

December 2009

The Christmas season is upon us now in force. Christmas Day is approaching with the speed of Google. Zip, and it will be here. Zip, and New Years Day will follow, heralding the start of 2010. This is that time of year organizations send out a Christmas letter, or, a “my-what-a-year-its-been” letter.

This letter is of a different sort.

It began yesterday afternoon, while I was watching TV.

Now, I don't watch a great deal of television personally, but when I do, I enjoy the history channel and military channel. (Of course; are you surprised?) In small snippets this past week I have been captured by a remarkable series on World War II, featuring hours of actual color footage shot during the war but lost in basements or bureaucracies for nearly half a century. It was gripping stuff – hand-held camera footage from the opening moments of the invasion of South Pacific islands like Tarawa and Okinawa. In-the-trenches footage from Normandy, and the Battle of the Bulge (which made me shut up about the weather in Colorado).

Then came an episode I was totally unprepared for.

The screen simply announced the date: May 8, 1945.

The scenes were first from Paris, then London. Again, much of it home footage. Thousands of joyful faces pouring spontaneously onto the Champs-Élysées. Soldiers being kissed by young girls, aircraft flying in formation overhead, elderly men and women waving small flags. They were celebrating the end of the war. Hitler was dead; Nazi Germany surrendered. VE – victory in Europe day. The celebrations were so utterly unscripted, so purely joyful by people who had every reason to be joyful.

I was overcome by emotion. It caught me totally off guard. I had been riveted by the battle footage, the courage and sacrifice and horrors of war. It all felt very, very familiar. But not the scenes of celebration. Up till that moment I had watched with a sort of sober fascination and respect. But here, now, as the streets literally overflowed with souls in a raucous party, champagne corks flying, people dancing, laughing, weeping, this is what brought the lump in my throat and tears in my eyes.

What I realized, for the first time in a very long time, was this: The Great Battle will also come to an end. Our day of celebration is coming.

It seemed too good to be true.

I've been so caught up in the fight – in skirmishes great and small, some on a grand scale and some those inner struggles no one else sees – so completely caught up in it I had forgotten that the war will end. We *will* have our “VE” day.

The parallel to Christmas is apparent. One of the dilemmas of Christmastime is that we're all running so hard we don't really get to enjoy it. The season can be so full, on top of an already full life, that

we lose it. (The most common Christmas message is some version of, “Let’s not lose the meaning of Christmas in the chaos,” a speech Stasi makes to our family every year. Usually in vain.) The chaos of life and the constancy of battle in one form or another had completely clouded my horizon to the point that I had forgotten that this, too, shall come to an end.

Okay, maybe this is a Christmas letter. But I am speaking of something more connected to Easter, really.

Because all that we long for in Christmastime – all the joy and love and wonder and delight, the deep ache we can hardly put into words – that is actually speaking to us not about Christmas at all, but of our own day of celebration. The end of the war. (This helps to explain two phenomena common to Christmas: That deep longing we feel for something magical and rich and wonderful, and, that disappointment when it never really comes, or, if we get a taste, it’s time to pack it all up in boxes and store them in the attic.)

Christmas is the invasion. It is Guadalcanal and Iwo Jima and Normandy. Most of you have accepted this by now, and you have entered into the Great Battle. An hour after watching the WWII series, I picked up Chesterton and read this: “Unless we understand the presence of the enemy, we shall not only miss the point of Christianity, but we shall miss the point of Christmas...the abrupt bells at midnight sound like the great guns of a battle that has just been won.”

For we are closer now to the end of the war than we are to Bethlehem. Victory is ours; that is promised. Bethlehem was the opening salvo, but also the signal of the end to the dark prince’s reign. This Battle is drawing to an end, dear friends. Let that sink in.

And O, what rejoicing will take place. Corks flying, angels overhead in formation, people laughing and crying and dancing and kissing one another. That day is coming. That day is ours, and it *is* coming. Normandy is well behind us; we have crossed the Rhine . This is how I will celebrate Christmas.

Thank you, with all our hearts, for fighting with us, for us.

And Merry Christmas!



John

PS I leave fundraising where I left it last month, trusting that as you ask Jesus, “Lord, what would you have me do for Ransomed Heart this year?” He will see to all our needs. So bless you.