



Volume 15, Issue 1 January 2015

Dear Friends,

This year I made the long, strenuous journey from Santiago Ixcán to Mandan, North Dakota, for Christmas. As I travelled from there to here, I reflected on the Advent season invitation leading to Christmas of *finding Him*.

I remembered an encounter during a prior Advent on December 18, 2013, to be exact, when my friend José Raymundo met me in Playa Grande in his four-wheel-drive pickup. He had offered to drive me the last two-hour leg of my return trip from the U.S. to home in Santiago Ixcán. On December 10, Jose's wife Maria had given birth to their second child. Mother and child were still in Playa Grande, where Maria had given birth in her parent's home (both her mother *and* her father are midwives). Of course I said to José before leaving Playa, "I want to see the baby."

And so we went. José led me through the humble home to a darkened, dirt floor room. There in a single bed, Maria lay with a tiny baby boy tucked up close at her breast. I bent down beside the bed and gently touched the baby's forehead. I whispered, "Maria, he's beautiful." "Yes," she weakly replied. "But he almost died. He came feet first. When he was born he wasn't breathing. My sister breathed life into him. God had mercy. *Nos salvamos* — We are saved."



José, Maria and baby Jesus, "Chuy", one year later.

Without thinking I said aloud, "This baby is my first Christmas encounter of Jesus in the Ixcán." I smiled. After all, I was with a Joseph and a Mary and their newborn son who had barely escaped death.

Later, when it was time to name the baby, José declared, “Kathy called him Jesus, and that will be his name.” And so in Santiago Ixcán we have a little boy named Jesus. “Chuy” they call him and he is precious and much loved.

I left Santiago Ixcán for the U.S. on December 6 in the dark early hours of morning. José Raymundo was once again my driver and we (José, three other men from the village and I) sat inside his double-cab pickup he calls “Che” (after the revolutionary Che Guevara).

Che has power, but this time as we swayed and jolted along the treacherous muddy road on the outskirts of Santiago at one of the most difficult areas to pass, we got stuck. This is unusual. José and Che rarely get stuck. “Kathy, you drive,” José commanded as he and the other men jumped out of the truck to push. I “floored it,” the motor roared, and the wheels spun furiously as the men heaved and pushed only to make the left rear wheel sink even deeper into the mud trap. “We need a rope,” I shouted to José. He didn’t have one. “Get a rope from Juan (the owner of the house adjacent to this part of the road).” And he left to get it.



I sat gripping the steering wheel and prayed, “God help us get out of here...” Within minutes a big white pickup plowed by on our right. I noticed a bull emblem emblazoned on the side of the truck and my heart sank. “Oh, it’s him, Keeshan.” Keeshan you see, is sort of well – my enemy. Well, not directly *my* enemy but someone I avoid. He illegally sells liquor in our village. Years ago the members of our community passed a law forbidding the sale of alcohol to curtail the ever-growing problem of alcoholism plaguing so many men and potential youth. “No hope in him,” I thought as Keeshan’s truck triumphantly passed and arrived on the road to freedom in front of us.

Then something happened. I saw Keeshan’s truck’s red brake lights go on. Then the vehicle slowly backed up at the same time José arrived with the rope. It stopped and Jose and Keeshan talked at the rolled down window. I watched as José quickly tied the rope between the two trucks. Then they signaled me to turn on the ignition and give ‘er gas as the four men pushed from behind and Keeshan pulled from the front. The motors roared and wheels spun. “Come on, come on,” I urged, gripping the wheel, foot pressed on the gas pedal to the floor. Then Che began to jerk and inch forward, rolling side to side like a boat passing through rough waters. Then — freed! José untied the rope and Keeshan, without a word, sped away. I couldn’t even thank him. José got into the driver’s seat as I slid to the front passenger side. “Did you ask him to stop and help us?” He asked. “No,” I responded. “He just did it.”

In the morning darkness as the head lights of the truck lit the way along that muddy road, no one saw the tears in my eyes, as judgment turned to gratitude and I encountered Jesus in an act of kindness and good will through an unlikely Samaritan.

The next day I read from Morning Prayer in the Liturgy of the Hours the intercession, “Give light to our eyes and help us recognize You in one another.”

I was to meet my American friend, Liz, in Antigua, Guatemala (a stop-over before flying out of Guatemala City to Houston, TX in a few days), for Mass at the small Spanish colonial church adjacent to Obras Sociales de Hermano Pedro, a hospital for the poor and sanctuary for mentally impaired children and adults. I entered the church, noticing young and older adults hunched over while sitting in wheelchairs aligned in a row like soldiers in file on the front right side of the church aisle. The sick and the healthy worship together here. I didn’t see Liz anywhere (I found her after Mass), so I walked down the aisle to the middle front and sat in an empty pew on the left. I noticed two of the four candles on the large adorned Advent Wreath were lit. It was Week Two.

A few minutes later, a woman in her 30s, bobbed brown hair, heavy set, short and mentally challenged entered the pew and sat right next to me — and I mean *right next*. Now, this was an *empty* pew apart from us, and I am a woman who needs lots of personal space, so I slowly slid a bit to the left away from her. And she in turn, slid right along, planted happily at my side. I quickly realized that there was no escaping her; she wouldn’t let me. No matter how often or how far I moved away from her in that pew she would follow. So I stayed put and sank into my initial discomfort of her

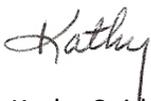
differentness, her need for human contact. And then something happened. By the time Mass was over, I was comfortable with my persistent Jesus. I met *Him*, in her, you see. I experienced God's persistent and unconditional love pursuing me no matter how far I pushed *Him* away. That was her gift to me.

The priest in his homily at that Mass spoke about preparing for Christmas. How in Advent we work and spend hours and money to prepare decorations, food, and gifts – but “The real preparation that matters,” he said, “is interior. It is the preparation for Christmas that asks, **‘What is left after the holiday. What has changed in me?’** It calls for conversion of life and heart.”

So, these are the questions I am asking myself now that the holiday is over. And the invitation remains...

Thank you for your prayers and financial support of Ixcán Ministries this past year. May God bless you and yours in 2015!

Sincerely,



Kathy Snider

Lay Missioner and Executive Director,
Ixcán Ministries



OUR MISSION STATEMENT

Ixcán Ministries provides a prayerful, pastoral presence through lay missionaries living in solidarity with the poor of the remote Ixcán jungle of Guatemala to learn from as well as to assist both spiritually and materially the people with whom life and ministry are shared. The organization strives to be a bridge between two cultures and nations allowing for the exchange of varying gifts between the rich and poor for the ultimate purpose of empowerment and transformation of lives and society.

Ixcán Ministries is a 501(c) 3 organization. Your contributions are tax deductible. You may contact us at:

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