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The Advent Journey to Peace (Part Three)

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On the Road to Peace

Where did Jesus learn his visionary nonviolence, those spectacular Sermon on the Mount teachings? Luke makes it clear: from his mother. Mary's Advent journey moves from the Annunciation as a scene of contemplative nonviolence to the Visitation as the practice of active nonviolence, and finally to the Magnificat, as a public proclamation, the epitome of prophetic nonviolence (Luke 1:46-56). I think Jesus learned the lessons of revolutionary nonviolence from his mother's manifesto.

"My soul proclaims the greatness of the God of peace," Mary announces to Elizabeth and the world. "My spirit rejoices in the God of peace, who has done great things for me. God's nonviolence is from age to age. God has dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart, thrown down the rulers from their thrones, lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry with good things, sent the rich away empty, and remembered God's mercy to God's faithful ones."

Here is one dangerous text, this utterance from a lowly woman languishing on the outskirts of a brutal empire. It is dangerous still. The junta in Argentina banned it after the Mothers of the Disappeared displayed its words on placards in the capital plaza.

But what of our own culture? What might happen to us if we announced those words, if we translated them to fit our nightmarish wars, injustices, and classism? More, if we tried to make them come true -- by ending the war on Iraq, cutting all tax breaks for the rich, feeding every starving child and refugee on the planet, bringing down our corrupt politicians, generals and warmakers from their thrones? Few Catholics

would suffer Mary's politics easily. Indeed, not many of us take her seriously. It's easier to keep Mary in her place than to take up her magnificent of peace and justice.

The Magnificat lays out the Gospel in sum and substance. Today, however, most would dismiss this magnificent Mary as a leftist, a radical, a communist, a disturber of the peace, a fanatic. But if this is her attitude at the time of Jesus' birth, what does it say about our attitude this Advent, the meaning of Christmas itself, the spiritual life, and the work before us?

A few points to note. After her experience of prayer and the Annunciation, after reaching out to a woman in need in the Visitation, Mary is full of confidence, even joy, as she announces the social, economic and political consequences of God's action in history. She believes it all; she already sees the outcome, and so she rejoices. Can we dare such faith and hope, and rejoice at the coming of God's reign and all that God is doing, as if it has already happened, as if it is really happening? What gives us joy anyway? How can we be so attuned to God's work among us that we do the politically incorrect thing and rejoice?

The Magnificat begins with words of consolation, focused on God, God's greatness, and God's saving action in the world. I think Luke frames this declaration as a public proclamation. It's so interesting that she never says another word in his gospel. But she doesn't have to.

She says that God has been active in her life. She knows that she is blessed and can see the future, that everyone will be touched by this blessing. She teaches me that the Advent journey, the discipleship journey, is not about results, achievements, fame or success, but about being blessed by God who is at work among us, and allowing everyone to share the blessings.

Mary then describes the nature of God. Contrary to what the culture or the empire or the warmaking government would teach, Mary explains that God is holy, meaning God is a God of mercy, a God of nonviolence. Mary knows who God is and what God is like and she tells us because she has encountered God. Like Mary, we too have encountered God, and we too need to proclaim that contrary to what the culture of war would have us believe, God is a God of mercy and nonviolence, not a god of vengeance and war.

God's way is through active nonviolence, she says, from age to age. If we look closely, we can see what she means. From the early martyrs to Francis and Claire to Gandhi and Day, we see God's spirit of creative nonviolence at work in history, right up to today. We can take heart, Mary explains, because the whole world is being transformed, mobilized through God's creative nonviolence.

That's not what the empire preaches. Bush, Cheney, Rice, the Superrich, the Pentagon generals, the millions who serve the forces of death -- they have their own magnificent of war and greed, a kind of anti-magnificat. They believe their own lies, their own power, their own arrogance. They lift up the rich and crush and kill the poor.

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But Mary's vision turns the world upside-down. God takes a preferential option for the poor and powerless, Mary declares, and has begun a permanent nonviolent revolution: scattering the arrogant, throwing down the rulers from their thrones, lifting up the lowly, feeding the hungry, sending the rich away empty, remembering God's mercy and promises. Mary practices a spirituality of justice for the poor, conversion for the rich, disarmament of the warmakers, liberation for the oppressed. She sees God doing these things, and this is why she praises God.

Like Mary, we need to look for God's transforming action, praise God for this work of justice and peace, and participate in the world's nonviolent transformation. That means, resisting the culture of war and greed, feeding the hungry and lifting up the lowly, and allowing God's promise to come true in us.

With one speech, Mary becomes one of the Bible's greatest prophets. In her Advent journey, she lays out a map for us, and for her son. A map of nonviolence in three stages: from contemplation to loving action to prophetic word and deed. The same journey now falls to us.

Just as Jesus learned from his mother and carried on the work of announcing God's reign peace and justice, and denouncing the anti-reign of war and greed, we too need to rise to the ranks of prophetic nonviolence, to become a prophetic people who speak out on behalf of the God of peace, to denounce the false spirituality of violence and speak the truth of peace and justice, to say things like, "Stop the war and occupation of Iraq. Bring our troops home now, let the UN resolve the crisis. Don't bomb Iran. End the occupation of Palestine. Seek nonviolent solutions for peace in the Mid-East and everywhere. Welcome every immigrant; support the undocumented. Close Guantanamo, and our 730 military bases around the world. And close the SOA, Los Alamos, Livermore Labs, Fort Huachuca, as well as the CIA, the NSA, and the Pentagon. Lift the entire Third World debt, house all the homeless, give free universal healthcare, abolish the death penalty, sign the Kyoto accord, find alternatives to fossil fuels, stop global warming, fire all the generals, end the Star Wars program, cut the military budget, dismantle every nuclear weapon and weapon of mass destruction, and use those billions and billions of dollars to feed every starving child and refugee on the planet, to end poverty, and to educate the world's children in the ways of nonviolence. And do it in honor of the God of peace and justice."

This Advent, as we undertake that journey with Mary on the road of Gospel nonviolence, as we unpack the social, economic, and political implications of Christmas in our own nightmarish reality, we too can take heart. God has not forsaken us. God will see justice done to the poor. God will end the wars and dismantle the weapons. God is bringing a new world of nonviolence in our midst. And so, with the world's poor, with children everywhere, we too can sing:

O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel. That mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appear?.

O come, thou Dayspring from on high, and cheer us by thy drawing nigh. Disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death's dark shadow put to flight?.

O Come, Desire of nations, bind in one the hearts of all humankind. Bid thou our sad divisions cease, and be thy self our prince of peace?.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!

For daily reflections this Advent, see John's new booklet, "The Advent of the God of Peace" from www.paxchristiusa.org, and his book, "Mary of Nazareth, Prophet of Peace" from Ave Maria Press. "The Narrow Path," a new DVD featuring John Dear, is available from www.sandamianofoundation.org. For further info., see www.johndear.org.

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