

*Fear not, little flock,
for it is your Father's good pleasure
to give you the kingdom. Luke 12:32*

Dear Friends,

12 March 2023

This past January our medical school asked me to take a turn supervising senior students during their 4-month rural rotation, so I travelled by jeep out to Amp Pipal Hospital in the mountains 60 miles northwest of Kathmandu. I spent a week there, making rounds with the eight female students, testing their clinical skills, and ending each day with a teaching session. Evenings when I returned to the guest house, a view of the nearby mountain darkening against a peach sky filled the screened window, and my thoughts slipped back to a day in 1987.

I last lay eyes on my two porters as we cross the old airfield down by the river. After meeting me where the truck stopped in Turture, they somehow lash my various awkwardly-shaped travel bags into units and begin carrying them on their backs. It's hot and they intend to take it easy: after ten minutes of walking, they ask to stop and eat. Hoping to beat the approaching darkness, I push ahead, aiming for a spot high on the mountain where the porters indicate the Amp Pipal Hospital is located.

After about an hour of gentle climbing past banana trees and thatch-roofed stone houses, the first drops of rain bounce off the guitar case I'm carrying. I wonder where the rest of my porous pieces of luggage are now. April is not the monsoon season, but the rain continues, the light dims in the forest and the trail turns ever upwards.

I come upon three Nepali nurses who say they're also walking to the hospital. At first I consider going ahead of them, but as steep became steeper, I grow to appreciate their methodical pace. They know when to stop and rest, when to be refreshed by tea, and they have a flashlight while mine is with my porters – wherever they are. In the cool, steady drizzle, we pick our way among the shadows of half-seen rocks and tree roots. I think about the hot shower and food I hope will be waiting for me up at the hospital.

The forest thickens. There are no lights, no electricity, and no people. Who would be out walking on such a rainy night? Lightning flashes briefly illuminate the path. It seems like we've been walking for hours.

As we come around a hill, I'm startled by brightness a mile or so ahead. "The hospital," one nurse murmurs. As we draw closer, the hum of its generator and glowing rectangles of light conjure some spaceship touched down in a prehistoric land. The bright image dips in and out of the trees. The hospital compound apparently sits in the lap of a mountain whose black outline looms against the gray sky over my right shoulder. We arrive 15 minutes later and the nurses bring me into a cluster of houses, murmuring into two half-lit doorways, before finally leading me to a one-story dwelling at the top of the sloping compound.

A Caucasian woman comes to the screen door and after exchanging a few words of Nepali with the nurses, swings it open and looks me up and down.

"So here's Mark!" she exclaims in a Scottish lilt. "I'm Jill. Come in. Come in. What a night you've had to endure. Come right in now." She grabs my guitar case and pins the door open with her foot for me to enter, calling past me, "Ken! It's Mark! He's arrived!"

That first time I walked up the hill to Amp Pipal, I had no idea what lay ahead. I'd come to Nepal the previous fall planning to do a several-month volunteer stint and, despite not being a committed Christian, had stumbled into an organization called the United Mission to Nepal. During the next year on that mountain, among total strangers – several of whom would become lifelong friends – my life took a new direction: I became a Christian and discovered a calling, which meant spending my medical career in Nepal. Nearly twenty years after that hike, when a group of us were given the opportunity to found a non-profit healthcare organization, Amp Pipal was the template I

had in mind for vitalizing Nepal's government district hospitals. Undeserved blessings heaped ever higher, I met Deirdre in Nepal and our boys spent their childhoods becoming part-Asian.

The recent med school trip into those familiar hills, beneath the ageless, snowy gaze of Himal Chuli, became something of a bookend for me, because we've now decided this will be our last year in Nepal. I suppose we could cite an accumulation of reasons – both our sons due to be in universities in the U.S.; my Mom and aunts in Pennsylvania and not getting any younger; the ever-difficult Nepal visa situation – but as this term's end approached, we were hoping for more than a tally of pros and cons. Whenever people express surprise at our staying in Nepal this long, we usually admit it wasn't our plan; we've just felt God nudging us on from one term into the next.

As we considered America, our spoken and prayed plea was, *What in the world are we going to do back there?* We'd set this past Christmas, with Zac 'home' from college, to finalize our decision but by October still hadn't reached a consensus. One November morning as I reflected on how much I'd miss the chance to preach in Nepali church, a gentle question startled my reverie: *So why don't you become a pastor?* I had to admit it had never remotely occurred to me, but when I took stock of my experience and gifts, it began to seem half-plausible. I prayed for another couple of weeks before sharing the notion with Deirdre, who in turn said she felt a strong call to be in continued Christian ministry wherever we were. So, as subsequent weeks unfolded, my becoming a pastor in the neediness of the United States became a nucleus for our shared sense of mission.

It occurred to me to sound out three pastor-friends – in Australia, England, and America – and within two weeks all three had sent me unprompted emails about unrelated matters. On a zoom-call, one of them, a Bishop in the United Methodist Church, segued from explaining the Certified Lay Minister pathway into telling us of the 41 churches in Maine without a pastor.

During Zac's month-long vacation, our family had many conversations, looking back and looking forward. Neither Zac nor Benjamin embraced the idea of our leaving Nepal. "*This is our home and we'd rather you keep it here than follow us to the U.S.*" There are many moving pieces to a decision like this. Another critical part involves whether Deirdre takes the exam to transfer her dietary qualification from Ireland to enable her to work in the U.S.

In our Nepal apartment, we've begun to segregate small items like books and paintings and clothes, to consider what stays and what goes with us. On the physical level, there will be lists upon lists, boxes and sales. On the personal level, we know this move will try each of us.

These prayer letters have given us a rich opportunity to regularly stop alongside the road and reflect on the journey. We trust they've also offered you a window and perhaps a focus for prayer. Having you walking along with us has been a gift.

From this July through December our friends at Wesley United Methodist Church in Elkton, Maryland will again provide a base camp from which we'll visit the 50 churches who have long supported us in the U.S. After spending Christmas with family in Dublin, we'll visit churches in Ireland and at the end of January 2024 our tenure as UMC missionaries will come to an end.

For discussions about a possible assignment as local pastor in the New England area
For Deirdre's work, in dietetics or otherwise
For Benjamin's college decisions as they're finalized this April
For goodbyes from this once-foreign place we now call home

That is, for God's perfect leading, even along uncertain paths on a rainy night
– *We thank you for your prayers.*

Love,
Mark, Deirdre, (Zachary), and Benjamin