

*Can you raise your voice to the clouds
and cover yourself with a flood of water?
Do you send the lightning bolts on their way?
Do they report to you, 'Here we are'?*
Job 38:34,35

Dear Friends,

25 July 2013

The monsoon arrived around midnight with a gentle, steady patter on the leaves outside my window. By dawn the persistent rain was conjuring visions of the muddy road to Kalikot.

We drove through the downpour following the Karnali River, our route hugging the flanks of forested mountains and cliffs. The hills funneled torrents; we passed through their roaring cascades. Freshly-prized boulders ranging in size from loaves to coffee tables littered the road.

Around 10 o'clock we stopped for tea in a village and I noticed a fallen tree that lay across the top of a tractor. These small farm vehicles are the most reliable means for carrying goods into the hilly regions to the north. The shopkeeper told us that the previous night the driver was sleeping on the roof of his tractor when the tree came crashing down onto him. He was rushed by ambulance to India. I pondered the odds – and reason – for such a thing happening.

It will be 10 years this summer since Nick Simons died. He'd come to Nepal, worked for about 9 months, and later drowned while swimming in Bali. We still occasionally run into someone who confirms the portrait of an ebullient young man who made friends and enjoyed life wherever he went. Since that tragedy, Nick's parents Jim and Marilyn have come to Nepal more than 15 times. This past March, we flew together by helicopter out to Kalikot, one of their many visits to NSI's work in Nepal's remote areas. "Nepal is a gift that Nick gave us," Marilyn once said to me, "and we've made so many wonderful friends since coming here."

Though they never met, Amogh Basnyat was studying in his second year of medical school during the time Nick was in Nepal. Amogh is from a middle class Kathmandu family, his father an airline official and his mother a nurse. After graduating from Nepal's best medical school – half of whose graduates emigrate to the U.S. – Amogh still held onto the aspiration to serve the poor. In 2009, he applied for a Nick Simons Institute scholarship to study to become an MDGP (Family Practice) doctor, of which there are too few in this country. In exchange for this 3-year training, doctors commit to working for 3 years in one of the 7 rural district hospitals that NSI supports. A year ago, Amogh sat in the NSI office with four other newly-graduated MDGPs and pulled out of a hat a folded slip of paper on which was written 'Kalikot' – the name of one of Nepal's toughest districts. He read it out and smiled bravely.

Our last climb up the hill to the Kalikot district headquarters started with a drive straight into a falling stream. We were glad for 4-wheel drive and a capable driver who had taken us on many trips before. The hospital is a cluster of about 15 buildings with blue corrugated roofs perched on the brow of a mountain. Bigger peaks loomed on all sides and 1500 feet below the Karnali River wound southward. The place is often windy and dusty, guarded by austere granite cliffs, but in this season it was a luxuriant, deep green.

We made rounds with Amogh and his junior colleague Rudra, walking through the wards of very basic, crumbling concrete buildings. There were no electric lights on. Holes had been cut in the roof and replaced with clear plastic to emit some light. Despite hanging strips of tape, flies were abundant and tenacious in the rooms. The patients' stories gave a glimpse into the challenges of life in those parts.

"This girl fell from the path and has a supracondylar fracture of the arm," Amogh said. "As is the custom out here, they first applied a poultice of herbs mixed with chicken blood – an attempt at spiritual cure. Now she's wound up with an infection of the skin, so we have to wait for the abscess to heal before we reduce her fracture."

Amogh cradled her thin arm as he spoke to his colleague about the treatment plan. The girl was about 10 years old and smiled winsomely. You wouldn't know she was in pain.

We came to a dark cubicle that serves as the hospital's emergency room. Three men lay on beds crowded into the room. We squeezed in and waited for our eyes to adjust.

"I think I saw this man being carried down the path in a stretcher yesterday," I said. "He's one of the victims of the landslides, isn't he?"

"Yes, all these three came from that disaster. 30 houses were taken out. Many people evacuated to higher ground, but a few were badly hurt. Six died. The army took the critical ones out by helicopter. We got a few of the 'walking wounded.' None too serious. The flood also damaged the district's hydroelectric plant, so we'll be without electricity for the next few months."

We walked to the main building and entered a room where a young woman nursed a newborn lying beside her. This was Kodi Kala's fifth child and first boy.

"They just keep trying until they get one boy," Amogh chuckled. "She wasn't progressing in her labor, so we did a Caesarean section three days ago. Look how happy she is now."

A C-section to deliver a child is a life-saving operation. It's one important component towards reducing maternal mortality, which is about 25 times higher in Nepal than in the U.S. Hospitals that can do even basic operations are a source of hope in a remote community, so NSI's hospital support program gives this a high priority.

After rounds I came and joined Amogh and Rudra sitting on the log bench by the canteen. The cook came out of his smoky kitchen carrying steaming tea in elegant white cups with curved handles. I nearly spilled mine taking it from his hand.

"So, how does it feel to be back in Kalikot?" I asked.

Amogh had been away for a month of ultrasound training in Kathmandu.

He let out a long breath and just raised his eyebrows at me.

He was far from home and friends. With the roads the way they were, he'd probably stay in the district hospital until the monsoon ends in October. And he'd be needed. Patients would not be able to travel to large city hospitals and a district of 120,000 people would look to him to provide their main emergency service. "You know how it is," he said, his round face breaking into a smile.

One of the reasons we went out to Kalikot that week was because of an incident that occurred 10 days before. Someone brought a boy to the hospital with a broken arm. The X-ray technician was away on vacation and his substitute had trouble finding the right X-ray plate. The injured boy's uncle got angry over having to wait and got into an argument in which he pushed a nurse. Our doctors sent us an email saying that they wondered how safe this place was.

Our district hospital coordinator Bal Sundar and I met with the Kalikot government officials, the police, and about ten political leaders. "We in Nick Simons put our doctors in your hands," I told the group in a community meeting. "You become their guardians. Our partnership depends on your care of these doctors..." The locals were a rag-tag bunch, some quite rustic, but they all made it clear they valued our support and that such episodes will be dealt with better in the future. No one mentioned the central role that alcohol plays in many of these 'security incidents.'

The deluge continued through the next day and night. In the distance we saw the Karnali River swelled to twice its usual girth and the only road out a brown thread drawn across vast mountainsides. There is no room for an airport out there. We could only watch the road for signs of tractor movement. We twice called Kathmandu to say that we'd be late coming home.

Finally, after two days of sunshine, we began to see road traffic on the far mountain. Early the next morning we drove tentatively down the hill. Over the 8-hour journey we came to countless places where the hillside had released heaps of rock and soil down onto the road and we often got out to clear the way. Then we caught a flight from a regional airport in the south to the capital city.

So now I'm riding home in a taxi through the dust and smoke of congested Kathmandu. I'm longing to be with my family again. And those wild mountains gushing with monsoon and the desolate hospital seem part of another world, maybe just a dream.

Love,

Mark, Deirdre, Zachary, and Benjamin