

# Messengers of Hope

Advent, 2016

*Matthew 4:16 – The people living in darkness have seen a great light.*



He reached for my hand, and as quickly as I could pass my camera to my colleague, I was off dancing arm-in-arm behind two other couples. We danced a simple two-step around the circle, weaving through the crowd while waving a white flag. Though tricky to navigate around the random plants, stones and dust of the dry riverbed, our dance continued as the band played and the people cheered on.

But why the music and dancing? Why the celebration? It was around 3pm in the community of Peñas, a small town located outside of the mining city center of Oruro in southern Bolivia, and the ‘Chasquis’ we had sent out earlier that morning had all returned. There was nothing else to do but celebrate!

It was spring and sowing season here in the Bolivian *altiplano* (high plateau) and the rural communities, such as Peñas, and their crops were desperately in need of rain. As in so many rural communities, much of their youth have migrated to the cities in search of a better life, due to the loss of opportunity for a sustainable livelihood back home. But the elderly who have stayed behind remember their ancestors and the ceremonies they carried out to call for rain during these seasons.



Peñas community members walking through the dry riverbed as they carry out the Water Exchange Ceremony. Peñas, Oruro (Bolivia)

I was here with my colleagues from our PC (USA) global partner, the UMAVIDA (Joining Hands for Life) Joining Hands Network. Together we traveled more than seven hours from La Paz to this very rural community of Peñas to experience and be with them during the *Cambio de Aguas*, or the Water Exchange ceremony. We sat with community members as Victor Zenteno and Tío Mauricio Choque (Uncle Mauricio), traditional community leaders, prepared **the symbolic elements to be offered by the ‘Chasquis’**, the messengers, to the nine principle water points of the area. Though some would have to travel far the next day and others only to the neighboring community, each *Chasqui* was sent with symbolic elements such as sweets and incense, as well as two bottles. The *Chasquis* would take one bottle full of water from Peñas to leave at their water point, and would return with the other bottle full of water from their water point. The offerings are prepared and left at each water point for the Pachamama (indigenous term for Mother Earth), as a way to give of their gifts, so they are blessed with the gift of rain.



These offerings were prepared as the community members shared stories of the past – how the rains used to arrive more consistently, how high and plentiful their crops used to grow, how healthy and strong their livestock were, how their water was clean and potable before the arrival of mining activity, how that dry riverbed I would soon find myself dancing in used to flow so high that no transport or person could pass during the rainy season.

Though they were stories of sadness and nostalgia for those healthier and abundant times, the final story was hope. This community carries out this Water Exchange ritual annually as an expression of that hope to return to better times. They share it with those of the remaining younger generation in hopes that they will continue this important ancestral tradition of calling and waiting for the rains.

And so we waited. The *Chasquis* were sent out early the next morning and the community waited at the meeting point of *La Mesa*, The Table, an arid piece of land next to a dry riverbed and struggling crops. Apart from the blazing, *altiplano* sun and the occasional wind blowing around the dust, we were accompanied by community members and traditional leaders who, throughout the day, shared words of encouragement and faith in the harvest to come.



Then in the distance I saw a *Chasqui* making his way toward *La Mesa* and us. Though tired from the journey, the expression on his face was one of pride and jubilation. The band struck up the music as Victor went out to greet him with splashes of water. Juan Carlos Fuentes, a Peñas community member, arrived with water from Asanaque and poured it into the communal clay pot, just as the other *Chasquis* had also done. He made his way around the circle to receive handshakes from the traditional leaders and then was joined by one of the women cooks to dance around the circle. It was then that he approached me, and honored me by inviting me to take part in continuing the circle dance to celebrate the arrival of all of our Water Exchange messengers, our *Chasquis*.



A *Chasqui* arrives at *La Mesa* and is greeted by band music, water splashing and dancing. Peñas, Oruro (Bolivia)





A Chasqui arrives at La Mesa and pours his water point's water into the communal clay pot. Peñas, Oruro (Bolivia)

Though these ceremonies may seem antiquated or not understood by many, the simple act of coming together to call and pray for rain as a community is important for community cohesion and mutual care. Those of us here in the city of La Paz could use that now as we are currently suffering the [worst drought](#) **and water crisis the country has seen in 25 years. Bolivia's president, Evo Morales**, has declared a national emergency due to the great water shortages. The southern part of the city is supplied by water from reservoirs that are now basically dried up due to the lack of rain and careless water management planning. Many communities have been left without water for days on end, despite declarations of water rationing schedules by the water company.

Other communities further north, such as mine, are supplied by the surrounding glaciers, which are currently able to provide water. But with erratic temperatures and lack of rain, climate change and melting glaciers, extractive

mining activity and lack of government regulation, overconsumption and lack of consciousness – it is difficult to say where we are headed.



Peñas community member, Paulina Llanque, dancing to the music with her granddaughter as they celebrate the arrival of a Chasqui. Peñas, Oruro (Bolivia)

But I stand with the Peñas community, young and old, and Juan Carlos in declaring that my final story is hope. With so much negativity happening in our world today, against the environment and against each other, I will walk through this Advent season awaiting not only the rain, but also the light that emerges from such darkness. I will work and serve each day to embrace the Jesus Way and break through the dark of night to reveal a greater light. A light that calls us to restore and heal Creation – to stand with our Bolivian brothers and sisters struggling for a Water Law, with the Water Protectors in Standing Rock – who are all proclaiming that Water is Life! That living beings and this Creation are much more precious and sacred than any amount of corporate greed.

I invite you this Advent to be a *Chasqui* working together to spread the Advent message of hope, pray and offer ourselves for the good of the world, be mindful of our interconnectedness with the rest of the global community, and dance to celebrate those signs of light with whomever will take your hand and accompany you in strength and love. I thank you for your accompaniment and **support, for joining hands and “dancing” with us, which allows this circle of hope to continue.**

In peace, hope, joy and love,  
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### UMAVIDA Water Exchange Ceremony Video Documentary:

As seen in my newsletter, many indigenous, rural communities in Bolivia continue to uphold their ancestral and Andean traditions, specifically when it comes to water, the elements and their relationship with Mother Earth. As UMAVIDA, we wanted to document this ancestral wisdom through this [15-minute video](#) of the water ceremony calling for the rains for their crops and livelihoods (make sure you have turned on the subtitles). As citizens and Christians of the western hemisphere, one may see **traditions that may clash with one’s beliefs and understanding. But, as we look** beyond the differences, one can see that these communities blend their indigenous traditions with their Christian beliefs, as is common in a country where two-thirds of the population is indigenous. We ask that while you view this video, you put aside cultural assumptions and judgments in order to open avenues of grace, humility and generous curiosity that dignify our Bolivian brothers and sisters.

I am more than willing to receive questions about the video or explain its context more deeply at any time.

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