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'What do you want me to do for you?' 'Sir,' he replied, 'let me see again.' Luke 18: 41

Dear Friends,

On the 30th of June, Santiago Caal Chen, a 40 year old Q'eqchi man from the village of Sierra Monterrey, arrived at my door. Three weeks earlier, I joined a local mission team of about 15 – catechists, musicians, women, and children who hiked the rigorous 2 hour trip (I rode mule) to Sierra Monterrey, the most remote village in our pastoral area. The views were breathtaking! The path consisted of exhausting inclines, but finally, tired but happy; we entered the humble community consisting of 15 families nestled among acres of cardamom, rain forest, and hills. Sierra Monterrey had been founded 11 years ago by 6 families and Santiago and his family were one these. I



informed the people that there would be eye exams and vision testing at my home in Santiago Ixcán by a trained eye care promoter at the end of June. I encouraged Santiago to participate because he was one of two catechists in the village and was having difficulty reading the Bible due to failing vision.

One goal of Ixcán Ministries is to offer the community short-term health clinics from our mission base. About a year and a half ago, I contacted Dr. Scott Peck, an ophthalmologist from Portland, Oregon, who is doing eye care in the Ixcán through Enfoqueixcán, a non-profit organization he founded and directs. One of Enfoqueixcán's local, trained promoters had been scheduled to do a one-day eye vision clinic at the end of June in my home mission base. Two days prior to the scheduled eye clinic, the promoter was forced to cancel due to a family emergency. I had advertised the clinic by word of mouth but did not remember who I had told. Now here was Santiago from distant Sierra Monterrey for an eye exam. My heart sank. I apologized profusely while explaining the situation. He graciously replied, "No tenga pena, hermana." (Don't feel bad, sister.) I offered him a cold drink and inquired, "Can you see distance?" "Yes, but I can't see words or letters close up," he replied. My heart leapt! "Perhaps I can help you, wait a minute!"

About a year ago, Lynn with Familias de Esperanza/Common Hope in Antigua, a non-profit organization based out of St. Paul, Minn., had given me some basic reading glasses with a hand held vision eye chart and a 20 minute explanation of how to do a vision test. I scrambled to a back room and pulled out the plastic bag with the glasses! In minutes Santiago was trying on various strengths of glasses while he held the eye chart at reading length. Finally, he chose the glasses that he could see with best! I ran to the chapel and grabbed the Bible in Spanish. Placing the open holy book in his hands, I asked him, "Can you see the words? Can you read the words?" "Yes, perfectly!" He responded. We both beamed! I was delighted that his vision needs were simple enough that I was able to help him, thanks to the help I had received. I invited him for lunch and he began to share his amazing journey that led him and his family to Sierra Monterrey.

Tens of thousands of Guatemalans fled systematic army repression between 1980 and 1983 during the devastating 36-year civil war that flooded southern Mexico with refugees. Santiago was one of these, a 3rd grader at the time, who was forced to flee with his family to Chiapas, Mexico from their home in Santa Maria Dolores in the Ixcan. There they lived for 15 long years during which time he met and married Rosa.

In 1993, refugees began returning to Guatemala in organized groups under a negotiated accord between the Guatemalan government and refugees in Mexican camps. The refugees were promised safe and peaceful repatriation. Santiago's family decided to return to the land of their ancestors. Escorted by human rights organizations, along with 50 other families, they made the long trek back to the Ixcán, Guatemala.

Unfortunately, the return was anything but safe and peaceful. When the refugees tried to return to their former homes, they were met by hostile throngs of locals equipped with machetes, stones and sticks who now possessed their lands. The authorities did nothing. Dejected and desperate they camped outside of their village for 6 days while negotiations ensued. During that time pregnant Rosa gave birth to a baby!

Now dispossessed in their own land, the returnees were moved from encampment to encampment in a search for a place to call home. Initially, they took refuge with the Catholic Church in the municipal seat of Cantabal out of fear for their safety. While camped near the cemetery in Cantabal gunshots were fired by an unknown gunman. A 9 year old child, Elena, Santiago's cousin, was shot dead! Terrified, the people were moved to another large plot of land near the village of Victoria 20 de Enero. There they lived for about a year waiting for land in which they could actually settle and call their own. In 1996, they were allotted land in Alta Verapaz for resettlement. Thus, the new community of Santa Elena 20 de Octubre, named after Elena who had been killed, was formed!

Later, the government offered land in a very remote area of the Ixcan for settlement. Santiago learned of the offer. As he had not been an original land owner in Santa Maria Dolores (his father was) he was not entitled to own land in Santa Elena. Bravely, along with five other families from Santa Elena, he and Rosa decided to leave and resettle in this new land. They named their new home "Sierra Monterrey".

"How many children do you have, Santiago?" I asked. "Many," he replied. "How many?" I persisted. "Eleven," he said. Then very slowly while struggling to recall, he began to name each child one by one on his fingers. As he arrived at number eleven, he continued to the next finger. Smiling up at me, he declared, "twelve! I have twelve children." "Bueno," I smiled.

As I watched Santiago throw the small pack on his back and leave through my front gate, I felt moved and touched. Listening to this unassuming, simple, humble man who had come to my home to see, I knew that I had been given sight in a different fashion... sight into a life and an amazing struggle of a man and his family to survive and find a place to call home.







Mission Update: Kathy returned to the U.S. on July 17th for yearly U.S. visit. While in Guatemala she had developed some health issues which affect her ability to walk and stand for any length of time. (plantar fasciitis, tendonitis, and shin splints.) She is doctoring here and we hope that she will be up and running again soon. In the meantime we ask for your prayers. She will continue to do reverse mission activities (public speaking, visiting, and writing) as God leads and opportunities present themselves. Thank you for your continued support of Ixcán Ministries!

OUR MISSION STATEMENT

Ixcán Ministries provides a prayerful, pastoral presence through lay missioners 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.

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