



Lent 2021

"This is the place," Daniel said pointing to an area of the thick jungle underbrush. "Here is where I fell."

Daniel, Andres, Candelario and Eliezar, leaders in our Catholic Church, and I stood surrounded by bushes, vines and towering trees in misty rain. We had trekked an hour along a muddy narrow path, barely visible through the dense vegetation that choked our way.

Candelario pulled from a small black plastic bag two white votive candles in glass containers with the imprinted Virgin of Guadalupe flanked by roses- that reminded us we were not alone. Placing them side by side on a cleared spot off the path; he lit them. Their flames would be the keeper of our prayers.

We hiked to this spot the morning of February 20th. This is the day Santiago Ixcán celebrates the memory of our martyrs- those whose lives were violently taken in the early 80's during the civil war. It is also Lent, the Catholic liturgical season on prayer, fasting and almsgiving in preparation for the great feast of Easter.

We came here to pray.



Daniel is our guide and a survivor of 'the massacre of the Playa.' Other members of the faith community would be gathered and praying at other points in and around Santiago Ixcán where other innocents and holy ones had been murdered. I chose to come here – at the site of the massacre that occurred in May of 1983.

The story goes like this: After harrowing long months of killings, threats and disappearances by both sides of the armed conflict, the situation seemed to have calmed. The people felt confident that it was now safe to harvest the community corn crop at the Playa, a fertile area near the Xalbal River about two hours by foot from the village.

Most of the community – ninety men, women, youth and children swelled the dirt path through the forest creating a long line of hunger and hope. They crossed a tall wood bridge over a river when just at the edge of the field an onslaught of bullet fire from automatic guns showered the air - Papapappaapaaapaaapaa...

Screams. Panic. Run. Get down. Hide. Live....

The rapid-fire shots sounding like non-stop firecrackers went on it seemed for an eternity. When the madness stopped, the blood flowed. Eight people (mostly children and teens) were dead and four wounded.

Daniel shares, "We heard shots and bullets started flying all around us! I threw myself on the ground but felt a piercing heat and pain in my left hip. I was shot!" His younger brother, only 12- years- old, lay lifeless a few feet away.

The people recovered their wounded and dead, their limp bodies strewn on the backs of mules amidst cries and wails of grief as they returned in a death march to the village...

The candles flickered. Candelario led the prayer. We prayed for the victims – for the repose of their souls, then for the survivors – for the healing of their scarred bodies and the unseen wounds lodged in their minds and hearts.

Then he said, "And Lord, we pray for the persons who did this evil. We ask you to forgive them. May they be converted to You." Candelario's prayer felt like a slap, a jolt. I lifted my head. The four men's heads remained bowed, eyes closed. I studied Daniel. His lips moved in unison with ours as he prayed in agreement.

Who do I need to forgive?

After praying we shook hands and greeted one another. (The usual custom here.) Then Candelario asked, "What should we do with the candles?"

"Leave one here and take one with us – for the sanctuary," Andres said. "I can pick up this one tomorrow, I work nearby." He cut a frond and planted it over the solitary candle to protect it from the rain.

Then we hiked out.

The community gathered for Mass an hour later. From where I sat in the church, I viewed Daniel sitting on the left side front pew. His usual place. I looked at him and at the lit candle we had brought from the forest, sitting like a sentinel near the altar.

I later asked him, "How were you able to forgive all of this?"

He said, "God says in order for me to be forgiven of my sins, I have to forgive. God forgives them and me." But he added,

"No se borre." It isn't erased - forgotten.

I am thinking of Easter early. Of that lone candle in the dark forest, its light shining where so much violence had occurred. Now bird songs fill the air instead of bullets. And the light we brought with us from that place. The candle's flame dancing in the sanctuary and the light of 59-year-old Daniel, father of eight, simple farmer, and prayer group member – who lives. A man who had the grace to forgive his enemies –and witness to Easter Resurrection – of God's eternal promise of Life's triumph over death.

Light in the darkness.

Thank you for your prayers and support of our mission in the Ixcán, Guatemala!
May God grace your Lenten journey with the promise of Easter hope and new life!
Because He lives.

Sincerely,



Kathy Snider

Note: Due to the sensitive nature of this story names have been changed to maintain anonymity.



Mission Update:

Kathy returned to Santiago Ixcán on January 9th. The mission goes forward amidst some Covid restrictions.

Some highlights:

*We are helping a non-profit Catholic organization in Guatemala City - the *Fraternidad de la Divina Providencia* in Zone 1 that feeds 150 to 200 people per day to expand our White Flag Ministry.

*We also hired a second part-time person- teacher Pedro Bonifacio - to help in the Library –part of our education outreach.

*Our Luchadora women's group continues to meet and we are trying to address some of their more pressing needs (housing, water, medical) beyond the basic necessities they are already receiving.

OUR MISSION STATEMENT

Ixcán Ministries is a Christian lay mission serving as a ministry of presence with the Maya people in the Ixcán jungle of Guatemala. We act as a bridge between cultures for the exchange of gifts to transform lives and society.

Our programs include- Scholarships, Community Library, Women's Micro-business, Medical, Housing, and Food Assistance, Spiritual and Pastoral Accompaniment, and Promotion of Peace and Justice.

Ixcán Ministries is a 501(c) 3 organization. Your contributions are tax deductible.

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