

(Word count: 500)

The Cute Little Nightmare

(adapted from *You Are There* by Robert Campbell, Cascade Books, 2016).

We drove into town, and then right out of town again. You've heard stories about towns so small you'd miss them if you blinked, it's true. Santa Margarita has one exit off Interstate 101 without another off-ramp for five miles in either direction. It's either Exit 211 or it's nothing. This was not quite what we expected. I had met the previous pastor, who faithfully served this church and town for nearly seventeen years. He told stories of the place that had me envisioning some mix between the Mitford of Jan Karon novels and a Eugene Peterson book. But was I supposed to be the pastor here? Our first trip to this small town raised big fears in us.

Now began the long process of discerning the difference between our fear and reality. We didn't put out any fleeces, sheep are not readily available in suburbia. Personally, I've never considered Gideon an example to follow. I would never want to encourage anyone to disobey a few times before obeying. This was more about examining our hearts. We needed to seek guidance in asking some difficult questions: What part of our fearful response has to do with Margarita and what part is our own past? What is something to go back to them and talk about? Is it appropriate to go and honestly ask, "Is 100 people a good core or a dying church?" How well have children done who grew up in this church? Can we ask more about the history of the people in the church so we could learn their stories and feel the stability of three and four generations serving in one place? That is what we did. We went back and asked a million questions, mixed in among times to play, eat and laugh, which you just have to do in a place like this.

The people and place of Santa Margarita began to help the Campbell family grow in our walk with Jesus long before we arrived in town. They pushed us to set aside our fear and to trust.

They invited us to walk with them. To give up control and risk a little bit on a people and a place in God's great reconciliation program, the local church. The lessons they have taught me about restoring people and place continue everyday. There is something small town people know about Christian living on a human scale that most of us don't. By scale, I mean that size, numerically or geographically, at which caring for people and place becomes inevitably impersonal, unneighborly. There is something that Christian ranchers know about a daily walk with Jesus that happens with actual people in an actual place. Their faith is lived out in the dirt that they nurture and the animals they feed. There is something about the people of God that I have only really understood after living in this parish. I have learned, hands on, the biblical truth that people and place always go together.