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## Celebrating the birth of the nonviolent Jesus

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

*?And so this is Christmas, and what have you done??*

That's how John Lennon's Christmas carol begins. No Frosty the Snowman; no Rudolph; no Jingle Bells. He gets right to the point in the chorus: *?War is over, if you want it.?*

That's a good translation, to my mind, of Luke's Christmas carol -- sung on that holy night by the angels to the terrified shepherds of Bethlehem: *?Peace on earth, if you want it.?*

In the midst of the carols, cards and shopping, we sometimes forget: Christmas celebrates the birth of the nonviolent Jesus -- the herald of a new world of peace, God's reign of nonviolence come down to earth.

When Jesus was born even the angels could not contain themselves. Peace is at hand, if you want it. Nothing could be more political, revolutionary or salvific.

This Christmas week, I've been snowed in on my New Mexico mesa with about two feet of snow. Every December I hardly have any electrical power because the solar panels don't get enough sunlight, but this week has been particularly rough. So I keep a fire going and welcome the chance for reading, prayer and solitude.

I've been thinking about Christmas as a time to celebrate the life of the nonviolent Jesus because his life is so remarkable, to say the least. Of course he is the God of peace present in our world of war, but I can barely wrap my mind around the mystery of the Incarnation.

So instead I consider Jesus' whole life and discover there, in the cumulative effect, an entirely new way of life, something rarely seen, something rarely invoked in the mass media and the churches -- the most

perfect life of love, compassion, nonviolence, peacemaking and resistance to injustice and empire.

I see Jesus as a nonviolent revolutionary who sets in motion God's peace movement for the disarmament of every heart, every nation and every age. His nonviolent revolution continues to this day and, as participants in it, we celebrate his birth and his revolutionary life.

Poverty, war, executions, global warming, drug killings, nuclear weapons -- it's hard to believe that Jesus' life two thousand years ago has sparked the coming of new peace. That's why as people of faith, Christmas invites us once again to dig deeper spiritual roots, to continue our own personal conversion to Christ, to believe in his Way and to carry on his Gospel witness.

When I look at his entire life, I'm challenged once again to renounce violence, let go of resentment, turn away from meanness, throw away despair, choose life, adopt his brave nonviolence, forgive everyone, offer compassion, practice universal love, and seek that Christmas gift of "peace on earth." As we ponder his lifelong active nonviolence, we will rejoice because Jesus really offers us a Way out of madness.

Jesus grows up and lives in dire poverty, with the specter of death in the form of Roman troops following him like his own shadow. During his short public life he seems to be everywhere he shouldn't be, doing everything he can to help all those crushed by the empire. He heals lepers, deaf people, mute people, blind people, and every sick person who approaches him. Apparently if you touched him, you were healed.

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Jesus doesn't have an ounce of violence in him; instead he is a fount of compassion and love. His presence is healing and disarming.

He tells the man with the withered hand to stretch out his hand, the woman with a bent back to stand up straight, and the paralyzed man to take up his mat and walk. He intervenes and saves a woman about to be stoned to death by the religious authorities. He calms the storm, walks on water, feeds the hungry crowds and blesses children. Apparently, he raised the dead to new life.

At every instance, Jesus calls the poor and marginalized to follow him on the Way. He teaches them to pray, love one another and serve those in need. He announces God's reign of peace and nonviolence. He challenges the hypocrisy of religious authorities and breaks unjust laws on many occasions to make justice a reality.

Finally, he turns toward Jerusalem on a long walking campaign of active nonviolence. His followers use street theater to hail him with palm branches as he enters the Holy City. In the Temple, he turns over the tables of the corrupt religious money changers in an act of nonviolent civil disobedience.

For such a protest he is immediately arrested, tried and executed -- but he undergoes his suffering and death with perfect nonviolence, forgiving his killers and surrendering himself to his beloved Father.

When Jesus rises from the dead he offers love, forgiveness and peace and, once again, invites his friends to follow him in this Way of life, love and peace. You will do even greater things than me, he tells them.

His grand life is hard to take in, but his incomparable teachings seem even greater. In my book *Transfiguration*, I listed his top twenty five "greatest sayings."

I offer them here below to remind us at Christmas of Jesus' hopes and vision for us. They are challenging,

inspiring -- and doable.

1. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you that you may be sons and daughters of God for God makes the sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust. (Mt. 5:44; Lk. 6:27-28)
2. Blessed are the peacemakers, they will be called the sons and daughters of God. (Mt. 5:9)
3. Love one another as I have loved you. (Jn. 13:34)
4. Repent, for the reign of God is at hand. (Mt. 4:17)
5. Forgive and you will be forgiven. (Lk. 6:37)
6. Be compassionate just as God is compassionate (Lk. 6:36)
7. The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. (Lk. 4:18)
8. Seek first God's reign and God's justice and all these things will be given you besides. (Mt. 6:33; Lk. 12:31)
9. Blessed are you who are poor, for the reign of God is yours. (Lk. 6:20)
10. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be satisfied. (Mt. 5:6)
11. Do not offer violent resistance to one who does evil. (Mt. 5:39)
12. You cannot serve God and money. (Mt. 6:24)
13. Let the one who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her. (Jn. 8:7)
14. Do not be afraid. (Mt. 10:31, 14:27, 28:10; Mk. 5:36, 6:50; Lk. 8:50, 12:7, 12:32; Jn. 6:20)
15. Go and learn the meaning of the words, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." (Mt. 9:13)
16. Do unto others what you would have them do unto you. (Mt. 7:12)
17. Those who live by the sword will die by the sword. (Mt. 7:12)
18. As you enter a house, wish it peace. (Mt. 10:12; Lk. 10:5)
19. Behold, I am sending you like sheep in the midst of wolves. (Mt. 10:16)
20. Whatever you did for one of these least sisters or brothers of mine, you did to me. (Mt. 25:40)
21. Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. What does it profit to gain the whole world and lose your soul? (Mt. 16:24, 26; Mk. 8:34; Lk. 9:23,25)
22. Whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave (Mt. 20:26-27; Mk. 10:43-44)
23. Put your sword back. (Mt. 26:52; John 18:11)
24. Follow me. (Mt. 9:9; Mk. 2:14; Lk. 5:27; Jn. 21:19)
25. Peace be with you. (Lk. 24:36; Jn. 20:19, 21, 26)

Each of us could pick out our favorite sayings from the Gospels. When we add them up like Casey Kasem's "Top Forty" we hear a whole new way of life. And Jesus very much wants us to join his campaign, to fashion our lives after his.

"Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' but not do what I say?" he asks at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. It's a critical question.

Here in this snowy solitude, reflecting on his amazing life, I hum that beautiful carol, "O Holy Night?"

*"Fall on your knees! Oh hear the angel voices! O night divine, the night when Christ was born."*

In our concern for peace, creation and humanity, we do indeed fall on our knees in thanksgiving for the coming of this new Way into the world. And so we sing:

*Truly he taught us to love one another.  
His law is love and his gospel is peace.  
Chains shall he break, for the slave is our brother,  
and in his name all oppression shall cease?*

*O Holy Night, the stars are brightly shining.  
It is the night of our dear Savior's birth.  
Long lay the world in sin and error pining.  
Till he appeared and the soul felt its worth.  
A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices,  
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.  
Fall on your knees! Oh hear the angel voices!  
O night divine, the night when Christ was born.*

This Christmas, I pray that we might look again to the nonviolent Jesus; hear and obey his teachings; and fashion our lives more and more after his.

May we hear those angel voices sing: War is over, if you want it; join the chorus of peace; and feel a thrill of hope.

Merry Christmas!

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For Christmas, please consider contributing to Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund, (at Catholic Relief Services). Go to: <http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn>. For further information, or to schedule a lecture or retreat, visit: [www.johndear.org](http://www.johndear.org).

John's column will return on January 11, 2011.

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