

Humorous and exciting memoir of Alaska missionary's adventures and misadventures.

The Adventures of Tundra Bubba: The Call of God Meets the Call of the Wild

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THE ADVENTURES OF TUNDRA BUBBA: THE CALL OF GOD MEETS THE CALL OF THE WILD

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Chapter 1: The Call *Whom Shall I Send?*

Like many of my fellow Bible College students, I was looking forward to graduating and starting a career as a pastor. I was envisioning being called somewhere tropical. If anybody had told me I would be serving in Alaska after graduation, I would probably have quit school.

I had just started my final semester of undergrad work at Leavell College of The New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. My wife Bonnie and I lived ninety miles away in Biloxi, Mississippi, and commuted back and forth three, four, and sometimes five times a week. We would normally leave at 6:15am to arrive for eight o'clock classes, and not leave until 4pm for the trip back. My wife was an adjunct instructor of American English, Grammar, English Composition, and Research and Writing. Those were long, grueling days of classes sandwiched between long commutes and New Orleans rush hour traffic. Needless to say we were both pretty worn out by the time we got home.

During the first week of my final semester of college Bonnie and I had gotten home after a typical day. As was her custom, Bonnie went directly to a neighbor's house to visit and, as was my custom, I stretched out in my recliner. It was about a quarter till six and I planned to sit quietly and relax until six, at which time I would turn the TV on and watch the news. It was as I was relaxing in total quiet that I heard God's voice. It was as if He bent over and whispered in my ear. He said one word: "Alaska." My chin dropped in astonishment.

As a kid, like any other kid, I dreamed of all the things I would be when I grew up. I was going to be a fireman, an astronaut, a fighter pilot, or a pirate. In my youth I hot-rodged around and took part in an occasional drag race, but as good sense set in I settled into an occupation and my couch. I got all the adventure I cared for on the TV.

Shortly before God called me to Alaska I read *Wild at Heart* by John Eldredge and *Your God Is Too Safe* by Mark Buchanan. Both had stirred my blood so much I moved from the couch to a recliner. I even sat on the edge of my seat at times. Whew! My soul was stirring within me but my body had become accustomed to reclining.

I was astonished at God's call for several reasons. First, I was amazed at how much God's voice sounded like the little voice inside my head. I had always imagined He would sound more like James Earl Jones, but He sounded just like me. At first I thought that maybe it was the little voice inside my head, that it was just a passing thought. But then I reasoned that I had not even thought about Alaska since I was first saved about four years prior. I remembered that I was praying that God would save my brother and his wife. I was praying in earnest and making promises off the top of my head. "If You'll save them, Lord, I'll do anything. I'll go anywhere. I'll even go to Alaska." (God has a good memory. He hasn't yet saved my brother or his wife, but I'm hoping His sending me to Alaska is a sign of things to come.)

I also reasoned that, even in my wildest dreams, I would never call myself to Alaska. I was a weather wimp. I lived on the Mississippi Gulf Coast and would have loved to move to even warmer climates. When the temperature dropped below seventy I was going for my sweats and sweaters. Snow was beautiful on TV or perhaps once every few years for a day or two, but nothing more, please.

I knew it was God's voice that spoke that word, even if His voice did sound exactly like the little voice in my head. And I knew that from that day forward my life would be drastically

different than I had imagined. I patted my security recliner fondly. Somehow I felt as though our relationship was nearing an end.

Another reason for my astonishment of the call was the sheer incredulity of God actually speaking to me. I know that He speaks to all believers through His word, circumstances, and other ways, but I've heard very few people ever claim that God has spoken to them audibly, and I wonder about most of those folks. I still wonder sometimes if it actually was an audible voice, since my dogs were lying at my feet and neither of them freaked out. They didn't even raise their heads or open their eyes. But it sure sounded as though God spoke an audible word.

After a bit of the wonder and amazement of actually hearing God's voice had slightly diminished, I began thinking overly highly of myself. "Wow! I must be pretty special. Of all the people in the world, God actually spoke audibly to me. Me. Wow! He could have spoken to the Pope, the President, or Billy Graham but He spoke to me." In time I came to realize that that was probably the only way He could have gotten me to Alaska. I'm not questioning the sovereignty of God, but I am questioning my level of obedience.

If God had tried calling me to Alaska through some missionary or pamphlet I would probably not have "heard" Him. But it's hard to deny an audible voice. I believe He spoke only one word so as not to confuse me. If He had said, "Goest thou unto the place where I shall send thee. . ." I would have had opportunity to claim that I hadn't understood. My cousin's wife still thinks I misunderstood God's calling. She thinks that perhaps what God said was, "If I want you to go somewhere, *I'llaskya!*"

The third reason that I was astonished was the call itself. Alaska!? Good grief. I remembered what I had promised a while back. But still. Alaska? I had been dreaming of serving somewhere much more tropical. I was sure that God would send me somewhere south of I-10. After all, everybody north of I-10 is a Yankee. Why would God send me to a bunch of Yankees? Aren't there any Yankees that can go? Surely there was somebody from north of I-10 that would be much more suitable than I for such a call.

Please don't misconstrue my feelings. I don't have anything against anybody that lives north of I-10; some of my best friends live north of I-10. My mother, my sister, and my brother all live north of I-10. My father used to live north of I-10, but he recently moved to Heaven, which I am convinced is south of I-10.

If the call had come on April 1st I would probably have laughed at God's wonderful sense of humor. Of course, they don't have calendars in Heaven, so maybe God can pull an April Fool's joke whenever He pleases. Of course he can. He's God. Maybe it was a joke. Maybe it was a test – like the one He gave Abraham with Isaac.

All speculation aside, I knew instantly that God had spoken to me and I knew what He had said. I knew my dreams of a tropical paradise would have to be put on hold for at least a while. Although I knew that God had called me to Alaska, I figured I had better be certain before I informed Bonnie. So I did what every faith-filled man of God would do in such a situation: I asked for a sign. For Bonnie's sake, not mine, of course. "Lord, this is pretty big. I mean this is really big. I'm sure You understand. I mean Your voice sounded so much like that little voice inside my head. If it had sounded like James Earl Jones I might not ask for a sign, but since it sounded so much like me, I really need a sign."

I mentioned that I had planned to turn the TV on at six to watch the news. I did just that, my head still spinning with wonder. I remember I was watching the national news on one of the cable channels. Within ten minutes of my turning on the TV there were two news stories and two

commercials about – you guessed it – Alaska! “Is that You, Lord? Is that my sign?” “No, Steve. Here’s your sign.” “Huh?” “Never mind.”

I would ask for and receive several more signs over the next few weeks, but I knew from the time that God spoke the word that Bonnie and I would be moving to Alaska. In fact, even though I asked several times for signs, I was excited about the call from the moment I received it. I felt like an ill-trained dog on a leash with his master. I kept running ahead only to get jerked back by the leash. I was chomping at the bit. “Come on, God, let’s go. Hurry. What’s taking You so long? Let’s go. Time’s a wasting.” I continually ran full speed to the end of the leash and was continually jerked back. It was as if I was bungee jumping horizontally. I was pumped. I had to get to Alaska.

I figured that along with the call to Alaska God gave me a heart for Alaska. He probably figured out the call itself wasn’t going to be enough for me; I wouldn’t go unless He gave me a heart to go. So He did. When I would find any spare time I would stare at a map of Alaska and wonder where in that huge state was I headed. I studied about Alaska on the Internet, read magazine articles, and watched the channel on TV that teaches geography. I had to go. The tropics would have to wait.

There were many steps yet to be taken on the journey to Alaska, but the next step that had to be taken was informing Bonnie. I just knew she was going to freak. So I tried to pass the buck. “Lord, Bonnie’s going to freak. She knows I tend to be impulsive. She’s going to think this is just another one of my hair-brained ideas. You tell her.” “No, Steve, you tell her.” Lord, it’s Your call, You tell her. “ ”Tell her!” “Yes Sir!”

I chose a time when Bonnie was a captive audience. We were on our way home from the seminary and in the midst of New Orleans rush-hour traffic. “Bonnie, there’s something I’ve been needing to tell you but haven’t been able to figure out the best way.” I quickly realized that that wasn’t the best approach. But I certainly had Bonnie’s undivided attention, which wasn’t really a good thing since she was driving. I went on to explain about the call and the signs and every detail I could imagine hoping that she wouldn’t lose control of her faculties while driving. Her answer was actually quite anti-climatic. With a low and very calm, but somewhat unconvincing voice she replied, “That’s exciting.” She continued calmly making her way through heavy traffic.

“That’s exciting.” That’s it? It was almost as if she had said, “That’s nice, dear.” No complaints, no questions, no encouraging words, just ‘that’s exciting.’ But to my surprise she remained quite calm. Bonnie later explained that she was not called to Alaska but was called to “go wheresoever thou goest.” She really was and is the more obedient of the two of us.

The call was really more difficult on Bonnie than on me. Bonnie had never lived more than ninety miles from her family. That was when she was in college. Her parents, brother, and sister lived on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, as did her children and grandchildren. I had moved around a great deal growing up and continued to do so as an adult.

As I have mentioned, before I moved to Alaska I lived in Biloxi, Mississippi. Before I lived in Biloxi I lived in Pass Christian, Mississippi. Before that I lived in Biloxi and before that Hurley, Mississippi. Before Hurley I lived in Gulf Shores, Alabama. I had moved to Gulf shores from Dallas, Texas and to Dallas from Atlanta, Georgia. Before I lived in Atlanta I lived in Huntsville, Alabama and before that I had lived in Charleston, South Carolina, Norfolk, Virginia, Great Lakes, Illinois, and San Diego, California. Before San Diego I lived in Huntsville, Alabama. Before I lived in Huntsville my father was in the service and we moved around a lot. So moving far away from home wasn’t as difficult for me as it was for Bonnie.

Once I had informed Bonnie of God's call, I sent my resume to the Alaska Baptist Convention. I later called and spoke to the Director of Missions. I told him of my call and that I had no idea where in Alaska God wanted us; all I knew was that God had earlier called me to preach and pastor and now He had called me to Alaska. Mike sent my resume to several churches around the state, two of which gave me serious consideration. One of those fell through after only a few months, but I communicated with a church in Nome for almost a year before learning that they had called someone other than me to be their pastor. During those months I answered questions, shared testimonies, provided more references, and jumped through a few other hoops. It seemed that they were getting closer and closer to calling me. I became more and more confident that we were headed for Nome. But I was one of many who they had considered in the beginning of their search. I was one of fewer and fewer to make it through the various hoops. But I wasn't the one they called. We were back to square one. I was bewildered and disappointed.

Bonnie felt my disappointment. She knew we were back to square one. Several days after we received the news that Nome had called another pastor, Bonnie suggested that we go ahead and move to Anchorage and let God either use us there or send us wherever He had chosen. It seemed a brilliant idea. We went online and began checking for jobs and apartments. After a few days I called Mike at the Alaska Baptist Convention and told him our plans. Mike asked me, "How about Dillingham?" I had no idea where Dillingham was but was opened to wherever God wanted us. I replied to Mike's query: "Is it in Alaska?" He assured me it was and I told him I was interested in beginning the process.

I later got a call from Bruce, the outgoing pastor of Dillingham Bible Fellowship. In an ironic turn of events it was he who had been called to Nome. I'm fairly certain that God grinned when I heard that. Bruce shared with me about the ministry and I got excited. Bonnie and I looked at pictures he had posted on the Internet and she got excited as well. No more "That's nice, Dear."

I had heard in the seminary about the long, drawn out processes that most churches go through in calling a pastor, and had just been through a similar process. When I spoke to Bruce next I asked him what I had to do to be considered for the position. He asked, "Do you want to come?" "Yes." "Well, come on then." How simple could God have made it? Bonnie and I did end up calling Lance and LouAnn a couple of times before we decided for sure that Dillingham was indeed where God was moving us. With Bruce and his family moving Lance and LouAnn were all that remained of the church. After talking with Lance and then LouAnn we finally knew where we were headed. I would be the new pastor of Dillingham Bible Fellowship.

Paying for my school and paying down previous debt had not helped our financial situation. Fortunately, we didn't have a lot of debt, but we had no savings. We both had the attitude that if God wanted us in Alaska He would come up with the money for us to move.

The cost of moving us (and very few of our things) to Dillingham proved to be extremely expensive. Dillingham is a small town in "bush" Alaska. The Alaskan bush consists geographically of over three-fourths of the state but demographically of about ten percent of the population. Bush towns and villages are those that passengers can reach only by air. The central part of the state has a road system. The southeastern part of the state has the marine highway system. Trains, passenger liners, or automobiles cannot reach the remainder of the state. There are no highways or railways in much of the state. In the summer cargo can be either flown or barged to Dillingham. But in the winter everything has to be flown in.

Due to difficult logistical problems, prices in bush villages are extremely high. It also costs a small fortune to move into or out of bush villages. We were shocked to discover that tickets up would run us close to a thousand dollars each. We priced moving our possessions up and discovered we could move a four-foot by four-foot by eight-foot crate with up to a thousand pounds for one thousand two hundred-fifty dollars. I held each item that we were planning to move in my hands, one by one, and asked, "Is this worth a dollar-twenty-five a pound to move?" The cost of moving us, and a very small amount of our goods, would end up costing us far more than we had. We decided to take no furniture, only small items. We gave away many of our possessions. One of the most difficult items to leave behind was my recliner. I was still occasionally asking God for signs that He wanted us to move to Alaska and decided that a good sign would come in the form of some financial help.

I began to worry about how we were going to get the funds to move. I didn't want to go into debt paying for the move. Shortly after I graduated I went back to work as a copier repairman. After being there only about six months I told my boss that I would soon be moving to Alaska. He offered me a position as service manager if I stayed, but of course, I had to decline. I knew my boss thought well of me so I asked him if I could borrow two thousand dollars to move to Alaska. He explained that if there was anyway he could, he would. He told me that if there were anybody he would loan money to it would be me. He told me, however, that he wasn't in a position to loan me the two thousand that I had asked for, but he would give me a thousand.

The tap had opened; that was the first of many donations that would come in from family, friends, and church members. By the time Bonnie and I left for Alaska God had provided just enough for our airline tickets and to ship the remainder of our things to Dillingham. "Is that my sign, Lord?"

Chapter 2: Our Arrival *Go to the Land I Will Show You*

We left Biloxi on September 2, 2003, and arrived in Anchorage the following day. As the jetliner's tires screeched onto the runway of the Anchorage airport I knew a new chapter of my life was opening, a chapter far, far different from the entire previous book.

Dallas, the Director of Missions of the Chugach Baptist Association, picked us up at the airport and took us to Calvary Baptist Church, where we stayed a couple of nights. Several churches in Anchorage had missionary apartments where bush pastors could stay while they were in Anchorage. Most bush pastors travel to Anchorage at least twice a year to buy provisions.

The bush towns and villages had limited selection and very high prices. Most have few if any restaurants and no theaters or other such forms of entertainment. Life in the bush is often difficult and sometimes discouraging. Most of the villages had very few evangelical Christians. Many villagers were often indifferent, if not hostile, towards evangelical pastors. So the pastors from bush villages tried to get into Anchorage at least once or twice a year. The Anchorage churches with apartments for missionaries helped make that possible.

I had lived in Anchorage as a kid during the late 1960s. My dad had been stationed at Elmendorf Air Force Base. We were there for three years and I enjoyed it very much but had never had a desire to go back. As I had gotten older and comfortable living in the South, I had grown to dislike cold weather very much. I had grown to love summers, even on the Mississippi

Gulf Coast. When I stepped off the plane that cool September day I remembered the beauty and ruggedness of the surrounding mountains.

The temperature was in the upper fifties, which for me was quite cool. I was glad I had worn layers. Little did I suspect that within a few short years I would be wearing only short-sleeved tee shirts even when the temperatures were in the low forties. I've learned that twenty degrees seems cool in the fall but warm after a winter of twenty to thirty below temperatures. I am no longer a weather wimp.

Dallas picked us up the next day and took us to Sam's and Wal-Mart. He suggested several things that he felt we needed to purchase and mail to ourselves in Dillingham. That was the usual way to get provisions to the bush. We also later learned to carry empty suitcases when we traveled, fill them with the supplies we purchased, and check them as baggage when flying to Dillingham. I'm sure security screeners in Alaska thought nothing of bags checked to bush villages filled with groceries and household items, but we also shopped when we came south to visit. I wonder how many eyebrows were raised at the Biloxi/Gulfport Regional Airport when our grocery-filled luggage went through security screening. I was already learning to be flexible, a priceless attitude to have in bush Alaska.

On September 5 Bonnie and I flew into Dillingham. We flew in on an Alaska Airlines jet. We would later learn that there was only one jet flight a day into Dillingham, and that was available only from April through October. Most flights into Dillingham were small turbo-prop planes, some with no restroom facilities. But flying in for our first time we were spoiled with the jet, which even sported a flight attendant, a luxury not all flights offered.

LouAnn and Shirley met Bonnie and me at the airport. LouAnn is Lance Nunn's wife and the daughter of career Southern Baptist missionaries to the Northwest Arctic: Harley and Martha Shields. Lance and LouAnn would prove to be wonderful saints and friends. Shirley had been a member of Dillingham Bible Fellowship but had recently moved to Anchorage; she had returned to town for an extended visit. We loaded our bags in the back of their two vehicles and headed for the church. Lance showed up at the church a few minutes after our arrival.

The ride to the house/church seemed almost surrealistic. There were few paved roads and no traffic lights. I started whistling the tune from the Andy Griffith show in my head. I wondered if perhaps we would see a young redheaded boy walking along the road with a cane pole. Most of the buildings we had seen along the way, including the residences, had abandoned automobiles, skiffs, and/or snow machines in the front yards. Most also had at least one container van in the yard. Container vans are used predominately for storage, but some are used for shops as well. I later figured out that there wasn't a place to dispose of old vehicles in Dillingham and it was too expensive to have scrap metal shipped back to Anchorage for proper disposal. So most just left discarded vehicles in their front yards alongside their container vans.

The driveway led to the back of the house/church. When we pulled into the driveway I noticed not too far from the porch, a metal outbuilding that was about three foot square and about seven foot tall with a wooden door. My first thought was: "Oh my word! An outhouse!" I wondered what in the world I had gotten myself into. Worse yet, what had I gotten Bonnie into? Fortunately for us it was not an outhouse; it was a smokehouse. The log cabin did indeed have indoor plumbing.

The view from the back porch was amazingly beautiful. There were several dozen spruce trees in the yard as well as a few birch trees. The property behind the church was heavily wooded. Fireweed was in full bloom and blanketed the yard. Fireweed in early September is usually about three foot tall and emblazoned with bright purplish-pink blooms covering the top

eight to ten inches of the stalk. The deciduous trees were already sporting yellow and orange leaves, which contrasted beautifully against the dark blue-green spruce trees. The perfect balance of colors was surely enough to impress even the most experienced oil painter.

As I stood staring in awe at the beauty spread before me, I also realized that the air was much fresher than what I had grown accustomed to. It was a real treat to just breathe. The cool, fresh air soothed my airway from nostrils to lungs. I took several deep breaths and held them, afraid to let them out lest the next one fail to deliver the same thrill. It was fresher even than the air in Anchorage. That was the most fun I had ever had breathing.

The house/church where we would be living and meeting was a log cabin kit home. It had two bedrooms and two baths with a full basement. The basement wasn't really suitable for housing since there was only one egress, and that into the interior of the house, so it could be deadly should a house fire occur. Our new home was simple and a bit rustic.

It was Friday evening when we arrived and LouAnn and Shirley had a meal prepared for us. Bonnie and I experienced the first of many salmon dishes we would enjoy while in Alaska. While there we would eat lots of salmon, moose, and caribou, as well as wild berries of various kinds. Of course, we would eat store-bought food as well, but we really enjoyed the subsistence lifestyle and local cuisine.

In early September the days are still pretty long. In Dillingham the sun comes up at about eight, but it starts getting light at about seven. There is still a fair amount of light until about ten in the evening. When we saw how light it was so late into the evening we immediately appreciated the dark woven shades on all the windows. We would later learn that during the longest days of summer it is still enough light at midnight to mow the lawn.

After dinner, as they were leaving, Lance and LouAnn told us they were loaning their vehicle for us to drive. They told us we could use it until we bought our own and there was no hurry to do so. They proved again and again to be very generous, not only to Bonnie and me, but to many in the community as well.

Lance owns and operates Dillingham Refuse and has lived in Dillingham most of his life. He and LouAnn met in college and later married and settled in Dillingham. Lance is a very quiet person, but when he speaks he speaks with great wisdom. Lance and LouAnn were Godsend to Bonnie and me while we were in Dillingham.

Lance showed me around the house, pointing out everything he thought I might need to know. Of course, he made himself available to us 24/7. If anything ever went wrong, all we needed to do is call Lance, who could do just about anything mechanical or electrical.

The weekend that Bonnie and I arrived in Dillingham happened to be in the middle of the fall moose season so much of the town was spending much of their time upriver. Lance and LouAnn had already planned to go up the next day. The subsistence lifestyle very much characterizes Dillingham's culture. When the salmon are running, when moose season is opened, when caribou are close, when berries ripen, when birds lay their eggs, harvesting food takes precedence over jobs, business, shopping, and most social events. The whole town seemingly came to a standstill, except, of course, the boat harbor, which was bustling with activity when the tide was up enough for skiffs to launch.

There are several types of watercraft in Dillingham. Cargo barges come and go several times between mid-April and mid-October. During fishing season tenders, processors, and various types of workboats join the standard thirty-two-footers, which comprised the majority of the fishing fleet. Each spring a dredge boat arrived to pump mud out of the harbor. Everything else, from fourteen-foot dinghies to twenty-two foot set-net fishing boats, was considered a skiff.

Because Lance and LouAnn were upriver that first Sunday, only Shirley, Bonnie, and I attended our first worship service. I was not discouraged in the least, rather excited about finally being a pastor in Alaska. I was standing on God's promise that wherever two or more are gathered in His Name, there He will be also.

Since Lance and LouAnn had left us their vehicle to use, Bonnie and I decided to drive around and check out the town. We first drove to downtown Dillingham. The downtown area consisted of a fire station, the elementary school, the high school/middle school, two grocery stores, a hardware store, the post office, the public safety building, an old-fashioned provisions store, two hotels, two banks, some apartment buildings, and a few houses. There were a few paved roads but no traffic lights.

While we were stopped at one of the grocery stores a middle-aged man carrying a young child on a four-wheeler approached us. He was concerned with why we had Lance's rig. We explained who we were and that Lance had loaned it to us. He seemed satisfied and welcomed us to Dillingham.

Dillingham is a small town of about twenty-five hundred people. In the summer the population swells to almost triple that amount due to cannery workers, commercial and sports fishermen, and hunters. Of the year-round population however, most everybody knows most everybody. They also know everybody's vehicles, snowmobiles, and skiffs. People tend to watch out for their friends and neighbors more so than in many so-called civilized places. Thus Butch stopped us, concerned as to why we were in Lance's vehicle.

Bonnie and I were in wonder at the many sights of Dillingham. I'm sure everybody knew we were the typical newbies, taking pictures of everything we found amazing. We took pictures of mountains. We took pictures of rivers. We took pictures of lakes. We took pictures of trees. We took pictures of gas prices and grocery prices.

We were really taken aback at the prices in Dillingham. Because everything had to be either barged in or flown in, most prices were between two-and-a-half and three times more than what we had been paying for the same items in Biloxi. Selection was limited as well. The two grocery stores and the hardware store also sold furniture and clothing, but the stores combined carried a much smaller selection than an average Wal-Mart. A trip to Wal-Mart, however, meant a flight to Anchorage, then a ride from a friend or a taxi. If one purchased more than a suitcase full of merchandise, the excess would need to be shipped.

Our first week in Dillingham was full of amazement – from natural beauty to grocery and gas prices. But we were just beginning. We would continue to be amazed again and again, continuing with our second weekend in Alaska.

Chapter 3: Getting Our Feet Wet

See What the Land Is Like

The fall moose hunt ends each year on September fifteenth, which fell on our second weekend in Alaska. Lance wanted to take us upriver to experience that wonderful tradition firsthand. So on Friday Bonnie and I drove to Lance and LouAnn's where we met them, their son, Lance's brother and his son, and several others who were all going to Lance's camp upriver. They had the skiffs and gear ready to go and we were soon on the way to launch.

Launching skiffs in Dillingham isn't as easy as it is in most places. There is over twenty feet difference in the average high tide and the average low tide. Moreover, there are two high tides and two low tides every day. One of the high tides is usually much larger than the other,

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