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The Advent journey to peace (Part Two)

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On the Road to Peace

The journey of Advent is modeled by Mary in three movements of the spiritual life: from the Annunciation as an image of contemplative nonviolence to the Visitation as a scene of active nonviolence to the Magnificat as the ultimate prophetic nonviolence. Today, in the second movement, we note that prayer leads to action. After the Annunciation last week, we see how Mary's contemplative nonviolence, her openness to the God of peace and her willingness to do God's will, led her immediately to reach out to someone in need, her cousin Elizabeth, to practice active nonviolence as Jesus would later learn (Luke 1:39-45).

The scene takes us to the hinterlands of Palestine; a blood-stained reality hovers about. Palestine is occupied by a global empire. Roman garrisons and checkpoints and patrols, surveillance and harassment and summary executions, a population taxed and terrorized, the peasants on the edge of malnutrition. And here Luke presents us with two women, disenfranchised and colonized, the one reaching out in love to the other. Mary serves her neighbor at risk. She practices active nonviolence.

But then, a surprise. Despite the dread realities, we hear no hint of bitterness or anger. The two speak words of love. They greet one another in the language of peace: "Shalom!" "Peace be with you!" Then they engage in what St. Ignatius called "spiritual conversation" and start offering beatitudes. "Blessed are you who believed?"

These great women teach us a thing or two about Advent peace, love, life and community. Prayer pushes us to reach out in love to a neighbor in need. Peacemaking means talking first of all about the God of peace, and what the God of peace is doing in our lives and in the world.

The two pregnant women talk about their experience of God. They tell their stories and sharing their experiences of Advent hope, and what happens. They are filled with consolation! This is such an important lesson!

These holy women invite us to share with relatives and friends about where we find the God of peace working in our lives and in the world. We are called this Advent to practice spiritual conversation. When we do, our relationships and friendships deepen, the holy spirit of peace spreads, community is created, and nonviolent action and vision is inspired. Such holy conversation consoles our hearts and lifts our spirits from despair to hope. From the Annunciation to the Visitation, we see the movement of the spirit, from fear and confusion, to consolation and even joy. These women invite us to reflect on how we can do this more and more, what greetings of peace we use, what we talk about, what gives us consolation, and how we can bring consolation to others by listening to their experience of the God of peace.

Notice that Elizabeth responds to the words of peace with two beatitudes: Blessed are you. Blessed is your child. Imagine if we spoke the language of beatitudes? We don't often think of the Advent readings as containing beatitudes, but here they are. Certainly, Jesus learned his beatitudes from his family. So we can reflect: How do we bless one another? Like Elizabeth, what Advent beatitudes of peace do we say to one another?

Notice, too, that even the unborn John the Baptist rejoices at the greeting of peace, at the news of Jesus. He recognizes the God of peace even before he is born. It's in his blood, so to speak, to be on the lookout for the nonviolent Jesus. We can reflect: How do we rejoice at the visitation of Mary and Jesus in our lives?

Then Elizabeth asks a question: "Who am I that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" We too can ask: "Who are we that the mother of the God of peace should visit us?" I think this is a great question because it concerns our identity, a key to Gospel peacemaking. Who are we? In the Annunciation, it was clear: Mary knew who she was. "Behold, I am the servant of the God of peace; let it be done to me according to your word." Here, Elizabeth isn't so sure, and neither are we. But like Mary, we have to claim our true identities as servants of the God of peace, sons and daughters of the God of peace.

Finally, Elizabeth offers a third beatitude: "Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the God of peace would be fulfilled!" This is a beatitude for Mary and for us too. All we have to do is believe the word of peace and trust the God of peace that it will be fulfilled in us. Just take the nonviolent Jesus at his word, and leave the outcome in his hands.

Contemplative nonviolence always leads to active, loving nonviolence, which gives forth into new beatitudes of peace. Mary and Elizabeth invite us to prepare for the coming of the God of peace and peace on earth by reaching out with love to the needy, speaking words of peace, proclaiming beatitudes of peace and noticing the blessings we receive. This too is the work of Advent.

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"Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing," Dorothy Day said, quoting Dostoyevsky. In the Visitation, the active nonviolence, loving kindness, and selfless service of the holy women leads them to consolation and joy. This text summons us to reach out to the poor, to serve the poor, to accompany the poor, to walk with the poor, to befriend the poor, to stand with the poor, and ultimately to defend the poor, to give our lives for the poor, and become, like Mary and Jesus, one with the poor. Get involved in God's work of love and disarmament and peace, we learn this Advent, and trust like Mary and Elizabeth that each one of us can make a difference, each one of us is needed to share God's Advent work of welcoming the Prince of Peace and preparing for peace on earth.

Once we engage in active nonviolence, love our neighbor, and serve those in need, we too will be consoled and rejoice, and move on to the third movement of the Advent journey, into prophetic nonviolence.

For daily reflections this Advent, see John's new booklet, "The Advent of the God of Peace" from www.paxchristiusa.org, and his book, *Mary of Nazareth, Prophet of Peace*, from **Ave Maria Press**. "The Narrow Path," a new DVD featuring John Dear, is available from www.sandamianofoundation.org. For further information, see www.johndear.org.

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