

Chaplain's Ministry for Luther's 524th birthday—and—the 232nd birthday of the U.S. Marine Corps!

Colleagues,

U.S. military chaplain Lee Precup—LCMS pastor—passed this on to me for Ed's edification. It did its good deed for me, so now it comes to you as this week's posting two days before those overlapping birth-dates that triggered his reflections. You can see another slice of Chaplain Precup's pastoral work on the DAYSTAR website. Here's the URL to get there: <<http://day-star.net/journal/2-4-precup.htm>> Topic "This War"Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

A Bit of Martin

Margarete Luther gave birth to a son on 10 November 1483, and while she recovered, her husband, Hans, took the boy baby to church on 11 November to be baptized. Many believe that the child was named Martin because 11 November is the feast day of St. Martin of Tours.

Martin of Tours was a fourth century Roman cavalry officer,

probably named Martin after the god of war, Mars. He had been exposed to Christianity, and one day encountered a wounded soldier. Martin immediately cut his cloak in two and gave half to the injured man. That night, according to legend, Christ appeared to Martin in a dream wearing half of that cloak. Martin left military service, was baptized, became a priest, and was later sainted. His cape (Latin, *capella*) was kept in a chapel (cloak room), and the keeper of the cape became a chaplain (interesting that some of God's servants would be coat room attendants). St. Martin of Tours became the patron saint of chaplains, and because he was a popular saint, even patron saint of some cities (Erfurt was one). His feast day also marked the beginning of a forty-day period of fasting during Advent.

Skip ahead a few centuries to the Continental Congress establishing a Navy 13 October 1775, a Marine Corps 10 November (!), and a Chaplain Corps 28 November in that same year. From the very beginning, leaders of the fledgling United States thought that military people should have access to worship and spiritual formation. Their reasoning might not always have been for the sake of piety, however: "If fear is cultivated it will become stronger; if faith is cultivated it will achieve mastery." – John Paul Jones. Chaplains were responsible for worship and teaching elementary skills such as reading and writing to enlisted people who did not have much opportunity for a formal education. Whether or not Lutheran pastor Peter Muhlenberg actually took off his robes in the pulpit one Sunday to reveal a Continental uniform thus declaring his intention of fighting the British, is a matter of folklore. The reverse did occur, however, in that clergy followed the troops either as formally-appointed chaplains or as itinerant preachers to aid in the revolution. In 1862, Rev. Friedrich W. Richmann served in the 58th Regiment of the Ohio Volunteers in the Civil War,

and became the first LCMS military chaplain.

Parish pastors are called to serve a worshipping community. Chaplains are called to live in a community—a community of Christians, non-Christians, and people of other religions. This diverse cross section of America holds strong beliefs for or against religion, or has no opinion whatsoever. Chaplains are staff officers. That is to say, they command and lead no one, but are staff officers of a Commanding Officer to whom they are responsible. They advise in matters of religion, ethics, and morale. What does a Commanding Officer expect of a chaplain? For the most part, chaplains assist in accomplishing the military mission by being a counselor resource for the people assigned to the command. The US Army spells out the work of a chaplain thus: to encourage the living, to comfort the wounded, and to honor the dead. Some Commanding Officers will relegate the chaplain to the status of an ordained social worker, and others will gladly support all expressions of religious ministry. Some want their chaplain far away from any decision making; others want their chaplain at the very center of any important activity. After weeks at sea, a sailor may say to a chaplain, “I don’t know how much longer I can take this,” and the chaplain may honestly answer, “I know; I know.”

At 2155 (that’s 9:55 pm for all you civilians) on each Navy ship at sea, there is evening prayer before taps (lights out). It is piped throughout the ship by loudspeaker. The chaplain prays into a microphone on the darkened bridge (the place where the ship is steered). Spending time on the bridge*—to get my night vision before evening prayer, and afterwards visiting the watch standers there as the ship steams through the night, I have learned how to be a good lookout. The way to see anything in the dark is not to look at it directly, but to keep scanning the horizon so that you can catch a glimpse of anything around you out of the corner of your eye. That is not a bad analogy of

the Christian faith. We cannot look into the empty grave, nor point anywhere and say: "Look, here is the proof of our faith. I can clearly see Jesus here." We only catch oblique glimpses of the Savior at work in us and among us-sometimes only in hindsight. I now intend to share some oblique sightings with you from a chaplain's perspective.

The average age in the military is 22. There are a lot of very young, junior people who make up the bulk of the military. Some of these young men and women are somewhat confused about life in general, and have little or no motivation for being in the military other than it seemed like a good idea. Larger Navy ships continue to have brigs (jails), and a punishment for any sailor who refuses to go to his appointed place of duty, or who refuses to work may be awarded three days in the brig on rations of bread and water. That sailor has to be visited daily by a medical officer, a representative of the command, and the chaplain. On one occasion, I made my way down into the bowels of the ship where the brig is located, and was let into the locked, barred area adjacent to the cell where the sailor sat on the deck. There is nothing in the 8 foot by 8 foot cell (he sleeps and has sanitary facilities in a different area) except the steel deck. A ship at sea makes its own electricity, and for various reasons, sometimes it fails, which it did on this occasion. Did I mention that the sliding door of bars I entered is electrically operated?

Being locked in with a prisoner was something new for me, but we began to talk. I asked what he was learning in that place. His response was not much of anything. I asked if he thought he deserved to be where he was. His response was that he certainly did not want to be there, nor in the Navy. I asked what he expected to get out of the Navy. He did not know. I asked what he expected out of life. Again, he did not know. In frustration, I asked what he was putting into his life. He sat

in angry silence for a while. I then asked if he would like to know Someone who can make life worthwhile. He was intrigued by the idea of God being even where we were, but then became sad to the point of tears. I asked where that was coming from, and he explained all of the mistakes of his young life and how God would not want anything to do with the likes of him. I smiled and named that Someone who came to save lost sinners. The end of this story is yet to be written.

On another occasion, I knew that an officer on one of my squadron ships was looking forward to the birth of his first child. His wife went into labor on Christmas Eve, and delivered a boy on Christmas Day. A few weeks later, we were at sea for local training. That officer was present for worship, and the Sunday happened to be the Presentation of our Lord. The Gospel for the day speaks of the presentation, Simeon, and Anna, but the last verse intrigued me: The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him (Luke 2:40). With the father's permission, I played off the growth of the officer's child and the growth of Our Child, of how one child had found favor with God through baptism, and the other Child found favor with God because he humbled Himself to become a Child. We returned to port that Monday, and on Friday I was summoned to a hospital late at night. The child had died. You may have heard stories of military bravery, but they pale in comparison to what I witnessed that night. Father, mother, and I prayed together as she held her dead baby. The death of a well baby necessitated a coroner's inquest. It was only the brave faith that the child was in Jesus' care that allowed that mother to get up from her chair and hand her dead child over to the coroner. I chose the same Luke text for the memorial service. What wisdom does a forty-day-old child have? In this case, the child knew the warmth and love of mother, the joy and love when father held him, and through the grace of baptism

will know God's eternal, loving embrace.

At another time of worship, it was Holy Week, and we had concluded Maundy Thursday worship with the Lord's Supper. There were only five of us, but we dined well. It was a special meal just for us. One person remained, and we sat in silence for a while. In the low lighting, he finally spoke, "You know, this is exactly how I imagine the Garden of Gethsemane." Did I mention that we were in the wardroom of a submarine at minus 400 feet and this was the Captain? Well, he had a point. Reflecting on the night in which the Savior was betrayed is to see with faith, and not with eyes which would see only the cramped spaces of a submarine. I told the Captain that I was glad to be there with him to experience Gethsemane, and to celebrate forgiveness through the sharing of Jesus' very body and blood.

I could tell more dramatic stories, but daily life tends to be more mundane. Even there, however, it is the shared moments with sailors and Marines (navy chaplains serve both) that have kept me eager to serve. Whatever their faith background, when I overhear a sailor or Marine talking about "my chaplain" when referring to me, I walk a little taller because I know that I have become God's representative for them. I am that daily reminder that God is present for them, and they know that I will gladly speak to them about anything, but especially about what God is doing and what God has accomplished in Christ. I have also been amazed at times of their care for me. They have graced me with offering all that they have-a Marine offering to share some fruit in the field where any fresh food is a treasure, a sailor offering to help stow my gear on a ship when he has already worked a long day, a Commanding Officer who unburdens himself regarding the responsibility of the actions and inactions of every person on his ship. This is the mission field in which I work.

Now, what of the present conflict in which we are engaged? I have not been there. The luck of the draw with assignments, or a realization of my age, or whatever else has determined my present military orders. I have not been to the Middle East in years. Some in the military like me carry a bit of guilt about that. Have we let down our brothers and sisters in some way? Intellectually, I know that is not the case, but it is a nagging feeling at times. I do listen to those who have been there. I especially listen when they begin to reveal incredible tales of actions which eye was not designed to see, nor ear to hear. I do not know what they experienced then, but I assure them that what they feel now is a normal reaction to an abnormal situation. I also assure them that God sorrows with them over this warring world, and more, God has done something about it. Jesus paid the price for all of our wrongs, and he chooses to forgive us. We do have a Savior, and all of this will pass away.

My current duty station is at Marine Corps Recruit Depot, San Diego. Here, eighteen-year-old recruits are made into Marines after three months of extremely difficult training. Almost daily, I counsel with recruits over homesickness, the correctness of their decision, problems at home, and doubts of completing this training. My vision is a bit more long range than theirs. I tell them that my daily prayer is that this war will end. I also tell them that if they joined to fight, and if when it is their turn to go, there is no war, they may blame me, and thank God.

My days in the military are fast coming to a close, and I must retire due to age. In conflict and in times of peace, I thank God for the people I have encountered and for whom I have sometimes made connections with the Savior, they with me, and God's own Son with us both. On one level, I regret that some of the brightest people of our country devote their lives to the

study and prosecution of war. When they join me, however, in praying the Lord's Prayer, specifically, "Thy kingdom come..." they confess with me that God's plan is complete. The Savior has come. His kindly rule and gift of life may be seen only partially now, but all of this, including war, will pass away at Jesus' return. We trust his promise that he is making all things, including us, new.

Some went down to the sea in ships, plying their trade in deep waters. They beheld the works of the Lord, God's wonderful works in the deep. Psalm 107:23

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