

*Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me,
And I will listen to you. Jeremiah 29:12*

Dear Friends,

10 January 2022

While most people have a story to tell about the pandemic altering plans, it was Benjamin's dream which seemed to redirect the course of our 2021. I suppose we'd not taken him seriously over the years when he'd occasionally say he was going to pursue his sports ambitions in the U.S. But he got our attention in December 2020 by arranging several interviews and securing a scholarship offer to attend a private high school in upstate New York.

From various websites and a few friends, we learned Hoosac School was well-rated academically and known for its development of basketball players. Though usually cautious, Deirdre and I were won over by several long phone conversations with school officials and, more, by Benjamin's desire to step out in faith. A 'home body' by nature, he believed God would use this opportunity in his life journey, even if in some unexpected way.

So, in late January 2021, Benjamin and I flew to the U.S., intending for me to stay two months to 'settle and support' him. Two pieces of grace fell into our laps: a Honda Accord loaned by Don and Barb, and *Brook Hollow*, the vacant get-away cottage belonging to my friends Deborah, who grew up on the adjacent farm, and her husband Michael. Coming to the U.S. in the thick of a COVID winter made it difficult for us to just 'drop in' on close friends, but with these kindnesses we seemed set. Benjamin and I quarantined in the cottage for a few days before driving to his new school.

Hoosac, a classic 19th century-era private school on the pastoral Vermont border, had in the last few years merged with the International Sports Academy, adding forty basketball-playing students who were housed in a renovated primary school two miles off the main campus. When we stepped inside its dormitory-cum-gym, Benjamin and I began to wonder. Five or six students were squeezed into each converted classroom, each laying on king-size mattresses arrayed around the floor, with no desks for study, living out of shelf-cabinets (Benjamin's was still unassembled), and, during this lockdown, gathering their meals from a small kitchenette. The coach, an ambling 7-foot Serbian named Bo, gave us a perfunctory tour, intermittently muttering to reclining students, "Hey, here's a new guy," to which a few looked up from their screens to grunt back. Over in the adjacent gym (open until 11pm, Bo proclaimed), the players appeared to be high quality. Our parting, one of many Benjamin and I would make over the coming months, evoked his wrenching first days in nursery school. Having come this far, though, we just had to hope for the best.

That afternoon I drove three hours south to New York City where our older son Zac was due to fly in the next day. I stayed the night with Ange, my college buddy and now a gynecologist, and his family. One of the silver linings of my pandemic period has been reconnecting with Ange. We'd not met for 30 years, but he happened to look me up on the internet and now it felt like I'd rediscovered a long-lost brother. The next morning I picked up Zac at JFK airport. The two of us spent the day at a Manhattan art museum, one of our shared pleasures, before driving to his campus in Pennsylvania.

By that point Zac had already finished his first semester at Swarthmore College, though nothing was traditional about his start there. In August 2020 he'd departed alone from a locked-down Nepal on a relief agency's transport plane, gotten settled into college with my sister Jill substituting for his parents, and eventually did all his classes on line. To our delight, he seemed to thrive. Gifted in both studies and making friends, Zac benefitted from the college's diversity and its pandemic-muted social calendar. He returned to Nepal for an extended Christmas 2020 break to find us deliberating on Benjamin's suddenly emerging adventure. One week after Benjamin and I left for the U.S., Zac also did, leaving Deirdre to hold down the Nepal fort with our cocker spaniel Bella for company. After dropping Zac at college, though still not allowed to see inside his dorm, I drove north to hunker down again in Brook Hollow.

The next morning when I went out to the car, I realized I'd have to walk down the hill. The bright February air was shot through with fat snowflakes, rapidly accumulating on the country lane. Brook

Hollow is located at the edge of an upstate New York farm, up too steep a hill for my car to drive back in the snow. So I crunched my way down the one mile road amidst pine forest until I reached Trinity Dairy, where I'd arranged with Deborah's cousin to use their Wi-Fi. There I settled myself at an indoor picnic table beside the milking station and opened my computer. While cows lumbered into the adjacent room to engage their udders with the robotic milker, I connected with Deirdre who was nearing bedtime in Kathmandu. Our family, who'd spent the last two decades together, was abruptly in four different locations, so there was a lot on which to catch up. After an hour of talk I trundled back up the windy hill.

Enfolded together amidst pristine banks of snow, warmed by a wood-burning stove, and lacking internet or phone service, the house and I became intimate. I spent my solitary weekdays writing for work and recreation, *skyping* Deirdre from the dairy in the mornings and walking up a knoll with cellphone signal to call Benjamin at night. Weekends I drove three hours east to spend with Benjamin, who was on an emotional roller coaster. He could see his basketball improving in this setting and appreciated getting to play even while much of the U.S. was locked down. He'd made friends with several students, including his Ugandan roommate Brick. But the coaches and teachers did little to diminish his loneliness and my visits seemed to perpetuate a cycle of separation. Our weekends together, spent walking in the snow, sampling the take-out restaurants of Troy, NY, and 'camping' in hotel rooms, bonded us even more deeply, but my inevitable departure for Nepal loomed.

Two weeks before I was to leave the U.S., we'd organized a family reunion at my Aunt Barbara's house. I'd planned to drive Zac and Benjamin there, my mom would drive up from her retirement community, and my cousins and my sister's family would show up at some point in the festivities. On the way to my Aunt's, though, we got a call from my mom. After a weekend driving her car around to shop for the family meal, she'd developed sudden leg pain. The reunion never took place as she was admitted to the hospital for spinal stenosis, a condition that would land her in various institutions over the next two months and render her wheelchair-bound. She'd been an active 96 until all this started.

At the end of March, I returned to Nepal with mixed feelings. Sure, I was delighted to see Deirdre after such a long time away, but was also weighed by concerns for Benjamin and now my mom. And for my Aunt Marie who'd recently developed chronic hepatitis. Deirdre and I reunited in our freshly-empty nest, taking our dinners out on a veranda table where in the twilight we discussed the interconnected events of this already eventful year.

After ending his school year in May, Benjamin went to stay with his godfather Fred and wife Cyndi in upstate New York, working for some weeks before returning to Nepal. Back home in our living room, with Bella on his lap, Benjamin and I discussed his options. He'd worked through his homesickness even to the point of considering a return to Hoosac, but Deirdre and I couldn't agree to a school with such poor nurture and worse academics. We'd applied to another private school in Pennsylvania, a choice that would have involved our moving to the U.S. to be close to Benjamin, Zac, and my mom. Over several weeks of deliberation and prayer, Benjamin decided to stay in Nepal. So, as 2022 begins, here we are.

Benjamin has joined a competitive basketball club team in Kathmandu while he attends the British School, a solid academic experience. Zac finished his third semester of college and has come home again this Christmas. My mom remains severely limited, cared for by home aides with a big assist from my sister Jill. As if all this were not enough, my brother Scott, single and with mental health issues, has recently been diagnosed with inoperable cancer; my sister Nancie accompanies him through doctor visits and treatments. The U.S. has never felt so far away.

2021 was quite a year for us. Even leaving aside work in a COVID hospital, it brought more than its share of unexpected challenges and dangling issues. But, also, a sense of gratitude. I don't think we as a family had ever prayed as much or as fervently. So, along with its ups and downs, the journey has left an aftertaste, the sweetness of having shared a path with *Immanuel*.

We pray that tenderness for each of you over the coming year.

Love,

Mark, Deirdre, Zachary, and Benjamin