

Aug. 29, 2010

Hebrews 13:1-8

“Marching Orders”

During my high school years I was fascinated by events of the Second World War. I wasn't really interested in the historian's or militarist's perspective, however. I was riveted by the STORIES of what individual people endured. I read accounts written by those who had experienced the war--- in Nazi occupied Europe, in Britain, in the U.S. and in Asia. I learned about the experiences of women and children caught in the webs of death, disease and violence.

One book told about the forced marches in Malaya after its occupation by the Japanese. Western women and children were marched thousands of miles, with little food, and no shelter or medical care. The Japanese were not given instructions as to where to send or house these women and children, so they wandered from one place to another with no clear destination.

The Japanese did not inflict intentional cruelty or mistreatment, but the climate and terrain presented harsh conditions. The water was not sanitary and quantities of both food and water were inadequate. Masses of disease-carrying insects in the tropical climate plagued the marchers. Many died of fevers and disease, combined with dehydration, hunger and exhaustion.

I imagine that in some ways those forced marches resembled the experiences of early Christians the letter to Hebrews was addressing. According to Bob Jewett, one of my seminary professors, Epaphras, a companion of Paul, wrote the letter to Hebrews in about 50-60 A.D. to his church friends living in the Lycus Valley, located in the present nation of Turkey. These Christians had been intensely persecuted in waves of violence through a number of years. They felt they were wandering in the wilderness with no protection, surrounded by hostile forces. Death, pain and persecution overwhelmed them; every family had lost some members.

In times of anguish we all long for a deliverer. I would like to be a pacifist. I do not believe violence and war are compatible with the spirit of Christ. However, I KNOW that if I were languishing in a foreign prison, or suffering captivity as a hostage, I would be YEARNING for the U.S. to send in the Marines to come rescue me. **We long for a “superman” kind of figure to sweep in, lift us up, and take us out of our suffering when we are in pain.**

If that's not possible, we'd settle for another satisfactory alternative: we'd accept being given **personal powers that could restrain the hostile forces, to render them impotent, making the world safe for ourselves and those we love.**

The Lycus Valley Christians longed for these exact things. They saw Christ as one from the "great beyond" who would rescue them from the suffering of life's journey. At the same time they tried to tap into magical powers through rituals in order to restrain hostile forces they believed were assailing them.

Epaphras, their Christian brother, wrote to encourage them in their troubles. He was writing to them from PRISON, however. I wonder how successful he appeared to his Christian kin back in Turkey—how strong or powerful, how accomplished at manipulating hostile forces? Like Paul, and for the same reasons (they were both victims of persecution), Epaphras' authority as a spokesperson for Christ may have been doubted.

I imagine people asking, "How great can this new religion be? Why should we follow Christ? What would it bring that's so great? A changed life? A cleansed and renewed person? Freedom? Release from burdens?" To the human eye, mind and heart, a person in chains does not typify any of those.

In our present time and place, following Christ does not lead to persecution or imprisonment. This presents a unique problem for us. It is easy to confuse Christ's gospel with the gospel of health and wealth and success preached by our culture. The book *God wants you rich, and other Christian heresies*, addresses this problem.

Epaphras wasn't rich. He was in prison and in rags. Epaphras wrote to his Christian friends to help them catch a vision of the Christian life that is consistent with his experience of prison and their experience of suffering. This is what he told his friends:

1. The journey of life, which includes suffering, is NECESSARY. It's not exactly a forced march, as in WWII Malaya—but in some ways, yes, it is. We have a choice of whether to march or not, but a decision to sit down by the wayside and stop means DEATH. In Malaya this was physical death; for Epaphras it was a spiritual death of isolation from God and others, of stagnation, of refusing to grow closer to God.

2. Our destination as we journey on is not always clear, just like in Malaya.
3. Adversity is UNAVOIDABLE. It will be encountered on the journey, just like insects, bacteria in water, rugged terrain were all encountered in Malaya. Encountering adversity does NOT mean we are failures as Christians. It does not mean we are missing the boat somehow in manipulating fate or powers around us. It does NOT mean Christ doesn't care about us. It does NOT mean Christ is refusing to deliver us.
4. Our Deliverer IS Christ. It's just that he isn't Rambo. He doesn't come by helicopter and lift us out of the jungle we're traveling through. He joins us IN the jungle, travels with us and our little band, shares our trials and struggles, faces WITH US all threats to our survival.
5. We DO have power. But it's not magical power that makes us impervious to harm. Encounters with God on the road provide us with his Holy Spirit, which lives in us and shapes us in the image of Christ. The powers of this Spirit don't look a lot like powers at all in the world's eyes. But THESE are the powers that are greater than any others. THESE are the powers that allow Christ to say, "In the world you will have trouble, but FEAR NOT, for I have OVERCOME THE WORLD." Here's a short list of how Holy Spirit power appears in the world:
 - Compassion for others
 - Trust in God
 - Courage in meeting adversity
 - Persistence- putting one foot in front of the other
 - Hope
 - Faith in God's promises to work good for all creatures.

We are like the Lycus Valley Christians. We may not suffer the same kinds of torments they did, or as the marchers in Malaya did. But we all encounter adversity, losses, hurts, wounds. Epaphras' words are meant to encourage us, just he tried to encourage them.

He gives us marching orders, for our travels. He provides some specifics in the Scripture read today. All of his orders recognize our vulnerability. They do not pretend that we have superhero status or magical powers. They are practical, concrete, specific.

1. Share brotherly, sisterly love. Provide support for one another in facing life's trials, and in embracing joys.
2. Love outsiders. This is easily forgotten among people banding together for protection. We're asked to remember Abraham who in Genesis 18 welcomed strangers who turned out to be angels. The best way to serve the Highest Power in the universe is not in elaborate rituals but in welcoming strangers.
3. Recognize the power of lifelong, committed, loving relationships. Don't let the stresses of life lead you into illicit liaisons, as though they offer excitement and pleasure strong enough to light up the darkness of life. This behavior will only compound hurt and trouble.
4. Recognize the limitations of money. This is so hard for affluent westerners like us to accept. It's hard to let go of the notion that enough money can bring us happiness and protect us from harm. It's not true. Money cannot protect us from pain or solve all our troubles.
5. Find your security in God's promises. Epaphras includes words that I imagine him whispering to himself in his prison, as God speaks to his heart:

“I will never leave you or forsake you.” “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?”

Epaphras sends us out into the world today. He tells us to follow our leaders, to look at the fruits of their lives, to imitate their faith. And he reminds us to follow and serve above and before all else our Leader with a capital “L”: Jesus Christ, the First, Last and Best. Amen.