

**"LOOKING FOR A NEW FRONTIER"**

May 28, 1995

Psalm 78:38-43

Robert S. Wilch

I was one week short of my 21st birthday in May of 1944, when I reported aboard the USS McDermut, a destroyer, which was tied up in a nest of destroyers for repairs, torpedoes, ammunition, food and fuel. I was preparing for a war cruise to the western Pacific. On May 31st, we set sail. Our destination was the island of Saipan in the Mariannas. The course would be 100 degrees, almost due west. It would be a voyage of over 2,000 miles. Along with the nearby islands of Tinian and Guam, Saipan was heavily fortified and in the control of forces of Japan.

Early on the morning of June 14, 1944, land was sighted low on the horizon. Later that day, all my training and preparation came to an end. Now every salvo, every shot was in wrath. On the next day, very brave Army and Marine men in hundreds of small landing craft started their dangerous dash toward the beach under the cover of bombardment from a huge armada of ships. At a heavy cost to both sides, Saipan fell to our forces in just a little less than two weeks.

In ensuing days the same ritual was played out on Tinian and also Guam. Air attacks were frequent and severe. This short period of time in the war's history became a pivotal action because the loss of planes to Japan was immense and because Saipan would become a name closely related and deeply etched in history for one of the most dramatic events of the war.

It was a little over a year later, on August 5, 1945, that two sleek, giant Air Force bombers, B-29s, sat under heavy guard at one end of a long cement runway on Saipan. It was about 5 minutes to midnight. Gathered around the planes in the moonlight were their crews, sentries and a Chaplain. He was Captain William B. Downey who knelt with those men to pray, "Almighty Father, who wilt hear the prayer of them that love thee, we pray thee to be with those who brave the heights of heaven and who carry the battle to our enemies. Guard and protect them, we pray thee, as they fly their appointed rounds. May they, as well as we, know thy strength and power, and, armed with Thy might, may they bring this war to a rapid end. We pray Thee that the end of the war may come soon, and that once more we may know peace on earth. May the men who fly this night be kept safe in Thy care and may they be returned safely to us. We shall go forward trusting in Thee, knowing that we are in Thy care now and forever. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen." Chaplain Downey later became the pastor of Fox Point Lutheran Church. He died last year.

The crews then climbed aboard and the Enola Gay and its companion plane roared down that air strip, climbed to altitude and set its course for Japan - Honshu - Hiroshima. The world will never be the same again.

This year, 1995, we will celebrate the end of that long, costly war which killed, maimed, or just lost almost 50,000,000 men and women and children. Some will exult in our final victory. Hopefully, the greater number will just give thanks that it did end in victory and for the safe return of many. Surely those who had to see and participate in the worst of the catastrophes will pray that we never ever again take our national disagreements to combat in the air, on the sea and on far off shores. Let us add no more names to the already too long list of those who paid such a dear price for our freedom. Let us close the book on the list of men and women who are remembered on Memorial Day, 1995.

Have you spent enough time in the Old Testament to understand the ups and downs of the Israelites? They knew that God took an active role in their history. They knew they were His people. How could they help but know that with all the evidence of His delight and frustration with their antics? These people knew what God asked - even demanded - but their history is a story of the moral hide and seek they played with Him. Temptations grew in number and intensity so that they served him only when they discovered that, for the moment, they could not escape Him.

Great victories were followed by terrible catastrophies. Peace and security were frequently shattered by new oppressions and new conquerors. These people knew better but they just didn't get it. When they chased after false idols, it was not only ingratitude, it was repudiation and defiance. It was never a pretty sight when the patience of God was exhausted and He was depicted as a strong man awaking from sleep, roaring with anger. The people paid dearly for their waywardness.

Astronauts return from space with breathtaking comment about the pale blue dot they see. That pale blue dot is the earth - where we live. They see other planets and stars, too, but their fascination is with that pale blue dot. It is so tiny, so small. Yet it is home to every known person in this huge universe, which is so large we have never seen nor bumped into its boundaries. To a person, astronauts come back with an urgent sense of the need for us to get along, to live together on the earth with kindness to each other and to live in peace.

We who live in this country are new frontier people. When our forebears tired of the religious oppression, the wars and the poverty of Europe, they migrated to this country in great numbers. This was the brave, new world that Columbus told about. And many men and women came to this new frontier and settled all along the East coast.

Then stories of gold and unlimited space began to drift into those crowded cities with their ethnic enclaves. Some, tired of the crowds, the fouled air, the sweat shop labor, the lack of opportunity, braved the long trek to discover and inhabit the West. Long columns of covered wagons headed west. Dangerous miles were travelled through canyons and valleys where they became targets of the tribes who lived there. But it was a new frontier. And many made their new lives there at great cost. Then cities sprang up everywhere in the land. But they, too, became almost uninhabitable, marked

by noise, traffic, racial tensions, crime. Another new frontier beckoned. And suburbia was its name. Once more those who could, moved in order to have quiet, peace, green grass, opportunity, room, and a safe place for their children.

But now, there is restlessness again. About 70% of our people believe today that somehow we are on the wrong track. Suburbs are no longer the safe haven. We want to go someplace to a new frontier - but where? Now there is no place to go. No new frontier. You might suggest, SPACE. Carl Sagan's recent book, *"The Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human in Space,"* has this thought: "The Earth is the only world known so far to harbor life. There is nowhere else, at least in the near future, to which our species could migrate. Visit, yes, Settle, not yet. Like it or not, for the moment, the Earth is where we make our stand." Surely this underscores our need to be responsible and to deal kindly with each other and to preserve and cherish this pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known.

We've said it often, "We are a Christian nation. And because we thought that we believed God was on our side. The truth is that this is not a Christian America. Even before 1945, Christendom which shaped medieval Europe, no longer shaped this country nor any other. This wonderful green hedge of customs, laws, institutions, arts and church has been pruned severely by the shears of secularism. Now each bush in that hedge stands alone.

But don't lament this change. Don't despair. This is the opportunity often given to the long ago and far away Israelites, and now to us, to rediscover ourselves as distinct from the world, as Jesus often said we should be. Instead of trying to fit into this secular world, let us be the amazing difference. If we persevere, the world may yet get it. It may yet find the new life which was promised in Jesus Christ in whose teachings are the guide for our lives, just as our Covenant says.

*(Although this manuscript was prepared by Robert Wilch, the actual delivery of the sermon may have added or subtracted from the manuscript or varied from it to some degree.)*

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