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Why make a peacemaking mission to Afghanistan?

John Dear | Nov. 27, 2012 On the Road to Peace

Peacemaking, to paraphrase Fyodor Dostoyevsky, is "a harsh and dreadful thing."

This week, I'm flying to Kabul, Afghanistan, on a long-planned, hopeful yet modest mission of peace. I've been looking for a way to get to Afghanistan for the last 12 years. I remember speaking out against the impending U.S. bombing of Afghanistan in September 2001* at a rally in Greenwich Village, New York, and again, just after the U.S. war began in October 2001*, in Times Square. In January 2003, I spoke against our war in Afghanistan and our impending war on Iraq at the large mobilization in front of the U.S. Capitol to 300,000 people. Since then, I've been denouncing this war, organizing demonstrations, speaking with politicians, even getting arrested in acts of civil disobedience. With Archbishop Desmond Tutu, I tried -- and came close -- to meeting with President Barack Obama about it. But most of all, I've wanted to go there myself.

So this week, I fly to the other side of the world, to one of the poorest places on the planet, where 2 million people have been killed in warfare in the last four decades. I'm going, basically, for three reasons.

First of all, I've been invited to Afghanistan by the Afghan Peace Volunteers, a group of young people who study and practice nonviolence in Kabul, to join their Dec. 10 day of peace. As some might know, these young people are part of a community education center in Kabul, and like the rest of us, try to practice peace and nonviolence. They have all lost loved ones because of our war, and continue to live and suffer in danger. (Read about them at Voices of Creative Nonviolence's website [1].)

My dear friend Kathy Kelly has spent much of this year living with the Peace Volunteers in Kabul. She has told me great things about their efforts to live the life of peace and nonviolence in the midst of poverty and war. Recently, I wrote about [2] their effort to get 2 million people [3] to sign on and declare friendship with the people of Afghanistan. They are trying to counter the grim statistic of 2 million Afghans killed in war over the last four decades.

I do not go to Afghanistan necessarily to say anything, do anything or accomplish anything, except to offer the hand of friendship and peace -- and to listen. My dear friends Mairead Maguire, the Nobel peace laureate from Belfast, Northern Ireland; Ann Wright, the former U.S. embassy official in Kabul turned peace activist; and evangelical author and speaker Shane Claiborne will join me in Kabul.

Second, I'm going to Afghanistan as a way to say, once again, a public no to this senseless, illegal, immoral, impractical, evil U.S. war, the longest in our nation's history. About 2,000 U.S. soldiers have needlessly died in Afghanistan since 2001, but how many tens of thousands of Afghan civilians have died? And who cares?

One would never know our war upon the children of Afghanistan continues; it was hardly ever mentioned in the presidential campaign.

Bombing Afghanistan, filling their skies with our drones, stealing their land, exerting our imperial muscle -- these actions can never lead to peace. This imperial warfare only further terrorizes the populace, turns millions

against the United States, makes the Taliban stronger and ensures further terrorist violence against us. It also bankrupts us. We can't afford this war.

But of course, few people in the U.S. government or military care about the children and young people of Afghanistan. This war is about taking their land and using it for future military bases and warfare against China. It's about the U.S. oil pipeline that we are dying -- rather, killing -- to build. And it's about money -- the weapons manufacturers and military leaders make a fortune by killing Afghan children; they guarantee not our security, but their own job security.

Through this war, we have become the global terrorists we theoretically oppose.

We need to continue to denounce this war, protest it, organize against it, speak out against it and demand that the Obama administration end it immediately. The U.S. should stop its drone attacks, stop its aerial bombardments, remove all its military and military advisers, and make serious reparations for the harm we have caused countless millions.

The third reason why I'm going to Afghanistan is to obey Jesus' commandment in the Sermon on the Mount to love your enemies. I want to practice that unconditional, nonviolent love he calls us to live.

I have long struggled to take Jesus at his word, even as most Christians actively renounce that word and oppose his way of peace. It's important to remember that when Jesus commands us to practice *agape* toward our enemies, he's actually using "nation-state" language. He's not referring to an unpleasant neighbor who lives across the street (he talks about that elsewhere) or, for that matter, a difficult boss or in-law. He wants us to show unconditional, non-retaliatory, sacrificial, nonviolent love to those being targeted by our nation-state. These days, that means, first of all, the people of Afghanistan. I'm going to Kabul to offer a loving, nonviolent presence to the Afghan peace volunteers and those I meet, come what may, in discipleship to the nonviolent Jesus.

The question is: How do we love our enemies? How do we love the people whom our nation is killing? Anyone who claims to be a Christian needs to grapple with such questions. I cannot remember a time when my country has not been killing people abroad. I've agonized over this commandment throughout my life. At one point, I came to the conclusion that the best way to love our enemies is to try, first of all, to stop our country from killing them. Over time, I saw how the United States declared every nation on earth its enemy through our development, maintenance and threatened use of nuclear weapons. We are willing to nuke anyone who threatens our global, imperial domination. And so I learned, too, that one way to love our enemies is to work for the abolition of nuclear weapons.

I also recognize that some peacemakers need to travel to those places where our country is waging war and killing children. That is what I have tried to do, however poorly. Over the last 30 years, I have traveled into the U.S. war zones of Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Colombia, Palestine, Egypt, the Philippines, Northern Ireland, and Iraq. And those journeys have infinitely enriched my life. Everywhere I've gone, I've met loving, forgiving people. These people, my supposed enemies, became not only my friends, but my teachers.

I don't mean to sound arrogant or self-righteous. I share these reflections to ask for prayers and support as I embark on this pilgrimage of peace. Those who wish to help can join Voices of the Wilderness in The Duvet Project [4] to support the women of Kabul who are making blankets. You can also join me spiritually on this two-week journey through prayer, fasting and focusing on a single-minded intention for the God of peace: that the U.S. war on Afghanistan will end immediately; that the people of Afghanistan may have justice, food, water, homes, health care, education, employment and dignity; and that a new era of peace and nonviolence will dawn for us all.

As we pray for the people of Afghanistan, we pray that we Americans will abandon our tired ways of imperial war-making and learn the ancient wisdom of nonviolent conflict resolution to welcome God's reign of peace on earth. That, by the way, is what Advent is all about.

May the God of peace bless us all.

**An earlier version of this column misstated the year.*

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John Dear will be in Afghanistan on a peacemaking mission for several weeks. He will lead a retreat, " Jesus the Peacemaker [5]," April 5-7. To see John's speaking schedule or to invite him to speak in your church or school, go to John Dear's website [6]. One of John's essays appears in the new book *A Faith Not Worth Fighting For [7]*. His book *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [8] 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. John's talk at the 2011 Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book *Challenging Empire* [9]. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* [10] by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings [11]*; *Put Down Your Sword [12]* and *A Persistent Peace [13]*, are available from Amazon.com.

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[11] http://www.amazon.com/Daniel-Berrigan-Essential-Writings-Spiritual/dp/1570758379/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348569&sr=1-1
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