forces that sought to oppress them; that they had every right to oppose the complicity and corruption of the establishment institutions of the day; that the Kingdom of God was *within* them. Jesus’ crucifixion like Berta’s was meant to send a message, to be a public death, so as to quiet a discontent population. In those days, there were 12 forms of capital punishment and any one of them could have been ordered for Jesus. But death by hanging on the cross was special. It was reserved to be public, for the purpose of instilling public terror. “Hanging as deterrent.” Their hope was that by killing a leader, they could destroy an organization, a movement, an idea.

Today, my topic is Empire and the Cross, and I am seeing so clearly how Empire, the total control of all aspects of life, is maintained and reinforced by acts of public terror – death as deterrent. The public, extrajudicial killings of Black Lives — Michael Brown, Mya Hall, Eric Garner, Natasha Mckenna, Alex Nieto and Sandra Bland, where black and brown bodies continue to be publically executed, on video camera, and then publically exonerated with impunity, as if black lives do not matter, are not loved and cherished, maintain an empire based on white supremacy. Such acts of terror seek to frighten and terrorize entire communities, today as in the beginning of this nation, as if to say, “stay in your place, keep quiet, or else.”

Empire, the militarized control and extraction of the land and water, the very essence of life, now has forced the extraction of people just seeking a little piece of land. A woman farmer, Orbelina Flores, whom I met at Berta’s funeral, put it simply for me:

“We want to go to school, but we can’t.  
We want to eat, but there is not enough.  
We want to grow our own food, but there is no land.  
We start organizing for opportunity and a different future.  
Then they start to threaten you with assassinations.  
And then you are forced to leave your country, before they kill you.”

Whole communities have been forced to leave, displaced by economic interests, corporate contamination, other nations’ wars over natural resources. People, forced to abandon their homes and flee, extracted and exiled, with nothing but their labor and bodies to sell, so vulnerable to

exploitation and abuse. Now the very lifeblood of a nation, its people – those who for millennia have been connected to the land, who love and care for it, are also commoditized by Empire. Instead of being welcomed as refugees, they are seen as a national security threat met with drones and a 30–60 foot high and 650 feet long wall that has cost \$4.14 million per mile to build. Subjected to the public terror of death by rubber dingy boat over the Mediterranean Sea, or death by bandits on the tops of trains, or death by desert. One Arizona desert lover told me — they have even turned the beautiful desert — into a weapon. The so-called “deterrence” of ice boxes in the detention centers, roadblocks and checkpoints through Mexico, lengthy detention for asylum seekers who must pay \$15,000 bonds to get released. Thousands have arrived, and thousands have been deported. Over [63,000](#) Hondurans and 90,000 Guatemalans were deported from the US and Mexico (with US financing) last year, including 7000 underage children. “Death as deterrent,” policy-makers say, “so more do not try to come.”

Empire maintains itself through public acts of terror. Like Nagasaki and Hiroshima, atomic and nuclear weapons, used to threaten and bully our way into other nations allying in our wars, hosting our military bases and operations, and opening their nations to our economic policies. Bending to our wishes, or else. This Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory is a shrine to war, to the God of National Security, where more terrifying weapons are dreamed to achieve what the US military calls: “Full spectrum dominance: control of the air, the sea, the land, and space. In it’s control, all the elements of life.”

Here, public acts of terror are not spun out of terror cells, but out of shiny clean corporate buildings named after scientists. With a budget of \$1.5 billion annually and 5800 employees, developing and building new systems and weapons to maintain Empire to impose an economic system that means poisoned rivers, displacement, refugees and death, like what has happened to the Marshallese.

But Death is not the final word!

They try Death as deterrent, but migrants are not deterred when root causes are left untended. As Somali born poet, Warsan Shire says — “No one puts a child in a boat unless the water is safer than the land.” Along the migrant trail at shelters through Guatemala and Mexico, migrant families and individuals are allowed to rest and recuperate, to strengthen and restore their dignity. And in about 3 days they are ready to continue on their way again.

They try Death as deterrent: But the people of Honduras are not deterred. Thousands upon thousands came to Berta’s funeral traveling on buses for hours. Farmers and families with threadbare shoes, weathered faces, calloused hands and their Sunday sombrero. They risked leaving their land that could be re-occupied by government forces, and came, carrying their children. After 72 hours of thousands filing to view Berta’s body and sitting in wake outside her family home, by the 3<sup>rd</sup> day, they were in the streets – defiant, organized, demanding justice for Berta and those who are still alive, fighting against the 42 other dam projects in Honduras. Denouncing not just this assassination, but also the assassination of hunger, the assassination of poverty that they face

everyday. Saying that the love of God is not stopped because of this violence. We cannot let fear dominate. As long as we don't have fear, we live, and they do not win. I am not afraid to die, because others will carry on the struggle. They fear us because we are fearless, was one of Berta's favorite sayings.

They try Death as deterrent,  
But we won't be deterred, will we?

We will not be deterred by fear. We will not be deterred by cynicism, we will not be deterred by powerlessness. We will not be paralyzed, immobilized, numb. We will not shut up. We will not be deterred by lack of hope that change will come.

My second topic of this sermon, is "Sowing the seeds of Hope." The Empire has the cross, but we have the seeds of hope. And here are three seeds I leave with you:

1. The first seed is a trait I heard people using to describe Berta: She was stubborn they say. Stubbornness as a virtue. Stubbornness for justice. Continue to be the splinter in the foot, the blade of grass that breaks through the concrete. This witness has been happening here outside the Nuclear labs since 1982, where 1300 people were arrested at these gates. Hold on to the seed of hope that comes from stubbornness for life, for truth, for justice.
2. The second seed also comes from Berta. And it is the seed of being deeply and spiritually connected to the sacredness of land and water. All who came to help in Rio Blanco, had to first go and visit the river, to understand what was undergirding their movement. "Come see the River," she would say, "This is why we do this. This is what sustains our struggle." Most of us here are migrants and settlers to this land. We have so much to learn and unlearn about how to be deeply connected to the sacred river, sacred story, sacred land under which the Chochenyo Ohlone ancestors are buried. As guests, on this land, it is our duty and our obligation to love and respect this land and native people's struggles. Hold on to the seed of hope that comes from our connection to the sacredness of land and water.
3. The third seed of hope is to accompanying the victims of systemic injustice, those who are the witnesses, the survivors, those who are still alive. That could mean, accompanying those fighting for the liberation of black people, or those displaced by our militarism and economic policies. As the program director on Immigration for the Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity, I invite you to join with us in extend the hand of solidarity, support and justice for migrants displaced from

Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador today. Today, 15 teams of volunteers from congregations are engaging in forms of sanctuary and accompaniment for a 19-year-old mother with a one-year-old baby who escaped from El Salvador, a mother and her four daughters who fled Honduras and is now here in the Bay Area. By accompanying, walking with, we catch a bit of the hope and resilience that has brought people this far in spite of overwhelming circumstances. Their hope is contagious. By entering into relationship, we begin to find the internal strength and hope ... the *ganas*, the chutzpah, the audacity to resume the struggle. Hold on to the seed of hope that comes from relationship and accompaniment with those who are resisting and pushing forward toward the dream drawn in Isaiah 63:21–23: Houses for people to live in. Land for people to plant and eat their own fruit. The ability to feed one's own children from the riches of the earth. To not work in vain, but to work to better humanity and the earth. No longer bearing one's children into a world of horror, but into one of hope.

We are the seeds of hope. As surely as Archbishop Oscar Romero, said, in anticipation of his own assassination in 1980: “May my blood be the seed of freedom.”



As surely, as the precious seeds brought by African slaves from the continent. The seeds of medicine, sustenance, spirit. With the potential to multiply into thousands more. “Berta Cáceres did not die, she multiplied,” the people shouted. “Berta was not buried, she was planted.”

Wake Up, Wake Up, Humankind!

We are out of time.

We must shake our conscience free of the rapacious capitalism, racism and patriarchy that will only assure our own self destruction. The Gualcarque River has called upon us as have other gravely threatened rivers. We must hear their call. Our Mother Earth, militarized, fenced in, poisoned, a place where basic rights are systematically violated demands that we take action. Let us build societies that are able to coexist in a dignified way that protects life. Let us come together and remain hopeful as we defend and care for the blood of this Earth and its spirits.”

—Berta Cáceres, martyr, environmental and indigenous leader, 1969–201

Isaiah 63: 21–23: They will build houses and live in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They won't build for others to live in, nor plant for others to eat. Like the days of a tree will be the days of my people; my chosen will make full use of their handiwork. They won't labor in vain, nor bear children to a world of horrors.