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The Psalms of Peace, part 3 (Ps. 34)

John Dear S.J. | Jul. 17, 2012 On the Road to Peace

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

> "Come, children, listen to me. I will teach you awe for the God of peace. Who among you loves life, takes delight in prosperous days? Keep your tongue from evil, your lips from speaking lies. Turn from evil and do good. Seek peace and pursue it." (Ps. 34: 12-15)

Psalm 34 [1] was the daily prayer of my friend and teacher of nonviolence, Billy Neal Moore, during his nearly two decades on Georgia's death row. He was granted clemency in 1990 and now ministers to prisoners in Georgia. Throughout the 1980s, during our near-weekly correspondence, he often wrote about Psalm 34 as his guide to the God of peace and the way of nonviolence. He taught me the beauty and power of Psalm 34, how it can be a guide for us through the door way to peace.

The psalm is a poem. Each line begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Its message and teaching are so simple that we can easily miss its life-changing wisdom. I suppose it would take the daily attention of a prisoner over the course of 20 years to realize it as a path to peace and the God of peace. It reads as a hymn of praise, a guide to daily living, an invitation to wisdom, and a testimony to God's liberation of the poor and oppressed.

The first part is an invitation to join in praising the God of peace:

> "I will bless the God of peace at all times; praise shall be always in my mouth. My soul will glory in the God of peace that the poor may hear and be glad. Magnify the God of peace with me." (Ps. 34:2-4)

Luke probably used this psalm as a basis for Mary's Magnificat. Both offer a hymn of praise, political denunciation of the rich and powerful, and a call for justice and liberation of the poor. "The powerful grow poor and hungry, but those who seek the God of peace lack no good thing," we read in verse 11. There is the promise for those who seek the God of peace: Everything we need will be provided for.

The second part testifies to God's help in our time of need:

> "I sought the God of peace who answered me, delivered me from all my fears ... In my misfortune I called, the God of peace heard and saved me from all distress ... Look to the God of peace that you may be radiant with joy." (Ps. 34: 5-7)

If we trust in the God of peace and turn to the God of peace in good times and in bad, God will help us -- that's the message and the testimony. We're told God delivers the poor, the oppressed, the broken-hearted and the crushed. God is on the side of the poor, the oppressed, the broken-hearted and the crushed. That means, of course, that we are called to be on the side of the poor, the oppressed, the broken-hearted and the crushed; that we are not meant to be rich, oppressors, heart-breakers or spirit-crushers. One day, when our turn comes to be

impoverished, oppressed, broken-hearted and crushed, we know God will be there for us. Anyone who seeks to be just, live simply and make peace in this culture of violence and war, we're told, will have "many troubles," but the good news is that the God of peace will be there for us.

> The God of peace has eyes for the just and ears for their cry. God's face is against evildoers to wipe out their memory from the earth. When the just cry out, the God of peace hears and rescues them from all distress. The God of peace is close to the brokenhearted, saves those whose spirit is crushed. Many are the troubles of the just, but the God of peace delivers from them all.

The third part is the lesson:

> Learn to savor how good the God of peace is ... Come, children, listen to me; I will teach you awe for the God of peace. Who among you loves life, takes delight in prosperous days? Keep your tongue from evil, your lips from speaking lies. Turn from evil and do good. Seek peace and pursue it.

I like the word "savor." Imagine savoring a delicious meal, fine wine or a gorgeous sunset. Here, we're invited to "savor" the goodness of the God of peace.

It's consoling to ponder the goodness of God. I remember a moment as a young teenager, lying awake at night, pondering God, savoring God's goodness, when I consciously realized I was pondering God's goodness and that God was indeed very good. That was a spiritual breakthrough for me. I knew God was good, and therefore, that God was trustworthy.

The more we ponder the goodness of God, the more we come to know God as only goodness, with not a trace of evil, or mean-spiritedness, or war, or oppression. The act of savoring God's goodness can heal our brokenness and help us to reclaim our own inherent goodness, to re-center ourselves in our own goodness, and then to live our lives in that goodness. In the process, we begin to resemble the God of peace.

Do not speak evil or lies. In the Gandhian framework, that means we speak the truth nonviolently, with love. We choose our words carefully so they do not spread the culture's untruth and hurt others. We use our words wisely, because words have power to heal or destroy. Some of us may have to go back to square one and practice the art of not-speaking for a while, to cultivate the wisdom of silent reflection, thoughtfulness and mindfulness, so that the words we speak become only words of peace, hope and love. Over time, as we pursue the truth of God, we try to speak only the truth. A good Gandhian "experiment with truth" is to try to speak only the truth, and then reflect on how well we did and what it felt like.

One way to practice this nonviolence of tongue and heart in our ordinary day-to-day lives is to use the language of affirmation, which seems to be losing ground in our culture of violence. I think we need to try to affirm one another, to tell others how good they are, to point out the good they do and thank them. We're pros at criticizing one another, putting each other down and hurting each other, especially in our families and in the church. But we're novices when it comes to affirming one another. To encourage others to be their best is to help others become nonviolent and make peace. Using the language of affirmation, we can help one another along the road to peace and nonviolence and build a stronger presence of peace in the world.

That is the one of the lessons I've learned firsthand from the saints I've known -- people like Dom Helder Camara, Cesar Chavez, Mother Teresa, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Coretta Scott King, Glenn Smiley, Thich Nhat Hanh, and the Berrigans. They all affirmed and encouraged me, and everyone they met. While speaking the hard truths about war, poverty, racism and nuclear weapons, they also spoke positive words to those around them. Over time, I began to see a common thread in their practice.

Turn from evil. Do Good. Seek Peace. Pursue peace. This is the call of the psalm and the God of Psalm 34.

Conversion, or *metanoia*, means "turning around." Every day, we're called to turn away from evil. That's our daily "conversion." It's not so much a project or a task -- though there may be dramatic moments in our lives when we have to quit an unjust job, stop participating in some form of cultural violence or realize the need to resign from the U.S. military. Turning from evil and doing good becomes an attitude of nonviolence that we carry through our lives. Through our work with various movements for justice and disarmament, we then try to "organize goodness," as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, and "create a society where it is easier for people to be good," as Peter Maurin said.

To seek and pursue peace is the heart of the spiritual life. To live at peace with oneself, to cultivate interior peace, and to live in peace with others are the necessary ingredients for our search for the God of peace. Along the way, we try to seek peace with the whole human race, which means we join efforts to oppose our wars in Afghanistan, Yemen and Pakistan, dismantle our weapons, and fight corporate greed, extreme poverty and environmental destruction. The church, the sacraments and the Mass are aimed, I believed, at sending us out into the world as peacemakers, "God of peace-seekers." If we're not part of this search, then we're stuck like everyone else in the culture of violence. We become war-makers and "false gods of war-seekers."

If we are unconsciously seeking and pursuing war -- in our hearts, our families, our relationships, our work, in the church, and in the world -- then we are not following the wisdom of Psalm 34, much less the Gospel of the nonviolent Jesus. We need to turn from all that is not peacemaking and seek peace and pursue peace every day, every step, every moment for the rest of our lives. As the psalm suggests, we will land in trouble for our peaceableness, but that will be our chance to test our nonviolence.

I think the combination of these teachings is crucial: Speak the truth, and turn from evil, and do good, and seek peace. We need to undertake each one of these steps on our journey -- to speak, turn, do and seek all at the same time.

Ultimately, seeking and pursuing peace means seeking and pursuing the God of peace. That, of course, is our highest calling. Jesus promised us in the Sermon on the Mount, "Seek and you will find." With that assurance, we know that one day we will find peace -- and the God of peace, too.

Psalm 34 makes that promise as well: "Blessed are those who take refuge in the God of peace." When all is said and done, that beatitude is enough to go by.

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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!* [2], 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 [3]. John's talk at last year's Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book *Challenging Empire* [4]. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* [5] by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* *[6]*; *Put Down Your Sword* *[7]* and *A Persistent Peace* *[8]*, are available from Amazon.com.

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