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The Psalms of Peace, part five (Ps. 115)

John Dear | Jul. 31, 2012 On the Road to Peace

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

> "Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands.
> They have mouths but do not speak, eyes but do not see.
> They have ears but do not hear, noses but do not smell.
> They have hands but do not feel, feet but do not walk,
> and no sound rises from their throats.
> Their makers shall be like them, all who trust in them." (Ps. 115: 4-8)

Psalm 115 [1] may not seem like a psalm of peace, but for me, it gets right to the heart of the matter. Peacemaking requires faith and trust in the living God of peace, as opposed to faith and trust in the culture of war and its idols of death.

Over the last three decades, I have heard both Daniel and Philip Berrigan reflect on Psalm 115, and their words surprised and unsettled me. I expected reflections on peace, and heard instead a denunciation of the idols of war. It has taken me a long time to understand what they were teaching. They were testifying to their faith in the living God of peace, but they insisted that such faith needs boundaries. Belief in the God of peace in a culture as sick as ours requires simultaneously publicly renouncing belief in the culture's false gods of war -- the idols of nuclear weapons, Trident submarines, drones, AK-47s and other instruments of killing. In other words, as we name our faith in the God of peace, we likewise denounce the culture's faith in the idols of war. We have to do both if we want to live in peace.

As we approach Hiroshima Day on Aug. 6, when many of us will join local anti-war, anti-nuke protests, I thought this text was worth pondering for further clarity about our stand for peace in faith and our stand against war and idolatry.

"The great sin, the source of all other sin, is idolatry and never has it been greater, more prevalent, than now," Thomas Merton wrote one Good Friday shortly before his death. "Yet it is almost completely unrecognized precisely because it is so overwhelming and so total. It takes in everything. There is nothing else left. Fetishism of power, machines, possessions, medicines, sports, clothes, etc., all kept going by greed for money and power. The bomb is only one accidental aspect of the cult ... We should be thankful for it as a sign, a revelation of what all the rest of our civilization points to. The self-immolation of humanity to its own greed and its own despair. And behind it all are the principalities and powers whom humanity serves in this idolatry."

"I hold that those who invented the atomic bomb have committed the gravest sin," Mahatma Gandhi said shortly after the U.S dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. "The atomic bomb brought an empty victory to the Allied arms, but it resulted for the time being in destroying Japan. What has happened to the soul of the destroying nation is yet too early to see."

These days, we see the effect of the bomb upon us everywhere -- from the collapse of our economy, our destruction of the environment, all our wars, our corporate greed, our president beginning his day by reviewing his assassination list, to the horrific massacre two weeks ago in the Aurora, Colo., movie theater. We have no meaning, no love, no sense of truth, no understanding of our basic humanity. We are soulless. We have become as dead as the metallic weapons we have created and idolized.

The way to reclaim our soul is to stop making these nuclear weapons and other weapons of war, and to spend those billions instead on food for the hungry, homes for the homeless, health care, jobs and education for everyone, and teaching the whole human race the methodologies of nonviolent resistance. As we do, our faith in the living God of peace and love will grow and strengthen.

Psalm 115 begins by repeating the taunt that every peacemaker in history has heard: Where is your God? How does this God of peace protect you? Why do you obey your God's way of nonviolence?

"Our God is in heaven," the psalmist answers calmly, "and does whatever God wants to do." The psalmist then proceeds to deconstruct the culture's false gods as empty, lifeless shells, which we insanely worship, and then saves the punch line for last: Those who make these idols become as empty and lifeless as the idols themselves.

Those of us who build and maintain weapons of war, greed and violence, Psalm 115 suggests, become like our idols. Those who make peace and serve the living God of peace, Jesus will teach on the other hand, become the sons and daughters of the God of peace.

Is this too harsh? The language of the psalms can be very harsh, and the question of idolatry is one that no one wants to face. As Merton writes, idolatry has reached unparalleled heights. We don't even realize we're idolaters. Our national idols are gold and silver and the weapons we make with our hands to protect the gold and silver we have stolen from the world's poor. Idolatry has become the new norm, our ordinary spirituality.

It's a cliché to speak, for example, of the Golden Calf that is worshipped on Wall Street. But many of us were struck last fall by the 5-foot-tall papier-mâché golden calf that an activist friend made. It was used to lead an interfaith procession from a church in Greenwich Village in New York City down to the Occupy encampment on Wall Street. It was a sight to behold. Everyone got the message.

Fewer get the message about our idolatrous nuclear weapons and the spiritual consequences of this idolatry. These empty, metallic machines bring only death, yet we pour all our money, energy and prayer into these metallic death machines in the hope they will protect us. As the psalmist writes, it's as if these weapons have eyes and ears and mouths and noses and hands and feet -- and yet ,they are blind and deaf and mute and cannot smell or feel or walk.

"The nuclear bomb is the most anti-democratic, anti-national, anti-human, outright evil thing that humans have ever made," Arundhati Roy writes. "If you are religious, then remember that this bomb is humanity's challenge to God. It's worded quite simply: 'We have the power to destroy everything that You have created.' If you're not religious," she continues, "then look at it this way. This world of ours is 4 billion, 600 million years old. It could end in an afternoon."

Last week, the war-makers announced that the Pentagon's 30,000-pound bunker-buster "superbomb" was "ready for use."

"The biggest conventional bomb ever developed is ready," the spokesperson said.

The Pentagon has spent $330 million to develop and deliver more than 20 of these precision-guided Massive

Ordnance Penetrator bunker-busters, which are designed to blast through up to 200 feet of concrete.

> "They have mouths but do not speak, eyes but do not see ... Their makers shall be like them, all who trust in them."

The lesson? Don't worship the idols of death. That's what Dan and Phil Berrigan taught. Be clear where you stand. Know whom you worship and what you do not worship. If you worship the living God of peace, then do not also worship the false gods of money and power, the idols of war and death.

That might be our greatest problem. We Americans have deluded ourselves into thinking we can have both. We can have God and nukes, God and money, God and Wall Street, God and empire, God and weapons of war. The psalmist, and the Berrigans, insist it's one or the other. God does not allow for other gods. The minute we give in to our worship of these false gods, we reject the living God of peace. Then we continue further down the path of spiritual death.

The psalmist names the idols as inhuman and ungodly, and the idolaters as inhuman and ungodly, too. We need to name the idols of today as inhuman and ungodly, too, and help each other resist the culture's idolatry so that we can become more human and more Godly.

Dan and Phil taught me, like the psalmist, that the surest way to know you are living life to the full and not giving in to the culture's idols of death is by our nonviolent resistance to the idols. That's why many of us will stand up this week to commemorate Hiroshima and say "no" to the idolatry of nuclear weapons. Our resistance helps us exercise our faith. It can help us become more aware of our need for the God of peace, and live more consciously in relationship with the God of peace.

So we might ask ourselves: Do we really believe in the God of peace or not? Do we really trust the God of peace or not? What form would greater trust, deeper faith, in the God of peace take in our day-to-day lives? What boundaries do we need to set so our faith and trust in the God of peace and the consequences of peace, hope, love and nonviolence are protected and held firm for the rest of our lives? What do nuclear weapons, drones, Trident submarines, handguns and other idolatrous weapons tell us about our supposed faith in the God of peace? What does our faith demand in the context of these idols of war?

Psalm 115 is a prayer of hope and trust in our quiet, gentle God of peace who does not violently intervene, who mourns our common disbelief and idolatry, and who blesses our small peacemaking efforts, even though we might see few tangible results.

"Not to us, God of peace, not to us, but to your name give glory because of your faithfulness and love," we read. For the psalmist, and the rest of us, our main focus becomes the God of peace. God is the one who is faithful and loving, not us. As we try to remain faithful to the God of peace, we will be blessed with peace.

"May you be blessed by the God of peace who made heaven and earth," the psalmist concludes. That is the hope and prayer of the psalms of peace, of all peacemakers. As we reject the idols of war and death, choose to be people of faith and trust, look to the God of peace, and practice God's way of nonviolence, we know we will receive the blessing reserved for peacemakers.

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John Dear will speak Aug. 4-5 at Occupy Los Alamos [2] in New Mexico; Aug. 22 at the spirituality festival in Edinburgh, Scotland; and Aug. 26-28 near London at the annual Greenbelt Festival [3]. His new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [4], 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 [5].

John's talk at last year's Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book *Challenging Empire* [6]. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* [7] by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* *[8]*; *Put Down Your Sword* *[9]* and *A Persistent Peace* *[10]*, are available from Amazon.com.

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