

September 14, 2014 – Exaltation of the Holy Cross
Prepared by Kathy McNeely, former lay missionary, Guatemala

Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 78:1-2, 34-35, 36-37, 38; Philippians 2:6-11; John 3:13-17

“... I will utter dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us.” Psalm 78: 2b-3a

We all have our stories. These stories are shaped by our cultural experience, by what our parents teach us and by the way we choose to respond to the world around us. While living and working in Guatemala among indigenous Qeqchi' people the stories I heard came to mind as I read today's readings for the celebration of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross.

Today's scriptures paint a picture of just how powerful stories can be – not only individual stories but the stories that an entire culture embraces. In the reading from Numbers we encounter the story that the Israelites told themselves while wandering in the desert. It was a hopeless story, filled with doom and despair. They had forgotten just how horrible their lives were as slaves and demanded more comfort. They complained to Moses even about the manna that God gave them to survive: “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.” As the expression of their misery grew, so did their troubles, poisonous snakes bit people and left them to die. Through Moses, God invites the people to change their story from misery to gratitude, and in doing so, they are able to overcome their difficulties in the wilderness.

When I worked in San Luis, I met Norman, who lived with his wife Dalia and their three children in the neighborhood adjacent to mine. Norman asked me to come to his house the day his daughter Daisy was born. Dalia had never taken this long in labor with their other children. He worried that we might have to rush out to the clinic and he wanted me and the vehicle I drove nearby. While we were waiting, Norman gave his six-year-old son a bit of money and asked him to go and buy some bread. When his son left, Norman proudly said, “He's a bright boy. You watch, he's going to come back with bread.” Then Norman told me that that he himself was never very bright. He said that when he was a boy, his mother would give him money to go to the store for a spool of thread, but he would go and come back with nothing because he would forget what his mother told him to buy.

This was Norman's story – a story of defeat, a story that indicated that Norman was just did not measure up to others' expectations. His story was quite different from my experience of Norman. In community life he always had positive input that helped people make decisions, but since Norman didn't really believe in himself, he prefaced that input with “some people say...” or some other indication that the thought he was contributing was not his own. In this way, he constantly reinforced his internal notion that he was not clever and his thoughts did not matter.

In that respect, Norman was no different than many Guatemalans who, after decades of oppression, just did not believe in themselves as individuals. However, as I reflect back on my experience living and working in Guatemala, this individual story changes when a community decides to take action together. In this regard an expression from the ancient Mayan creation story, the *Popol Vuh*, gives voice to the notion: “Everyone rises up and no one is left behind.”

In the mid-1990s, the Guatemalan peace accords were being signed and refugees began returning from Mexico to rebuild their lives. I remember how bleak the surroundings felt when a group of us drove into the camp. Plastic tarps were everywhere, some men were working together to chop fire wood, and women were lined up to gather water from one of two newly constructed wells. The ground was muddy from some of the first spring rains. When we spoke to Eduardo, one of the community leaders, he was completely animated. He talked about their move from Mexico and how they had formed committees to build, and plant and help one another get settled into their new homes. He sat tall on his stool as he spoke with so much hope for the future that this community of refugees would build tighter.

Then we asked Eduardo about the circumstances under which he left Guatemala, when he fled to Mexico. Immediately his demeanor changed. His shoulders slumped, his voice got low and quiet. It crackled as he struggled not to cry. He spoke of an army raid on their village. He was just a nine-year old boy; he fled with his mother and sister. Family members, animals, possessions were left behind; he could hear screaming and see flames coming from the rooftops of village houses when he looked back from the dark woods where they hid. Despite his temptation to stand and watch, he was pressed by the adults to keep moving.

The massacre story that caused Eduardo to flee is a crucifixion story. The feelings that welled up in Eduardo as he spoke could be compared to those experienced by Jesus' followers once he was crucified. After living through the suffering and horror that their dear friend experienced, they must have questioned how they would go on. Yet, they did, and therein lies the mystery of how a story of devastating and paralyzing crucifixion becomes "the triumph of the holy cross." Somehow, surrounded by a community of survivors, Eduardo, like the followers of Jesus, could turn his story around. Destruction and death did not have the final word! With the commitment to come home to Guatemala and rebuild their lives, God's story of compassion, of great reversals could now be his. He now told a story of resurrection and new beginnings.

In a world that cries with signs of destruction and defeat, we are challenged to see the great reversal that is offered in the cross. Jesus "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave... he humbled himself, and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross." But his death was not the end of the story; it's just the beginning of a story of eternal life for those who chose to embrace it. Let us go out this week and tell new stories, stories that embrace the past, but do not hold us there; stories that promise new life and invite us to create future full of hope and life-giving possibilities.

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200 New York Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20001

202-832-1780 ogc@maryknoll.org www.maryknollogc.org