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Advent Peace at Jonah House

John Dear | Dec. 9, 2008 On the Road to Peace

Last week after speaking in Baltimore, I spent the night at Jonah House, the long time peace community that embodies the Gospel message of love and nonviolence. They live it out constantly in the form of nonviolent resistance to war and nuclear weapons. It was a blessing beyond measure to share stories with my friends there, to pray through the Advent readings, and to experience again their community of hope and peace. Jonah House remains for me one of the brightest beacons of hope in the country.

It was founded in 1977 by Philip Berrigan, Elizabeth McAlister and their friends in inner-city Baltimore. From the beginning they envisioned themselves as a Christian community of nonviolent resisters, and since then they have faithfully stood publicly against war and injustice. They keep regular vigils and engage in periodic acts of civil disobedience against war-making institutions in the D.C. area. There is, quite simply, no other community like it. They are our own modern day Jonahs, Ezekiels, Jeremiahs. As well as Dorothy Days, Emma Goldmans, and Rosa Parks.

Jonah House was instrumental in my own education, as I write in my new autobiography, *A Persistent Peace*. Its members continue to be the standard by which I measure my own discipleship.

In 1982, I first met Phil and Liz during their annual "Faith and Resistance" retreat around the Feast of the Holy Innocents. I prayed and watched as community members poured pints of their blood on the gleaming floors of a Pentagon hallway, and watched as the police moved in and hauled them off to the local lock-up. Over the years, I participated with them in countless die-ins, vigils, and sit-ins, occasionally sharing arrest with them for civil disobedience.

If their innumerable actions were to be written up in some grand chronology, people would scarcely believe their track record of steadfast resistance. The story would be fit to be appended to the Acts of the Apostles.

Many would argue that their witness is lost on the winds of war. But I say their lives accord with the spirit of the New Testament, and their witness towers over all the self-important things going on in the imperial capital. The Pentagon, the nuclear weapons, the wars -- despite talk of change -- carry on to this day. But then again, so does the Jonah House community, much to my delight.

It was my delight to be there again. Such a consolation to see my friends, Dominican Sisters Ardeth Platte and Carol Gilbert, who have lived at Jonah House for fourteen years. They are completing their sentences for their "Sacred Earth and Space" Plowshares disarmament action on October 6, 2002, for which they received two-and-a half to three-and-a-half years in federal prisons, and three years of supervised release and restitution in community service.

"Every day of these last six years has been full of grace and blessings," they said. During the past year, they have traveled the country on a national speaking tour preaching their mantra: "Disarm nuclear weapons and end every war, all wars forever."

Likewise, it was a pleasure to visit with my friend Susan Crane, another stalwart veteran of peace and Plowshares defendant, as well as Luke, Joe, and Lydia Willie-Kellermann, daughter of my friend Bill and the late Jeannie.

At the center of the community, there from the beginning, is Liz McAlister, still faithful after all these years, still speaking out, acting up, saying No to war, and Yes to life. To us her friends, Liz is a tower of strength, hope, love, and encouragement. Being with Liz again had me reminiscing. I remembered the many talks she and Phil delivered over the years. I remembered the many irrepressible letters Liz wrote me from Alderson Women's prison in the early 1980s, where she spent 3 years for a Plowshares action.

This past Friday, there Liz was again, in an Alexandria, Va., courtroom, on trial for daring to sit in sackcloth and ashes at the Pentagon last Hiroshima day (while many of us were doing the same thing at Los Alamos). She made her statement, pled not guilty. The judged declared her guilty and fined her a hundred dollars. Like the disciples in the Acts of the Apostles, she came home rejoicing.

Much of my time there we sat around and talked about Phil Berrigan, who six years ago Dec. 6, 2002, died of cancer. On the walls now are photos of Phil, along with icons of saints and martyrs, and shelves lined with books on Scripture and nonviolence. The scene threw me back to the week Phil died. Thirty relatives and friends moved in for the duration, caring and praying for him, and eventually burying him. His diagnosis had come down only two months before.

On Dec. 1, he slipped into a coma. And the days of waiting brimmed with grace. We prayed, cooked, shared stories, sang, wept, laughed, and planned. In the basement, Phil's son Jerry crafted a coffin of burnished pine.

Those were some of the most intense community experiences of my life -- days of deep faith, hope, grief and love. I presided at his funeral a few days later and I was overwhelmed by the outpouring of love from the peace community. I trembled at the power of Phil's long, faithful life. I'm convinced it has born fruit, though we may never know the full extent of it. But by any measure it was an extraordinary life of sacrificial love. He spent 11 of his last 34 years behind bars for peace.

And so I was there in that place again. Tuesday night I spoke at St. Ignatius Church and signed copies of my autobiography. On Wednesday morning I joined the community for their usual morning prayer. They read aloud the daily readings, share reflections, offer prayers of intercession.

On this morning, we read the astonishing vision of Isaiah: *"On this mountain God will provide for all peoples a feast of rich food and choice wines, juicy, rich food and pure, choice wines. On this mountain, God will destroy the veil that veils all peoples, the web that is woven over all nations. God will destroy death forever. God will wipe away the tears from all faces. God will remove the reproach of God's people from the whole earth."* (Isaiah 25:6-10)

By no means do I intend to paint an overly nostalgic or transcendent picture. Jonah House lives with its feet on the ground. They plug away, offer retreats, provide food to hundreds each week, speak around the country, and most of all, plan nonviolent action after action -- the pending one for the Holy Innocents' "Faith and Resistance" retreat, just after Christmas in Washington, D.C. It's an annual affair.

? nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction that imperil all life and creation itself; war -- perpetual and unending -- driven by an imperial claim to control the earth's resources; utter and dehumanizing poverty -- the consequence of a greed-driven global economy that is now collapsing and causing untold suffering and death; global climate crisis and ecological destruction -- consequence of our addiction to consumer life-styles?.

And so, the Jonah House community keeps watch, lives in Advent hope, and carries on the Christian work of Gospel nonviolence, saying No to war, injustice and violence, and Yes to peace, life and love. They show us all how to follow the peacemaking Christ and welcome his Christmas gift of peace on earth. They are a blessing for us all.

[To learn more about Jonah House, visit: www.jonahhouse.org [1]. To send a Christmas contribution to support their work, write to: Jonah House, 1301 Moreland Ave., Baltimore, MD 21216.]

John Dear is featured this week in an interview with Martin Sheen on www.abcnewsnow.com [2] and Podcast interviews on BBC News America, "Interfaith Voices" radio, and "America" magazine, available on line. His autobiography, *A Persistent Peace*, (Loyola Press), just named "One of the best books of the year" by the *Washington Post*, is available from www.amazon.com [3], along with a new collection of this NCR Café columns, *Put Down the Sword*, (Eerdmans Pub.) For further information, see: www.johndear.org [4].

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