

Edward F. Phillips Funeral Service ~ September 18, 2010 ~ A homily
preached by The Rev'd Erl G. Purnell at Old St. Andrew's Church,
Bloomfield, CT

Ecclesiastics 3.1-8; Psalm 23 (KJV); 2 Timothy 4.1-8; Mark 4.1-8

HIGH FLIGHT

*OH! I have slipped the surly bonds of earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings.
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun-split clouds,—and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of—wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,
I've chased the wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air.
Up, up, the long delirious burning blue
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace,
Where never lark, nor even eagle flew—
And, while with silent lifting mind I've trod
The high untresspassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand and touched the face of God.*

John Gillespie Magee, Jr. wrote this fliers' anthem—*High Flight*—for the likes of Edward Finley Phillips. No experience in Ed's good and long life eclipsed being in the Army Air Corps during World War II. Stories atop stories—like the time he crash-landed on the campus of an all women's college; like his training to fly invasion gliders; like the day he airlifted dozens of French concentration camp victims from Germany to France.

Ed was my friend. We bantered constantly, often about aviation. I was a Naval Aviator and spent a lot of time flying over water. One time—years ago—I asked him, “Ed, where am I supposed to keep the wet side?” He quipped, without the slightest hesitation, “Wet side's down. Blue side's up.” Since that day, we rarely parted without one of us asking the other about where to keep the blue side and the wet side.

You all knew Ed, too. Each in your own special way. Caroline, as wife and best pal. Jeff, Matt and Leah as Dad. Livi and Jack as Granpy, but so much more. Each of us was blessed by the extraordinary spirit of Ed Phillips. Can anyone ever remember Ed refusing to lend a hand? Setting up the chairs in the Parish Hall or the Legion Hall, loaning a

tool, running an errand. There is always more to say when speaking about Ed's whole life—his work at Hamilton Standard (the B-58 and B-1 bombers, and the Apollo program) his writing, his life-long connection to Maine and boating and fishing.

But, among the many badges of accomplishment Ed wears proudly, few stand out as brightly as his place in this parish church. A member of Old St. Andrew's since 1957, Ed did it all—from the Strawberry Festival to serving on the Vestry to being a Chalicist. Occasionally a contrarian at Annual Meetings, he was always supportive once decisions were made. Faithful Sunday by Sunday and at our Wednesday noontime Eucharist, Ed challenged and questioned theology, the church, polity, Scripture, his place as a human being, and me. Our last long conversation was at Governor's House a couple weeks ago. We talked for 40 minutes about the nature of God, the creation of the universe, and what happens when we die.

Damn. I'm going to miss this guy a lot!

I went to St. Francis late Friday a week ago to spend a little time with Ed. He opened his eyes and I think he recognized my voice. I said some prayers and told him that it was OK to let go. That all was well and all would be well and that all manner of things shall be well. I gave him God's blessing, tracing the sign of the Cross on his forehead.

Then, I told him the story he had told me so many times. It's about one of the most numinous and precious moments Ed ever had. *"Remember,"* I said, *"those nights flying over the Amazon jungle in your C-47? Nights when the jungle skies weren't mad with unimagined violence nor sprayed with a million stars, but the times when two dense layers of clouds—one at 3,000 feet and the other at 12,000—sandwiched you and your craft in the pitch darkness of a cave."*

I paused to let the words sink in, then continued, *"And, remember how your crew and passengers would fall asleep in the wee hours of the morning? Sitting in the left seat, it was as if you were all alone at 8 or 10,000 feet, peering into the nothingness, not a flake of light anywhere."*

"Then, didn't you tell me, that as you flew north toward the equator, you'd look to the right—to the east—as black faded to grey and the engine nacelles and wings became visible? ... "You spot a sliver of yellow at the very edge of the jungle-covering cloud layer. Ed, you're there once again," I told our

friend. Now wait ... Here it is ... Here's the moment, the colossal maelstrom of exploding color. A million prisms above, around and in front of your airplane. You race through the funnel of celestial flame into a rainbow of infinite power and grace. And, I remember you always said, it was in these few seconds of sunrise that you looked into the face of God ... Keep flying Ed. Keep flying right into the face of God."

For now my friend, blessings and Peace. Godspeed ... And remember, blue side up; wet side down.

Amen.

(The final story of this sermon is based on Ed Phillips' own account in *A Memorable Moment: God's Face In The Sunrise.*)

Copyright © 2010. Erl G. Purnell
All rights reserved.