NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

The Psalms of Peace, part two (Ps. 46)

John Dear | Jul. 10, 2012 On the Road to Peace

Editor's note: This meditation is the second of a five-part summer series on the peace writings in the psalms.

> "Come and see the works of the God of peace who has done awesome deeds on earth, who stops wars to the ends of the earth, breaks the war bow, splinters the war spear, and burns the war shields with fire, who says: 'Be still and know that I am the God of peace.' " (Ps. 46: 9-11)

How refreshing to hear this verse, right in the center of the Bible, from **Psalm 46** **[1]**: The God of peace stops wars and dismantles weapons. This is the God who made us, the God who calls us, the living God we will soon meet face to face. This God, it seems to me, is a God worth seeking and knowing.

But we don't hear much about this God these days. I have often thought that the heart of our global crisis comes from our false image of God. Most of us imagine a god who makes war, blesses war, supports our wars and admires our weapons. But this is not the God of Psalm 46 or the God of the nonviolent Jesus. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus names God as a peacemaker who practices universal nonviolent love toward all creation by letting the sun shine on the good and the bad and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust. This true image of a nonviolent God changes everything.

As every spiritual director knows, God is always moving in close to us with love and blessings, and every individual responds up to a point and then stops. Every one of us resists the movement of our peacemaking God at some point for some reason, usually because we are afraid of what might be asked of us, even though God usually just wants to love us and be with us like a doting parent. But we don't realize that we are resisting God. That's why a spiritual director is so helpful. A good spiritual director is a like a coach who sees God's movement toward us and our movement away from God, and encourages us to go back to prayer and welcome God.

But few talk about our collective, national and global resistance to God. I think all of us seek God -- but up to a point. And though collectively, nationally, even globally, we give God some small portion of respect, we certainly do not want to know God collectively, nationally and globally, and do what God might expect of us to do -- collectively, nationally and globally.

Here, in Psalm 46 and elsewhere, we get a taste of God's attitude toward the nations and the world; that is, God's active distaste for war and weapons. Jesus will take this foundational understanding of God much further and announce that God is a God of peace, nonviolence and love.

But this can't be, we whisper to ourselves. If God is so peaceful, why doesn't God end our wars, dismantle our weapons and make peace? Psalm 46 insists that the God of peace is, in fact, busy doing just that. You just won't hear about it on the evening news -- or even in church on Sunday. You have to "go and see the works of God" if you want to witness God's disarming action. That means getting out of our comfort zones and going where the action is.

Psalm 46 calls us to learn how wars end, how weapons are dismantled, how peace has come about in history, and how to see the finger of God in this peace movement. Perhaps we are too doubtful or too cynical or too tired to believe God is actively making peace, but if we set out on the journey "to see the works of the God of peace," I bet we will learn a surprising thing or two and discover what the spiritual life is all about.

Like many others, I can testify that I have seen the God of peace at work to end war -- in El Salvador, Iraq, Northern Ireland, the Philippines, Nicaragua, Colombia, Palestine, Mexico, Egypt, India, even here in the USA. This effort to see the peacemaking work of God has cost me, but I thought that's what the spiritual life was about, what Christian discipleship required.

The God of peace is found on the margins, not in the center; on the edge, not in the axis of power; at the bottom, not at the top; among the least, not among the first; on the outskirts of empire, not in its headquarters. If we want to see God and God's work for peace, we have to go to the margins and the edges, and there we will find God. In the process, we will learn something about faith and our lack of it; fear and the solution of love; peacemaking and the useless waste of war-making.

I wonder if the journey of faith only begins once we renounce violence and start the long pilgrimage of loving nonviolence. Once we decide to reject violence and the culture of war, then questions of personal and common security arise. Who will protect us? How will we survive? What is the meaning of life? It's in that moment, which is relived every day for the peacemaker, when we sincerely call upon God for help and protection. That's when we start sounding like the psalmist: God is our rock, our refuge, our shield, our strength, our ever-present help, we say. We nonviolent people need God; violent people don't -- they rely on their violence and weapons, which, of course, prove futile.

"The God of peace is our refuge and our strength, an ever-present help in distress," Psalm 46 begins. Even if the earth shakes, the mountains quake, the waters rage, the mountains totter, the nations rage and empires fall -- the God of peace is with us, so we do not have to be afraid. That's a mighty promise, and a way forward through these days of catastrophic climate change, global warfare, economic collapse, and right-wing politics.

This week, activist Alaric Balibrera will start a three-week hunger strike in Santa Fe, N.M., aimed at Los Alamos and calling for the abolition of nuclear weapons. Ten people have announced they will join him for all or part of his fast. With his fast, Balibrera hopes to draw attention to the upcoming Occupy Los Alamos, the first time the Occupy movement will take on nuclear weapons. On Aug. 4-6, hundreds are expected for workshops, reflections, the annual sackcloth and ashes action, and other activities in Santa Fe and Los Alamos. (For more information or to join the hunger strike, go to nukefreenow.org [2]. I'll be speaking at several of the events that weekend.)

Alaric grew up in Los Alamos, so he knows its reality first hand. His father was the filmmaker who documented Los Alamos National Laboratory's nuclear weapons work for the Manhattan Project.

"We need a transformation from thinking that we are all separate and have to compete against each other to get what we want," he writes. "Quantum physics has shown us that we're all connected. Because of the insights of quantum physics, we can still pursue science, but we must have a new attitude, that 'what's good for that person is good for me as well.' "

I think the hunger strikers are on the lookout for the God of peace, and God will take note of them. Like Psalm 46, they're telling us to put our trust in the God of peace, to join God's work to disarm the planet, and to discover the fullness of the spiritual life through peace and nonviolence.

The message of such peacemakers is one worth heeding: "Come and see the works of the God of peace ..."

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John Dear will speak Aug. 22 at the spirituality festival in Edinburgh, Scotland, and Aug. 26 near London at the annual Greenbelt Festival. His new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [3], 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. To see John's 2012 speaking schedule, go to John Dear's website [4]. John's talk at last year's Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book *Challenging Empire* [5]. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* [6] by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings [7]*; *Put Down Your Sword [8]* and *A Persistent Peace [9]*, are available from Amazon.com.

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[1] http://www.usccb.org/bible/psalms/46
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[4] http://www.johndear.org
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[10] http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup