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Christmas and the end of the U.S. war in Iraq

John Dear | Dec. 20, 2011 On the Road to Peace

There is much to celebrate this Christmas. The Arab Spring, the millions who marched for justice and democracy throughout the Arab world, and the fall of various dictatorships; the ongoing campaign to protect the environment, including the Keystone Tar Sands pipeline protests and last week's protests at the U.N. Global Climate Conference in Durban, South Africa; upcoming elections for Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma; the three heroic African women who won the Nobel Peace Prize; and closer to home, the amazing Occupy movement that has exposed the class warfare by the 1 percent against the 99 percent. The struggle for justice and peace goes on. Millions are engaged. The movements are moving.

In particular, I give thanks for the end of the U.S. war in Iraq. This holy season of peace offers a chance to reflect on that evil war, our modest efforts to resist it and what we might learn from it.

The U.S. war in Iraq probably cost about 3 trillion dollars. The Bush administration announced they were bombing Iraq to get Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, but of course, they lied. Iraq never had any such weapons. The goal was always to steal their oil, use and sell more of our weapons and take further imperial control of the Middle East.

Almost 4,500 U.S. soldiers were killed. Thousands more injured. But how many Iraqis were killed? The question is rarely asked. The Lancet report in June 2006, stated that more than 601,000 Iraqi civilians were killed, with hundreds of thousands injured. Three and a half million Iraqis were displaced. All of this comes on top of the 300,000 we killed in 1991 and the half a million we killed during the 1990s through our economic sanctions.

So we destroyed their infrastructure, killed their children, poisoned their land, lied about our motives and increased fear and hatred throughout the world. Mission accomplished!

"Was it worth it?" an NPR journalist asked a former Bush government official the other day. "Of course!" came the answer.

Christmas tells us that no cause is worth the death of a single child. Every child is the Christ child. Every child comes with the gift of peace.

Thousands of us worked tirelessly to oppose this war. I hope we helped end the war. For me, the war was 20 years long, beginning with that first bombing raid on Baghdad on Jan. 15, 1991. I was arrested more than a dozen times for acts of civil disobedience against this long war. In 1999, I made a harrowing journey to Iraq, where I met thousands of angry, grieving, terrified Iraqis. I'll never forget visiting a Catholic girls' school, where I was surrounded by hundreds of high schools girls who cried out, "Why do you want to kill us?" I still mourn the loss of Margaret Hassan, director of CARE International in Baghdad, who hosted a beautiful dinner for us. She was kidnapped in Baghdad in October 2004 and weeks later executed.

In January 2003, I spoke at the mammoth anti-war rally on the Washington Mall to 300,000 people. On Feb. 12,

I spoke against the war to 8,000 people in front of the Round House in Santa Fe, N.M. More than 14 million people in more than 600 cities on every continent marched that day against the impending war. It was the single largest day of protest in world history.

Around that time, the entire congregation of one of my New Mexico parishes asked the archbishop to remove me because of my antiwar stand. They actively supported the war and did not want to hear my sermons against it or to pray for our victims. The archbishop quickly agreed.

It was quite an experience to hear the confessions of my parishioners, give them Communion and bless them, only to be thoroughly denounced for my stand for peace. Once, when confronted by an angry woman after Mass, I suggested that as followers of Jesus we wouldn't want one Iraqi child to be killed.

"Oh, that's just collateral damage," she said.

She wasn't the only person of faith who supported the killing of Iraqis. Throughout the last nine years, as I traveled the country and spoke to hundreds of thousands of people against this war, I was regularly attacked for being unpatriotic, for not supporting the troops, for talking too much about Jesus instead of our holy "war on terrorism." Most of these attacks came from Catholics and Christians.

The harassment reached a peak in November 2003, when the entire unit of the 515 National Guard, about 75 soldiers leaving for Iraq the following week, paraded up to my rectory in Springer, N.M., at 6 a.m. After marching around the block and chanting war songs for an hour, they gathered at the front door of the old house and started shouting their battalion slogan, "One bullet! One kill!" It sounded like, "Kill! Kill! Kill!"

What to do? I put on my coat, walked outside and told them in no uncertain terms not to go to Iraq, but to disobey orders to kill and to start loving our enemies as Jesus commanded us. I thought they might kill me then and there, but they laughed and mocked me and dispersed. To have a local military battalion march on the home of a private citizen shows how far our country has changed. I think we're heading toward fascism.

In the summer of 2006, peace movement friends organized nationwide sit-ins in congressional district offices around the country to protest the war. Those small, targeted protests made an enormous impact on the elections and turned the tide of opinion against the war.

As part of the campaign, nine of us tried to visit our senator's office in the Santa Fe Federal Building. We stepped into the elevator to go to the third floor, but were told by police that we were not allowed to visit our senator. Then they cut the power of the elevator. We refused to get off and stayed in the elevator with the doors opened to the lobby for six hours. We had brought with us the names of 10,000 people killed in the war -- Iraqis and Americans -- so we started to read them out loud to the 20 police officers and government officials now gathered in the lobby. We had not considered what this would do to us. Within minutes, we were all crying.

At 5 p.m., we were charged and released. For the next year, we were in and out of court. Eventually we were found guilty of trespassing. I endured a terrible seven-month probation that involved nearly weekly meetings with a tough probation officer who regularly threatened to put me in jail.

Over the years, countless priests, bishops and ordinary Catholics told me how wrong I was, how just the war was, how necessary it was to kill Iraqi children for our greater good. So many Catholics and Christians tried to convince me that killing Iraqis was God's will that I began to wonder if people read the Gospel any more. These folks certainly do not understand the nonviolence of Jesus. Instead of celebrating the Christmas event, many seem to honor the slaughter of the holy innocents.

Over time, I learned that working for peace doesn't lead to White House invitations to discuss the benefits of

disarmament. Peacemaking disrupts your life. You get attacked, you lose your job, you lose your friends, you can lose your life. This is the story from Jesus to Gandhi. There is a direct trajectory, Gandhi and the early church noted, from the wood of the crib to the wood of the cross, and that's precisely what we celebrate.

Jesus teaches that these peace actions offer opportunities for love, nonviolence and grace. For me, these episodes tested my nonviolence, my willingness to forgive and my ability to respond with disarming love. Looking back, I see now how I could have done better. That's why peacemaking is ultimately a spiritual journey of ongoing prayer. It requires the daily effort to embody peace.

Christmastime invites us to reflect on our nation's wars and our efforts, however modest, to stop them. We need to reflect upon our work for peace, specifically our work to end the long nightmare of our war in Iraq. What did we do? How can we empower others to speak up for peace? How could we have responded in a more loving, nonviolent spirit? What does the God of peace think about our efforts to make peace? What can we do now to oppose the ongoing U.S. war in Afghanistan and the ever-expanding U.S. war machine?

"Do not be afraid," the angel told the shepherds on the morning of Jesus' birth. "I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." Suddenly, "a multitude of the heavenly host" praised God saying, "Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth ..."

Christmas marks the birth of the world's greatest peacemaker and nonviolent resister. His coming is told in political language. We hear of a kingdom that will have no end, of his lordship, of glory to God and peace on earth.

Notice, for example, that the angels do not sing, "Glory to Rome! Glory to America! Glory to empire! War on earth to all those not in the empire's good favor!" Sometimes, the culture of war would have us believe that's the Christmas message.

But no. The angels speak of glory to God, the reign of peaceful child, the coming of peace on Earth. To celebrate Christmas is to take sides against war, poverty and empire. If we adopt the politics of Christmas, we will welcome that peaceful child and his gift of peace, which means we will join his ongoing campaign of nonviolent resistance to war and empire, his ongoing holy occupy movement.

With the nonviolent Jesus, we are saved from war, empire and death. We have been given a way out of the world's violence through his creative nonviolence, steadfast resistance, active peacemaking and universal love. And we have been taught how to live in love, grace and prayer.

As we relearn the politics of Christmas, may we recommit ourselves to his work for peace so that we can do our part in the upcoming year to help end war, poverty and injustice. Then maybe we will be able to join the heavenly multitude and sing with angelic harmony, "Glory to the God of peace!"

Merry Christmas! Happy New Year!

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John Dear's new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [1], has just been published by Orbis Books. It explores Jesus as the God of life, calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* *[2]*; *Put Down Your Sword* *[3]* and *A Persistent Peace* *[4]*, are available from Amazon.com. For more information, go to John Dear's website [5].

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