

“On a Mission From God”

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Even before he had rolled out of his narrow bunk aboard the USS Kearsarge, Col. Marty Berndt knew this was the real thing. Four-star admirals don't phone at 2:30 in the morning just to chat. Adm. Leighton "Snuffy" Smith, the commander of all of NATO's southern forces, was on the line from London and he wanted to know if Colonel Berndt's Marines, the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit, were ready.

They were, Colonel Berndt assured the admiral; he would need just a short time to get his hulking CH-53 Super Stallion helicopters off the Kearsarge's flight deck and on their way across the Adriatic Sea. The destination: western Bosnia. The mission: rescue Capt. Scott O'Grady, the downed F-16 pilot missing for six nights, who had been located in the hilly, Serb-held countryside not far from Banja Luka. Smith put the Marines on alert. At 3 o'clock, Berndt replaced the phone's receiver and hurried along the ship's narrow, red-lit passageway to the war room.

In the pine forest where he had hidden, Scott O'Grady waited. He had been shot down by a Serb battery with an SA-6 missile. As the plane had broken apart and tumbled toward Earth, he reached between his legs and with both hands pulled the lanyard that blew the canopy and ejected him from the plane. After landing, O'Grady abandoned his parachute and plunged into the woods. He lay face down, cupping his camouflaged flight gloves over his head and ears so he

could not be spotted in the brush. Within minutes, a teenage boy and a man wandered past; then he saw armed men nearby. He heard gunfire and was sure he would be caught as the Serbs continued their search into the night. "Thank God there were no dogs there," he told military debriefers.

O'Grady slept by day, covering himself with camouflage netting, and moved only between midnight and 4 a.m. Armed Serbs were never far away and he often heard gunfire. Once, as he lay hiding, cows grazed at his feet. Equipped with a 121-page survival pamphlet, a radio, a first-aid kit and a compass, he put to good use the lessons learned during 17 days of survival training he had undertaken near his hometown of Spokane, Washington. He used a sponge to soak up rainwater to fill a container. He ate grass and bugs; the survival pamphlet includes instructions to cook insects as big as grasshoppers and to eat them only after removing the hard, crunchy legs.

Besides foraging for food and avoiding the Serb patrols, O'Grady said that he spent a great deal of time talking with his Creator. "I prayed to God and asked him for a lot of things, and he delivered through the entire time," O'Grady said. "When I prayed for rain, he gave me rain. One time I prayed, Lord, let me at least have someone know I'm alive and maybe come rescue me. And guess what? That night, T.O. came up on the radio."

T.O. was fellow F-16 pilot Thomas O'Hanford. O'Hanford's information was quickly relayed to an intelligence gathering AWACS plane circling high above and eventually to Col. Marty Berndt on the Kearsarge.

The Marine extraction team would have preferred going in under the cover of darkness, but by the time everything was a "go", streaks of morning light were already appearing. At sunrise, the Marines, their faces covered with camouflage paint, had boarded a pair of enormous Super Stallion helicopters. "We were so focused on the mission I don't think anybody had time to be nervous," one of the Marines told reporters afterward.

The mission was successful. By 7:30 that June morning, O'Grady was onboard the Kearsarge, a missing soldier now safely back among his comrades.

O'Grady became quite famous after being rescued, and even found himself on the cover of magazines. The 51 Marines, however, remained unnamed in media accounts from that time. People called O'Grady a hero, but in O'Grady's mind, the true heroes were the Marines who risked their lives to save him.

The Marines were willing to put their lives on the line because their comrade needed their help. The fact that their helicopters and supporting aircraft would be targeted by every Bosnian Serb in the area was of little consequence to them. They were called to save O'Grady and didn't even consider turning this mission down.

Today's Gospel lesson from Luke tells of another mission 2,000 years ago. Only this time, the lost soul was not just one individual in the Bosnian wilderness, but the thousands of souls in the towns that Jesus was preparing to visit on his way to Jerusalem. The mission for the 70 followers of Christ was no less dangerous than that confronted by the Marines. They did not encounter anti-aircraft missiles, of course, but they did face the wrath of those who did not wish to accept Christ's radical message. Indeed, Jesus himself tells the missionaries that they were being sent like lambs into the midst of wolves.

In the same way that we don't know the names of the 51 Marines who rescued Scott O'Grady, we are without a clue as to the individuals who made up the 70 missionaries. Were the 70 disciples old or young? Rich or poor? Married or single? Men or women? The Bible doesn't say. We are left to believe that the 70 could be any 70 people on the street. One could have been a rich merchant; another a beggar; another a homemaker; another a middle class farmer. All we know is that whatever their station in life, these 70 people accepted the mission which Jesus gave them.

And what a truly incredible mission it was! Jesus instructed his 70 followers to cure the sick and to tell the world that "The kingdom of God has come near to you." Two by two, the missionaries went to the villages, towns and cities in Galilee and did exactly as Jesus instructed them. And, when they returned, they did so with joy, having spread Jesus's message and cured the sick. They cried out: "Lord in your name, even the demons submit to us."

In our 21st Century, post-industrial world, the idea of casting out demons is seen as ridiculous. Modern westerners say that the people with "the demons" in Christ's time had mental or physical infirmities. Accepting that point for the sake of argument, is it not all the more amazing that in a pre-scientific era, the 70 disciples were able to cure whomever they met? What they saw as casting out demons may have been miraculous cures for infirmities such as severe depression, alcoholism or other difficulties that we are still struggling with today. One of the "demons" may have been what Mother Teresa called the most severe difficulty humans face: loneliness. Certainly, among the thousands whom the 70 disciples met, there were those who felt separated from the world -- cast out from everyday society. The disciples' message that God loved them and that they could share in the kingdom must have been a powerful tonic.

The 70 disciples' joy also sprang from the fact that they had loosed themselves from their

own personal demons. Rather than concerning themselves with their own worldly wishes and worries, they had accepted the mission from Jesus and spread the word that the Kingdom of God was near. Herein lies an important lesson for all of us. When we are focused upon ourselves, all of our cares and desires are magnified. Every molehill of a problem becomes a mountain. Every personal goal becomes a hurdle that must be leaped. Yet, when we take the time to care about others, our own wishes and worries suddenly become of little importance. Our joy is found in the happiness of others.

Note that the role of the missionaries was not merely curing the sick, but speaking of the coming Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is a powerful concept within our Christian faith. It signals a coming day when God's Will shall be done throughout heaven and earth. The emergence of this Kingdom was signalled by the presence of God in his son, Jesus Christ. For, through Jesus, God has revealed himself so that each person can come to know God in his or her own life.

The mission of the 70 foreshadowed the universal mission which we find after Christ's death, resurrection and ascension into heaven. For, it was not just the well-known apostles – the famous church leaders, if you will -- who carried the Lord's message, but the laity. The unknown men and women, like you and me, who have chosen and who continue to choose to live in accordance with God's Will. Working together with the clergy, the laity has made Christianity the world's largest religion-- more than 1 billion souls strong.

The striking thing about this story to me relates to Jesus himself. As children, we're taught in Sunday School to think of Jesus alone as the miracle worker. He changed water into wine. He walked on water. He made the blind man see. Today's account shows how Jesus sent out others in his name to heal and preach the Kingdom of God. Jesus knew that one man, even a God-filled man like himself, could not do everything. He needed help.

This message should hit home to us today as we prepare to welcome a new interim pastor, Dr. Don Longbottom. Dr. Don, as he likes to call himself, has had a long and varied ministry in a variety of contexts. Most recently, he's served as a senior minister in a UCC church in Omaha, Nebraska and then as an intentional interim pastor at a UCC church in Illinois. He's even been invited to give the opening prayer on the floor of the United States Senate. Yet, as Dr. Longbottom will readily admit, he can't do it all alone. If he's is going to help us heal from our recent difficulties, he's going to need our help.

Dr. Longbottom's mission is clear, but each of us have to ask ourselves what our mission is right now. Though we are one body of Christians, we perform a variety of functions within our church. As Paul told the Romans, we have gifts that differ according to God's grace. The minister's gift lies in ministering, the teacher, in teaching, the giver, in generosity, the leader, in diligence, the compassionate, in cheerfulness. If our lives are to have ultimate meaning, we must prayerfully listen for the mission which the Lord has in store for us. We may not have the youth and strength of a Marine to rescue a lost soul in the Bosnian wilderness, but we may be called to rescue other lost souls in dire straits here in America. For, right now, there are men and women in our midst who, like Scott O'Grady, are praying: "Lord, let me at least have someone know that I'm alive and come rescue me." The rescue can come in the form of a hug, a long conversation, or in a variety of other ways. It is a simple willingness to go that extra mile to comfort another human being.

Neither I nor any other person can tell you what your God-given mission is. Perhaps you are already on your mission or, maybe, you are still awaiting it. In your heart, though, you will know what it is. Perhaps your mission will be to the hungry in Fairfield County, to a lonely bed-ridden patient in a nursing home, or maybe to a person who has all of the material possessions he needs, but

who lacks faith in God. As a human being created in God's image, you are free to choose to accept or reject your mission as you are free to accept or reject the Lord. These choices are of the utmost importance. For the right decisions will not only benefit you in this life, but in the life to come.

Like the 70 disciples, our mission isn't simply to cure the ills of the world. We are also appointed to spread the good news of the New Testament. It is true that your calling may not be that of the Evangelist, that is one who openly talks about his or her faith. But, as a Christian, the very way in which you live your life will be a testament to others about your belief in God and in all of what God commands. Speaking for myself, I have been strengthened in my faith journey far more by observing how faithful Christians act than in anything a particular Christian has ever said to me. A song from my youth rings true today. It is titled: "Let Them Know We Are Christians By Our Love." For when we love one another, we bring Christ's love and message to the world.

None of the missions which God gives us are easy. For whether the mission is within our church or to the greater world, it will require effort and sacrifice. Yet, the Lord tells us that when we accept a mission in his name, he will give us the power to tread on the difficulties we face. And, most importantly, when we accept the Lord and the Lord's mission, we can be safe in the knowledge that our names are written in heaven.

Thanks be to God. Amen.