

Isaiah's Advent vision

John Dear | Nov. 30, 2010 On the Road to Peace

Last August, during a visit with friends from Ireland, I learned that a great meteor shower was going to happen one night. So late that evening, we put out chairs, sat down on the New Mexico mesa and looked up at the night sky. On the mountaintop where I live at 7,000 feet at the edge of the Rockies, sometimes you can see a hundred thousand tiny stars set off by the Milky Way which looks like a pinkish banner across the sky. I never knew so many stars were visible until I came to New Mexico.

Sure enough, as if on cue, a tiny meteor shot across the sky. Then, another. And so on, every minute for hours. It was beautiful and exciting.

We sat for hours, mesmerized, wide awake, with our heads back, looking straight up at the dark sky full of bright stars, talking, enjoying the moment. It was well past midnight when all of a sudden, a huge red fireball the size of the moon shot across the sky for five long seconds leaving an orange and red trail of fire before it disappeared behind the distant mountain range. We jumped up screaming and shouting. It was scary, thrilling and exhilarating. We had never seen anything like it in all our lives.

Advent is like that.

In the midst of the world's long dark night of war and violence, advent invites us to look up for the coming of the Light of peace.

The times seem darker than ever, what with our ongoing wars, extreme poverty, economic collapse, senseless imperialism, continuing nuclear weapons development, and no end in sight. On the first Sunday of Advent, U.S. imperial warships started "military exercises" with South Korea off the coast of North Korea, stirring the embers of war, itching for a fight.

But the readings for this first week of Advent point to a spectacular vision -- the hope of a nonviolent Savior and a new world of nonviolence. There's nothing else that can match Isaiah's fiery vision except the Gospels themselves.

First Isaiah's oracle from chapter two outlines that momentous day when the nations of the world will climb the mountain of God to be instructed in God's ways, and then proceed immediately "to beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks," so that "one nation shall not raise the sword against another nor shall they train for war ever again. Come, let us walk in the light of the God of peace," Isaiah writes (Isaiah 2:2-5).

This passage explains the work of our lives. We are the people who try to walk in the light of the God of peace, who allow ourselves to be instructed in God's ways, who seek to dismantle our arsenals, feed the hungry and end war forever. This sums up the spiritual life, we hear on the first Sunday of each new liturgical year. This is how we prepare for the coming of the peacemaking Christ.

In our work for disarmament and justice, we envision a world without hunger, poverty, war, executions and nuclear weapons. We try to recognize one another as sisters and brothers dwelling in God's peaceful creation.

But Isaiah goes even farther. He announces the coming day when the God of peace will "destroy death forever." God will "wipe away the tears from all faces and remove the reproach of the people." On that day, we will say, "Behold our God! This is the God of peace for whom we looked. Let us rejoice and be glad." (Isaiah 25:6-10)

Isaiah's Advent vision goes beyond our wildest imaginations. With his long haul perspective, he proclaims: "The days of death as social methodology are over. No more killing, no more bombings, no more war, no more death, no more tears. Look to the God of peace and rejoice!"

Thomas Merton called the dark night of war, empire and evil -- "the Unspeakable." Isaiah envisions its opposite -- a new kind of world, the fullness of life for all, which he tried to describe and speak. I think Jesus read these texts and took them to heart. At one point, when he quotes Isaiah, Jesus says, "How right Isaiah was?"

In chapter 29, Isaiah announces that the days of tyrants and arrogant rulers are over. Instead of "gloom and darkness, the eyes of the blind shall see." The lowly will find joy in the God of peace and the poor will rejoice (Isaiah 26:1-5).

In Isaiah 9:1-6 and 11:1-10, the promise reaches fulfillment in the coming of a nonviolent savior who will herald a new world of nonviolence.

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom, a light has shone. You have brought them great joy? For the yoke that burdened them you have smashed. Every boot tramped in battle, every cloak rolled in blood, will be burned as fuel for flames. A child is born to us? His dominion is vast and forever peaceful."

"Then the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb and the leopard shall lie down with the kid. The calf and the young lion shall browse together with a little child to guide them. The cow and the bear shall be neighbors, together their young shall rest. The lion shall eat hay like the ox. The baby shall play by the cobra's den and the child shall lay his hand on the adder's lair. There shall be no harm or ruin on all my holy mountain. For the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the God of peace." (Isaiah 11:1-10)

It's a bitter cold night as I write this on the first Sunday of Advent on Block Island, R.I., in the little cottage built by the late theologian William Stringfellow for Daniel Berrigan on a cliff overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. The wind howls along the cliffs and the stormy sea churns in turmoil down below. A deer just strolled by. I stoke the little stove with blocks of wood to keep warm. High above, the night sky is filled with stars. Some of them are twinkling.

Here, thirty five years ago, Stringfellow described our predicament:

We live now in the United States in a culture so profoundly pagan that Advent is no longer really noticed, much less observed. The churches have become so utterly secularized that they no longer remember the topic of Advent. ? In the first Advent, Christ comes into the world, but in the next Advent, Christ comes as Judge of the world and of all the world's thrones and pretenders, sovereignties and dominions, principalities and authorities, presidencies and regimes, in vindication of his lordship and the reign of the Word of God in history. This is the truth, which the world hates, which biblical people (that is, repentant people) bear, and by which they live as the church in the world in the time between two Advents.

As biblical, Advent people, we take Isaiah's vision to heart and live by that Word of God. I find that this Word, this Advent vision, gives me hope, perhaps even my only hope. In Advent time, we keep watch for Christ, and keep alive Isaiah's vision of a world without war and death, where there is "no harm on all my holy mountain." As we do, we prepare ourselves and the world to welcome Christ's gift of "peace on earth."

That gift makes even the night beautiful.

John's collection of the writings of Nobel Laureate Mairead Maguire, *The Vision of Peace*, has just been republished by www.wipfandstock.com. His new book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings (Orbis)*, and other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile's *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' "Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund," go to: <http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn>. For further information, or to schedule a lecture or retreat, visit: www.johndear.org.

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