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Jonah and the mission of peace (part 2)

John Dear | Jul. 23, 2013 On the Road to Peace

"Set out for the great city of Nineveh, and announce to it the message that I will tell you."

In part two of our story, God sends Jonah on a mission of peace into the heart of the brutal empire, just as God will later send John the Baptist then Jesus on such a mission. Jesus will then send his disciples and the rest of us on that holy mission. Apparently, that's the way God works -- God likes to send messengers of peace into the culture of war and empire, kind of like an advance PR team, with a strong message of nonviolence. That means God is a movement organizer. God takes chances, agitates for social disarmament, keeps at it and remains hopeful. Given this story, the Gospels and our God-awful times, God must want that mission to continue.

In the first sentence of the Gospel of Mark, we're given a quote from Isaiah: "Behold, I am sending my messenger before you ... a voice of one crying out ..." John the Baptist goes forth and calls for repentance. After John is arrested, Jesus takes up where John left off and walks through occupied Palestine, announcing, "The time has come. The reign of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel." Eventually, Jesus sends his disciples out as prophets of peace to announce God's reign of peace.

It's good to revisit the famous story of Jonah now and then to remind ourselves of our duty to carry on this tradition of publicly announcing God's message of peace and nonviolence.

As we saw last week in Act One [1], Jonah ran from God and resisted God's mission. But when he hit rock bottom in the belly of the whale, he came to his senses, saw how God protected him, gave thanks and eagerly took up his assignment. He prayed a psalm of thanksgiving then got to work -- marching through the great city of the brutal empire calling for repentance and nonviolence.

Here's the text of Act Two from the book of Jonah:

> Jonah began his journey through the city, and had gone but a single day's walk announcing, "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed," when the people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and all of them, great and small, put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in the ashes. Then he had this proclaimed throughout Nineveh, by decree of the king and his nobles: "Neither people nor beasts, neither cattle nor sheep, shall taste anything; they shall not eat, nor shall they drink water. People and beasts shall be covered with sackcloth and call loudly to God. Everyone shall turn from their evil way and from the violence they have in hand. Who knows, God may relent and forgive, and withhold his blazing wrath, so that we shall not perish." When God saw by their actions how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil that he had threatened to do to them. He did not carry it out. (Jonah 3:4-10)

I love this tale because it offers the stunning image of a violent people who heard the prophetic message of nonviolence and immediately repented of their violence. There is no other story like it anywhere. What seems utterly impossible is presented to us as possible -- indeed, actual. It offers an image of what could happen.

And indeed, I believe it is possible. It certainly happened in 1947 in Calcutta, India, two weeks after independence. The whole city was consumed in violence and brutal killings. Mahatma Gandhi moved into the home of a Muslim, announced a fast to the death and publicly called for an end to the killings and a new spirit of nonviolence. Within days, the riots and killings stopped and millions of people repented of their violence. It was one of the most astonishing -- and neglected -- events in modern history.

Why did the people of Nineveh -- and even the king, not to mention the poor cattle -- suddenly take Jonah's message to heart and repent of their violence? How is it they all believed him, proclaimed a fast, put on sackcloth and ashes, and called out loudly to God for mercy? That is a question every movement organizer since Jonah, from Jesus to Gandhi, has asked. How do we wake up the people of violence and empire and get them to renounce their violence and adopt God's nonviolence?

I cannot imagine President Barack Obama, his administration, Congress, the Supreme Court, the Pentagon and corporate media repenting in sackcloth and ashes for our mortal sin of war, violence, systemic injustice and nuclear empire, like the king and people of Nineveh did. But that's exactly the kind of dramatic change the God of peace hopes for. And it can only happen if we hear the God of peace, reclaim our imaginations for peace, and go forth with the public announcement of repentance and nonviolence.

It's just as hard for me to imagine our religious leaders undertaking such repentance, but that, to my mind, would be a good start. If every religious leader in the U.S. fasted, prayed and put on sackcloth and ashes to repent for our social sins -- the sex abuse scandal and cover-up; our support of war; our racism, sexism, violence and greed; our nuclear weapons; our lack of faith; our rejection of God's nonviolence; and so on -- perhaps God would have mercy on us, we would change our ways, the church could start over with a new commitment to nonviolence, and we might receive new hope for peace.

But even if our political and religious leaders won't repent, we can. Change always happens from the bottom up. The people of Nineveh offer an unprecedented example of social repentance in response to social sin. They model for us the national response to God's message and messengers. The story of Jonah and the people of Nineveh invite every American in particular to repent of America's war-making and violence; to fast, pray, put on sackcloth and ashes; and beg God for mercy.

Each year in early August, many of us across the country commemorate the U.S. atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and our ongoing commitment to vaporize hundreds of thousands of people. On Aug. 4, I will once again join friends for our small peace vigil in Los Alamos, N.M., the birthplace of the bomb and the center of the entire U.S. nuclear arsenal and its ongoing nuclear terrorism.

For the 10th year in a row, we will speak out and pray against the mortal sin of U.S. war-making and nuclear weapons production, especially in the face of global poverty and environmental destruction. We will spend 30 minutes in silence sitting in sackcloth and ashes, storming heaven, calling upon the God of peace for the gift of nuclear disarmament and our societal conversion to nonviolence.

This is a strange thing to do. It's not like going to a happy convention or an interesting conference or an exciting march or a rabble-rousing rally or a benefit concert for peace. This is an act of social repentance, something quite rare. But if the people of Nineveh, at the center of an evil empire, could turn, perhaps we can, too. Perhaps, if we are sincere, God will take pity on us and give us the gift of disarmament.

The first time we did this, on the 60th anniversary of the U.S. atomic bombing of Hiroshima, we made special note of the fact that the ruins of the great city of Nineveh are located in present-day Mosul, Iraq, a city the United States has obliterated with its bombs. We have killed many people there and even used depleted uranium on them. Not only did we kill the cattle; those that survived gave birth to seriously deformed calves. This is what our country has done at the place where Nineveh once stood. What must God think of that?

Our empire has gone well beyond the evil deeds of Nineveh's empire; we now threaten the entire human race and creation itself.

Act Two urges us to speak out publicly for disarmament and justice like Jonah and to repent of violence and turn back to God's way of nonviolence like the people of Nineveh.

I think the God of peace wants people of faith and conscience to take up the mission of Jonah and to speak out publicly for disarmament and justice. But I also believe the God of peace wants us to learn from the imperial people of Nineveh and repent of all our violence and war-making and turn back to God's way of nonviolence. We need to call upon God to forgive us and pledge to practice God's nonviolence from now on.

"This episode is an image of the wild, improbable hope of God," Daniel Berrigan writes in his classic work, *Minor Prophets, Major Themes*. "The troubles of our time! The wars, the insuperable hold on imagination and energy; of violence, fear, greed, idolatry of death. Will there ever come relief, an end to our plight? And then this image: the instantaneous conversion of Nineveh! It is improbable, impossible. It never happened, it never could. Image, promise, vision. There it stands."

"Nineveh is an image of all peoples and all time and of the end of time," Berrigan concludes. "Direction, outcome, non-absurdity, time and ourselves (God the chance-taker!) -- behold us, as such a God would have time and ourselves one day, one impossible day, to become, to be."

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John Dear will speak Aug. 9 at the Wild Goose Festival [2] in Asheville, N.C., which will also feature the Indigo Girls. John will undertake a national speaking tour in the winter on his upcoming book, *The Nonviolent Life*. To see John's speaking schedule or to invite him to speak in your church or school, go to John Dear's website [3]. John is now working with the Francsican-based peace group Pace e Bene [4]. He is profiled in *Doing Time for Peace [5]* by Rosalie Riegle and with Daniel Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in *Divine Rebels* [6] by Deena Guzder. John's book *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [7] 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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