

“WE ARE MARCHING IN THE LIGHT OF GOD”

Exodus 13:21-22; Psalm 27

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In a book I've been reading, the author tells about a former prisoner remembering life in solitary confinement. "My eyes hungered for light," the man said. The writer who recounts this says that he senses this hunger throughout our culture, which "longs for light as it longs for blessing, or for peace, or God."

If you stop and think about it, it makes sense, because after all we are absolutely dependent upon light; we could not live without the processes of photosynthesis which drive every food chain. Beyond that, it is light that lets us see what's around us; light gives us colors; light more than anything else allows us to define time and situate ourselves in space. It's no wonder that light is a metaphor for hope, learning, clarity, truth, and righteousness. It's no wonder that people have always associated light with God.

Gothic cathedrals were built with that theological perspective in mind: with windows through which light could pour into vast sacred spaces... spaces in which believers and seekers could feel themselves bathed in the light of God's presence and lifted up out of the dull slog of their daily lives into a holy light.

That's what it feels like to me when we sing the hymn I'm going to talk about today, "We Are Marching in the Light of God." When I sing this song, I want to straighten up, and look up. It reenergizes me for following Jesus. I feel a little more courageous, a little more hopeful.

This hymn seems to remind me that "God is our light and our salvation," and that even when things feel hopeless and scary, I don't have to be afraid. It has echoes of the story of the Exodus – God leading the people in the night with fire as well as with a cloud in the day, so that even in the dark wilderness they knew they weren't lost. It calls to mind so many scriptures that make use of this powerful metaphor, from Psalm 119 "Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path," to Jesus words "I am the light of the world" and "You are the light of the world."

And yet, the English words of this song are simple and not many. In fact, the title is all the words there are. But every piece of this phrase is significant and necessary.

We are marching in the light of God.

We are marching. Not "I am." *We* are. There's a world of difference. "We" is a testimony to the power and solidarity of community, of those who stand together, work together, march together, take risks together.

We are marching. The song is about movement. Even without the words, you feel it in the rhythm and beat. It's a marching song, so it engages the whole body. You can't possibly experience it on just an intellectual level or even an auditory level; it's more than just words and notes. And that sense of movement lets us know that we are not supposed to be sitting still. There is work to be done; there are things to learn, places to go, wrongs to right, people who are hurting. The movement is toward justice, truth, freedom, wholeness. The song insists that we can't be silent or indifferent or complacent or stuck in our ruts. We can't remain unmoved by injustice or the needs of others.

We are marching in the light. These are the words of people who claim a righteous cause – not out of arrogance or ignorance as often happens, and not out of self-interest or group-interest, which sometimes is defined as a righteous cause - but out of a conviction that they have to do what they know is right, even if it is hard. There's a kind of freedom in that. "Light" implies truth, and we may remember Jesus' words, "the truth will set you free." Walking in the light also reminds me of the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. : "The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

We are marching in the light. But more than that, we are marching in the light of God. In this song, we sing about a calling. It's an acknowledgement that God is sovereign, that divine authority is above all other powers, that the cause of justice is holy. It is an expression of faith that God walks with us – marches with us – and though we might face risks and fears, God is there to give courage and hope.

Sometimes the words of a song speak for themselves – but sometimes context is critical... and that's the case here.

"Siyahamba" is based on a folk song in the Zulu language of South Africa, rewritten in the 1950's as a Christian hymn. It was sung in churches and schools originally but it came to be one of the "freedom songs" of the anti-apartheid movement. It's easy to see why. And it's impossible to appreciate the meaning of this song without that background. Does it make us want to move our feet? Of course; it's a song intended for marching to; its beat is meant to be kept by the rhythm of many feet moving together. Does it seem a little repetitive? The march toward justice was and is a long one. It requires constancy, staying the course, doing the same work, speaking the same truth, resisting the same evils, walking the same road for the long haul. It also requires regular affirmation and reaffirmation of the faith that keeps us going.

We can't forget when we sing this song that it is not – at least not in every way, and not for most of us – our song. We have not had to put our bodies on the line against powerful oppressors as black South African men, women, and children did. There have been those in our country who have faced those kinds of risks. But we ourselves are pretty far removed from that.

Still, in another way, maybe we can embrace this song as our own. Walter Brueggeman says “it could be that when we pay attention and sing ourselves into solidarity” with our sisters and brothers, “we will become aware that more is required and more is possible.... When we let our feet and our bodies identify with the marching cadence of the song, we might move beyond singing in the sanctuary to singing in the street.” (p. 175-6)

Brueggeman reminds me, and I want to remind us all, that we ought not to indulge ourselves in the fantasy that injustice is a thing of the past, and that we now live in a world where everyone has equal justice, equal protection, equal opportunity, equal access to what they need. We have a ways to go, and we need to keep moving toward something better.

This song can be ours if it helps us claim the courage we need to keep moving in the direction of justice, of inclusion, of more people-centered rights. And of course we need to do more than talk about – and sing about - truth and justice inside the walls of the church; we need to walk that walk out there, too.

Maybe sometimes that means actually marching – which can be a powerful way to not only call attention to an issue – whether it be racism or climate change or peace or hunger or something else – but to experience solidarity with a community. But there are a lot of ways to march for justice – such as writing letters, changing policies and practices of organizations we are part of, being part of groups like ISAAC or Amnesty International, donating to advocacy organizations, getting to know people who are different from you, learning more about issues and sharing what you learn... helping your church engage more effectively with the issues and needs around us.

Maybe singing this song can also bring us into greater solidarity and empathy with our sisters and brothers across our country and across the globe who march and act and speak to call attention to injustice and human needs.

Maybe singing this song and remembering that we walk in God’s light can instill in us a sense that our lives and actions matter, inform our choices, show us a new perspective on our responsibilities and relationship to others, give us courage as we move through the rough places in our lives.

“We are marching in the light of God.” Despite the song’s history in the struggles against oppression, despite the other similar struggles it evokes – from the Israelites’ exodus out of Egypt to the U.S. Civil Rights movement, despite the many situations in our world today that require the courage of this song... it is nevertheless a song of profound hope, for *people* who have hope – because light has shined on us, because we have the blessing of community, because we are called by God who is our life, our strength, our guide, our light and our salvation. Thanks be to God.

“We Are Marching in the Light of God”

Siyahamb' ekukhanyen' kwenkhos',
siyahamb' eku khanyen' kwenkhos'.
Siyahamb' ekukhanyen' kwenkhos',
siyahamb' eku khanyen' kwenkhos'.

Siyahamba, hamba,
siyahamba, hamba,
siyahamb' ekukhanyen' kwen(khanyen' kwen) khos'.
Siyahamba, hamba,
siyahamba, hamba,
siyahamb' ekukhanyen' kwenkhos'.

We are marching in the light of God;
we are marching in the light of God.
We are marching in the light of God;
we are marching in the light of God.

We are marching, marching,
we are marching, oooo,
we are marching in the light of (the light of) God.
We are marching, marching,
we are marching, oooo,
we are marching in the light of God.

Resources:

A Glad Obedience: What and Why We Sing, Walter Brueggemann
Arctic Dreams, Barry Lopez