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Finding Advent peace along the Carolina coast

John Dear S.J. | Nov. 29, 2011 On the Road to Peace

It's common here in North Carolina's Outer Banks to see pelicans glide effortlessly in single file a foot above the breaking waves along the coastline. On occasion, I've seen a hundred pelicans circle over a dark area in the ocean. One by one, they dive straight down into the water to feed off a school of fish.

The other day, I watched in wonder as a dozen dolphins swam by. I especially enjoy studying sandpipers, the small, white birds with tiny legs like toothpicks who run down the beach right into the face of an oncoming wave, pick at the sand, and then turn around and run back before they get hit by the wave. Back and forth, all day long, they run right into the face of an oncoming wall of water and then turn around.

The North Carolina coast is known for its rugged beauty and raw wildness. It's a good place to step out of our violent, consumer society and rediscover the refreshing reality of creation. Because the Outer Banks juts far out into the Atlantic, the currents and tides are particularly rough. The ocean can seem enchanting one day, and angry and menacing the next. It is alive, and one feels more alive in its presence.

I was born and raised not far from Nags Head, and decided to spend a few days at my parents' house by the ocean to begin Advent in peace and quiet. I've been coming here all my life and feel at home on these dunes, by these roaring waves, under this big sky, in the company of pelicans, dolphins and sandpipers.

During the 1960s, since we lived close by, we visited the beach regularly. For two or three weeks each summer, we rented one of the classic flat-top houses and spent our days in the water --literally. My three brothers and I, along with our father, would run into the ocean at 8 a.m. and get out at 5 p.m. -- every day for two or three weeks. We were fish. I was permanently sunburned but didn't care. At night, we went go-cart racing. Those were some of the happiest days of my life.

These days, I prefer the off-season, when only the locals can be found at the coffee shop. Before the Cineplex, McDonald's and Walmart, back in the 1960s, the Outer Banks were barren. The sand dunes of Jockey's Ridge could be seen for miles, just as they had been 50 years before when the Wright brothers first flew across them. The only stores around were Wink's and Anderson's, a tiny cinderblock building that sold everything. Twenty miles south near the bridge to Manteo and Roanoke Island stood the little yellow Holy Trinity Catholic Church at Whalebone Junction. Not far north stood the beautiful old Currituck lighthouse. No one had a telephone, a TV, a computer or air conditioning. It was stark, simple, primeval, but quiet, healing and peaceful.

Nags Head is a good place to enter the holy season of Advent as a time of prayer, reflection, renewal and peace. It's a place of peace where one can set one's sights again on the God of peace who comes with the Christmas gift of peace.

At night, I look up and see the stars and watch the moonlight shimmering on the rolling ocean and listen to the sound of crashing waves. There's not a soul in sight and the ocean stretches out far until it merges with the night sky. Here, one sees the big picture. Everything points to God. Everything bears God's fingerprints. Everything makes peace.

Advent is a time when we beg God for the gift of peace, when we tell the God of peace, "Yes, we want your gift of peace." Even though others might reject God's gift, we welcome it with joy, hope and anticipation. That's the work, the wisdom, the way of the spiritual life. We welcome God's coming into the world with the gift of peace by living in peace here and now with ourselves and everyone.

Advent means getting ready for peace. Advent prays with Jesus, "Yes, may your reign of peace, love and nonviolence come. Yes, we welcome it. Bring it on."

I think of Advent, then, as a Christian season of mindfulness. We take four weeks to return to our center, enter the present moment of peace, live and breathe and eat and walk in peace, and wake up to the holy essentials of peace. Advent offers the chance to start the journey of peace all over again. It's a time to practice peacemaking in our day-to-day, hour-by-hour life.

In the morning, I'm up early to catch the sunrise over the ocean. Light appears along the horizon, a few clouds turn pink, then red. Suddenly, a red line appears. Then the sun pops up and I see the light. I walk two miles down the beach to the Avalon Pier and find the local fishermen and women standing above on the pier or knee-deep in the water with their fishing rods. I think of those comforting words, "Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men and women." I recall how the Galileans dropped their nets and walked off with Jesus.

But that's not how it feels this morning. It feels, on second thought, like the journey has come to an end. I feel like St. Peter after Jesus' arrest and execution, at a loss to understand our ongoing rejection of peace, hope and light. Peter goes back to Galilee, and starts all over again. He takes out a boat and goes fishing, and the others join him. That's all they know to do.

Like Peter, I'm back where I started. And here, by the sea, at dawn, the risen Jesus approaches with his Advent/Christmas/Last Supper/Good Friday/Easter gift of peace and says, as if for the first time, "Come, follow me."

Once again, I hear the call to take up the journey. It's like I'm always beginning. And the initiative always comes from God.

This Advent, as we keep watch over the world with its wars, corrupt governments, greedy corporations, extreme poverty, unjust suffering, nuclear weapons and environmental destruction, we keep a lookout for the coming of the God of peace. The signs are all around us. We are headed toward ever-widening peace with creation, all creatures and the Creator.

We see God's movement of peace in the ongoing Occupy movement; the School of the Americas protest; the steadfast resisters in Egypt, Yemen, Syria and Palestine; in the staunch witness of Burma's Aung San Suu Kyi; in all those who struggle for justice and disarmament.

It's in those moments under the night sky, by the sea or before the rising sun, as we remember the essential truths and our great calling, as we take heart from the growing movements for justice and peace, as we practice Advent mindfulness and open ourselves to the Great Compassion, as we reach out in loving kindness and creative peacemaking, that we hear an old song rising from deep within us and among us:

"O come, o come, Emmanuel ..."

May your Advent be blessed with peace, hope and light!

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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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