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The Lenten journey of gospel nonviolence (Part 2)

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

"If you are the son of God, turn these stones into bread, jump off that building, rule the world, worship the false gods of war and greed." The Lenten journey of Gospel nonviolence begins in the desert where Jesus fasts for 40 days, hears these inner temptations to violence, and renounces them in favor of the God of peace, God's word and God's way of nonviolence (Mt. 4:1-11). In this struggle, the Gospel encourages us to renounce our own inner violence so we can follow Jesus in steadfast nonviolence to our own Jerusalems and the cross of nonviolent resistance to empire.

"If you are the son of God," the tempter says to Jesus, "command these stones to become loaves of bread" "It is written," Jesus answers, "'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.'"(4:4)

"If you are the son of God." Each temptation begins with this taunt. Throughout his public life, Jesus' identity is challenged, even as he dies on the cross where passersby mock him with similar words, "If you are the son of God, come down from that cross." The question of our identity is at the heart of the spirituality of peace and nonviolence. "Blessed are the peacemakers," Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount. "They shall be called the sons and daughters of God?. Love your enemies, that you might be sons and daughters of God." The tempter then, and the culture of war now, also challenges our identities as his followers, as beloved sons and daughters of God, saying: "Who do you think you are? If you are a child of God, a person of justice and peace, do something. Prove it. Give us results now. Be successful, be effective. Make a difference. Be relevant -- otherwise, you cannot be who you think you are." This is the

voice of despair.

The first temptation to violence is the temptation to despair. It says: "Quick! Do something. You're on your own. You have no food, no security. There is no hope. You must take care of yourself." It renounces patient trust in God and relies on its own power, which, in the end, amounts to nothing. Despair pushes us to inhuman, empty solutions, while hope leads us to attend to every word of God. Jesus remains human and refuses to give in to the magic of instant, inhuman solutions. He listens for the voice of God which spoke at his baptism. His quiet, patient trust in God gives him hope. He is hungry, but he does not panic or despair. He remains focused on God.

Like Jesus, we are tempted by the culture to change stones to bread, to bring about tangible results. But Jesus calls us back to the scriptures and urges us not to rely on our own powers, but on God and God's word. God does all the changing and brings all the results. God makes the difference, not us. We are called not to be successful, but faithful to God and God's word which works slowly, humanly, peacefully, not inhumanly, violently, forcibly like the empire. We are not called to be powerful, but powerless, instruments only of the nonviolent power of God, God's word. We are not called to be relevant, but as irrelevant as Jesus, hungry in the desert, dying on the cross. We take up the effectiveness of the cross, which as far as the culture is concerned, is complete lunacy, an absurd failure. To do this, we live by every word of God. We listen carefully for God's voice. We take God's word of nonviolence seriously, come what may.

Next, the tempter takes Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem and says, "If you are the son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written: 'God will command his angels concerning you' and 'with their hands they will support you lest you dash your foot against a stone.'" "Scripture also has it," Jesus says: "'You should not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

The second temptation of violence is the temptation to doubt. The voice of doubt says that God cannot be trusted. Jesus is tempted to doubt God's abiding love and God's way of nonviolence, to test whether or not God is really trustworthy, and whether or not nonviolence works.

But Jesus refuses to doubt God. He will not give in to the faithlessness that leads to violence and self-destruction. He remains faithful. He knows that when we doubt God's abiding presence, we give in to the world's chaotic violence. Doubting God's trustworthiness leads to violence against ourselves and others. The tempter tries to trick the nonviolent Jesus into faithlessness and violence. But Jesus trusts God, whether hungry in the desert or dying on the cross. Thus, he does not do violence to himself or reject the way of nonviolence. His faith in God is the foundation of his nonviolence.

Likewise, the world tells us that God should not be trusted. It attacks our faith in God and God's loving-kindness and pushes us to reject God's way of nonviolence. The culture tells us that God does not care about us, that God cannot be trusted, that God is not there for us when we need God and that in fact, God does not exist. As we abandon our trust in God, we fall prey to the world's violence. "There is no God," the culture insists, "no moral order, no reason to be nonviolent with ourselves or others. Why not step over one another, kill yourselves or wage war? Nonviolence does not work, God does not exist and if God does exist, God cannot be trusted."

The culture sows seeds of violence by tempting us to doubt God and destroy ourselves under its false pretenses. Once we give in to the voice of despair, the voice of doubt takes us down the spiral of violence. The culture does not understand God or God's way of nonviolence. It can only urge us to do violence. It insists that we give in to the addiction of violence. But Jesus stands firm. He believes in God and trusts in God. The act of trusting God rejects all forms of violence. Do not test God, he tells us. Be at peace with yourself. Treat yourself nonviolently. Trust God and God's way of nonviolence.

In the third temptation, the tempter takes Jesus up "to a very high mountain and shows him all the kingdoms of the world in their magnificence. He says, 'All these I shall give to you, if you will prostrate yourself and worship me.' Jesus says to him, 'Get away, Satan! It is written: 'The Lord your God shall you worship and God alone shall you serve.'"

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After the temptations to despair and doubt comes the last temptation to domination. It is the temptation of imperial power. It urges us to be number one, to be emperor over all, owners of everything, in control of everyone, in charge of life itself. It is the temptation to be god -- and it comes with a price: the loss of our souls. It requires the worship of false gods, the idols of death. As we give in to this last temptation, try to dominate the world, and resort to imperial violence and nuclear weapons to maintain our imperial domination, we stop worshipping the living God and instead worship the false gods of violence.

Jesus rejects the temptation to dominate the world. "Get away, Satan!" he orders. "Satan" was a code word for the Roman empire. Jesus and the early community resisted the empire and its domination over others. He teaches us not to lord it over others but to serve one another, love our enemies, show compassion to each other, and worship the living God. Because he turns his back on the domination system, the empire eventually kills him. The Gospel invites us likewise to reject the way of domination and empire and worship the living God of peace.

This last temptation questions our patriotic presuppositions. Our country prides itself on being number one in the world. As the world's policeman and economic tyrant, we try to possess and control all nations, with some 740 military bases around the world. In the process, however, we find ourselves worshipping the false gods of violence. Though we claim to worship God, in reality, we place our hopes and security in our idolatrous weapons. Our militarism insures our economic domination over the poor and we gain the world but lose our souls to the forces of death.

Real worship of God is not compatible with global domination. The Gospel urges us to renounce global domination, serve the poor, reclaim our souls and worship God and God alone. That means we have to dismantle our nuclear and conventional arsenals, relinquish our control over the world's resources, and fulfill our calling to serve the poorer nations of the world as a sign of our worship of the living God.

Jesus' prayer and fasting summon us to a spirituality of creative nonviolence, humility, voluntary poverty, selfless service, suffering love, steadfast trust in God and obedience to God's word of peace. As we reject

the temptations of despair, doubt, and domination, as we renounce every form of violence, we become more human, more faithful, more trusting, more nonviolent. Like Jesus, we can walk into the world in a true spirit of love and compassion to serve those in need and proclaim God's reign of justice and peace.

After Jesus rejected those inner voices, God's angels came to him and ministered to him.(4:11). I think the same thing happens to us when we resist the temptations of violence and stand firm in faith and nonviolence. Ministering angels of peace console us -- in our friends, companions and teachers. Like Jesus, we find strength for the journey.

My hope and prayer is that like Jesus, we can reject the temptations of violence, of despair, doubt and domination; trust God, God's word, and God's way of nonviolence; and go forward as peacemakers on the way of the cross.

Next week, John Dear will lead a Lenten retreat Feb. 22-24, "The Passion, Death & Resurrection of the Nonviolent Jesus," at the Kirkridge Center in Bangor, Pa. (www.kirkridge.org). The DVD, "The Narrow Path," featuring his teachings on Gospel nonviolence, is available from www.sandamianofoundation.org. To attend one of his speaking events, see: www.johndear.org.

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