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Jonah and the mission of peace (part 1)

John Dear | Jul. 16, 2013 On the Road to Peace

Usually it seems God has one of three directions for us: "Come follow me"; "Stay with me" (and "Keep watch!"); or "Go and tell them ..." The first is the call to discipleship; the second, a summons to accompaniment and companionship; the third, a push into prophetic ministry, to go forth and announce to the world of war and injustice God's desire for peace and justice.

Jonah is the worst and the greatest of the prophets. The worst because he ran from God and God's mission and as a consequence, landed in the belly of a whale. But after he came to his senses and fulfilled his assignment, he fell into an angry depression. He was resentful at God for saving the hated enemy, for being so compassionate to them, and sulked like a sullen teenager.

But he's the greatest prophet because he's the only prophet in the entire Bible who fulfilled his mission and converted all the people -- in this case, the large city of Nineveh in the evil empire. No one ever did such a thing. He fulfilled God's push into prophetic ministry.

I thought I'd offer a little summer series on the book of Jonah to help us reflect on how we are fulfilling God's mission to speak the word of peace to people who live in the empire of war. I invite you to open your Bible and read along with me through the story of Jonah, "an extended parable" that "subverts normal expectation," as Daniel Berrigan describes it. I think it applies to our own lives, our current predicament, the empire in our midst, our responsibility to speak out, and our own relationship with God.

"Jonah is an anti-hero," Berrigan writes in *Minor Prophets, Major Themes* *[1]*. "In this he matches our mood -- both rather dark of mind, melancholic, on the down side. And we're strangely grateful for this."

As everyone knows, Jonah's story has three parts. Act one: God tells Jonah to go to the hated enemy city of Nineveh and tell them to repent of the sin of violence, injustice and war. Jonah runs in the opposite direction and boards a ship. A terrible storm rises, and the terrified sailors confront Jonah and throw him off. He's swallowed by a whale, sits in its belly for three days, then turns back to God. He sings a hymn of praise for saving him, and the big fish throws him up on shore.

Act two: Jonah walks through the city of Nineveh, calling upon the people to repent of violence, injustice and war. Suddenly, they all repent, so our ever-merciful, nonviolent God spares them. Act three: Jonah has a total meltdown. He's mad God spared the hated enemy, falls into despair and wants to die. God tries to reason with Jonah and explains why God had to show mercy to those confused people, "not to mention the cattle!" Jonah, it turns out, needs a time out.

"Set out for the great city of Nineveh, and preach against it; their wickedness has come up before me." That's what God tells Jonah right at the start.

I think God is speaking to all of us all the time, but we do not want to hear it. And if God was upset about the wickedness of Nineveh, what must God think today about the wickedness of America, where we build nuclear

weapons, serve evil corporations, let the poor suffer and die, bomb our enemies, spy on everyone and destroy the environment? God must be incensed! I figure God is asking hundreds of thousands of people a day to walk through America and call it to renounce its violence, injustice and war-making. And like Jonah, every one of us is running in the opposite direction. That's the last thing we want to do.

Note that the mission always involves confronting empire. Whether it's Moses, sent to face down Pharaoh; Jonah to Nineveh; Jesus to the Roman procurator in Jerusalem; or Peter and Paul to Rome, sooner or later, God's servants get sent on a mission to confront empire with a message of repentance, conversion, disarmament, justice and nonviolence. This pattern begs us to reflect on God's mission for us and what we are going to do for God in the face of a powerful, militaristic and destructive empire: the United States of America.

When Jonah realizes God wants him to confront the empire, he turns and runs. He catches the first boat to Tarshish. He has no intention of going to Nineveh. Big mistake. A storm rises, and the boat tosses and turns. Notice how Jonah sleeps soundly. (Perhaps it is an image of the unfaithful disciple, like the three who slept through Jesus' transfiguration or his agony in the garden?) The sailors confront him, blame him for the storm and throw him over board. "A large fish" swallows Jonah, and he remains in its belly for three days and three nights.

The moral of act one: Don't run away from God. Get used to the fact that God has a mission for you, and it involves addressing our empire with an unpopular message of conversion and nonviolence. Put aside your fears and worries and get to work with the mission.

Once he hits rock bottom, Jonah turns to prayer for the first time in the story. The sailors pray for their lives, but not Jonah. He tells them he worships the living God, but he does not pray. He does not want to engage God. He does not want to hear again what God wants. He suspects God is merciful and compassionate and might even let the hated enemy off the hook. "Who could ever be with such a God?" he thinks.

But the situation has changed. Now he's stuck in the belly of the fish. Rock-bottom reality has a way of making us come to our senses, recognize our powerlessness and call to God for help. Jonah breaks out with a beautiful psalm of thanksgiving for deliverance. He hasn't even been freed yet, but he knows God has answered his prayer already and will take care of him. It's the theme song for all those who hit rock bottom, all those on the mission of peace in a world of war.

"Out of my distress I called to God and God answered me," he begins. "From the midst of the nether world I cried for help and you heard my voice ... You brought up my life from the pit, O Lord, my God. My prayer reached you. With resounding praise I will offer sacrifice to you."

Every verse explains how God answered Jonah's cry. Now Jonah rejoices and promises to trust God no matter what. He will be faithful, he says. He lands on the beach and heads off into enemy territory to preach God's message of repentance and nonviolence to the people of the empire.

Many verses from act one stand out. I like this one: "Those who worship vain idols forsake their source of mercy." What an insight. Thomas Merton concluded toward the end of his life, like William Stringfellow, that idolatry is the source of all our problems. We place our trust in guns, bombs, drones, nuclear weapons, money, corporations and empire, not the living God. Because of our idolatry, we "forsake our source of mercy." We turn from the God of mercy and refuse God's mercy: mercy toward ourselves, mercy toward others, mercy towards our enemies, mercy toward creation and all creatures. God remains merciful; we are the ones who reject that mercy.

It's startling that of all of hundreds of tales and books in the Hebrew Bible, Jesus quotes the story of Jonah. Indeed, he identifies with Jonah and tells the crowd that the only sign he will offer them is "the sign of Jonah."

Jesus, too, will hit rock bottom and spend three days in the belly of death itself before rising to carry on God's mission of peace. The imagination of Jesus and his identification with Jonah is also well worth pondering.

Whenever you read Scripture, Megan McKenna advises you ask yourself: "What touches me, surprises me, inspires me and challenges me? Where am I in the story? What is God saying to me in this story?" As we read the first part, we can ask: "When has God spoken to me? What mission does God have for me? What does the God of peace want me to say to the empire of war? How do I respond? When have I run away from God's mission? What happened when I did? Have I ever hit rock bottom in my flight from God? How do I find God when I hit rock bottom? What makes me turn back to God in prayer? How can I get on with the work of God's mission for peace and go forth and call the empire of war to repent?"

More next week!

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On Aug. 9, John Dear will speak 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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