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Our scandalous, nonviolent God

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

This week I spoke about *A Persistent Peace*, my just published autobiography, in Portland, Berkeley, Burlingame, Santa Cruz, Los Angeles and Phoenix. And at each gathering folks lamented the economic crisis, the ongoing U.S. war in Iraq, and global warming. Fear and confusion hung on the air, but I discerned beneath the surface a great longing for God, and more than that -- a restless search, a search common to all of us: Who is this God who calls us to love and serve? Where is God in such times as these? Is this a God of peace? And this: how dare we hope for a peaceable God when the Hebrew Bible holds aloft a warrior god, a god who unsheathes swords, who releases divine fury and unleashes the Israelites headlong toward vengeance?

I take such questions seriously. They lie at the heart of the human predicament, for dissatisfaction lies in all of us. Our hearts are blind and still something in us demands to know: What does it mean to be human? What is God in an ungodly world? And more to the point, who is this God?

And so the people I met cast about and aired their fears and stood and faced me with earnest, piercing questions. And the response I offered is, I believe, the only viable one that lay at hand. I pointed to the example of Jesus. He called us to embark on a journey, one of peace and love, a journey teeming with social, economic and political implications for the whole world.

And the first implication is this -- we withdraw our trust in money, weapons, Los Alamos or Wall Street,

in anything that claims our allegiance away from God. We trust instead in the God of love and peace; we live according to the teachings of Jesus. No matter what happens.

Which brings us to the second implication. Suddenly, history no longer belongs to the elite. Or to violent forces beyond us. Or to systems too complex to control. God puts history, as it were, into the hands of the meek and mournful, into the hands of those who hunger for justice, into the hands of peacemakers.

Jesus proclaimed in the Sermon on the Mount, "You cannot serve God and money." It's one or the other." And he says, "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear? Do not worry and say, 'What are we to eat?' Or 'What are we to drink?' Or 'What are we to wear?' All these things the pagans seek. Your heavenly God knows that you need them all. Seek first the kingdom of God and God's justice, and all these things will be given you besides."(Mt. 6:24-34)

God provides for those who take up the call of justice, who make peace, who practice nonviolence, I suggest. So keep focused on God's reign of justice and peace. Do what you can to resist the world's injustices and wars, welcome God's reign through nonviolent love. It may be hard, but everything you need will be provided for you. This God is trustworthy.

I can see the gears moving in their minds. Dare we trust this Gospel, this God, as the economy collapses, the wars rage on, the future seems so uncertain? The media and the government manipulate us by sowing generous amounts of fear and doubt. It goes against their interests to have us trust solely in God. We hear from them: cling to your money, keep vigilant against terrorists, support the troops, place your faith in the system. We are on Orange alert, so worry, and hope America will save you.

A constant drumming that robs us of clarity. It's why we need spiritual disciplines. Reading the Gospels and taking time for prayer each day will center us in the spirit of the God of peace. In the Gospels, especially, we discover a God who sides with the poor, who makes peace, who enters the world to offer a new reign of nonviolence. I often ponder how Mary describes God as merciful, as one who "disperses the arrogant of mind and heart," who "throws down the rulers from their thrones," who "lifts up the lowly," who "fills the hungry with good things," who "sends the rich away empty" (Luke 1:46-55).

And I often speak of Jesus' command, "love your enemies because God is a God of universal nonviolent love." God "makes the sun rise on the bad and the good." God makes "the rain fall on the unjust and the just."

In this core teaching is the scandal of Christianity: God is nonviolent, God loves everyone. And as children of this generous God, we are to love everyone too, with universal love, boundless compassion and active nonviolence.

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But the question lingers and vexes many. How to reconcile the God of peace that I speak of with the

schizophrenic god of the Hebrew Bible -- a god of loving kindness, on one hand, a god of fire and brimstone, on the other. How do we respond to that?

I answer: the god of war is not true God. True, the scriptures are the Word of God. But as the story unfolds the revelation of God betrays a kind of growing awareness. Or better, a birthing of awareness.

We see God spare Nineveh, the conqueror of the northern tribes, and Jonah go off bewailing God's mercy. Conventional wisdom demanded of God that the city be laid to ash.

In the book of Job, we see Job's friends repudiated, those who had heedlessly insisted that misfortune befalls from the hand of an offended God.

And we see Third Isaiah daring to dream of Gentile and Jew reconciled, this over against an earlier vision of some vehemence -- Gentiles would be purged from earth.

Across the pages a new image emerges in fits and starts. And it culminates in the gospel of Jesus, which unveils to our shocked minds a God of nonviolence. The Church has always insisted that the fullest revelation of God is in Jesus of Nazareth, who claims "to fulfill the law and the prophets." Which is to say, he is the climax of Hebrew Bible's struggles to understand God.

The Hebrew Bible came into being over a thousand years, at the hand of a hundred authors and redactors, through the filter of dozens of Jewish faith communities -- all of them grappling with the mystery of God. All of them struggling with what this God expected of their humanity.

Most presumed God was violent. Because in fact the people were violent. And the text reflects this, so many pages soaked in blood. God retaliates, wreaks hot vengeance, crushes skulls and throws back the divine head and laughs at the carnage. And what we have is a projected god, a god created in their own violent image.

The image wouldn't go unchallenged. Prophets arose, a fragile breed, those on the fringes putting their needs of food and clothes on the welfare of God. They said contrary things of God. They said God liberates the oppressed. God demands that all have enough. God is wholly compassionate. God envisions a time when all nations will combine to beat their swords into plowshares, and the science of war will fall into ruin. This first glimpse of true God comes from the prophets.

The Gospels provide the final glimpse. Jesus practices nonviolence, saves the victims of violence, disarms the violent, resists the violent empire, and forgives his murderers -- all this in the name of God. Which is to say, reflecting the very nature of God. In Jesus, we meet a God of peace.

If we meditate on the Gospel of Jesus, if we stake our faith on the nonviolent God, true God will dawn in our hearts. Peaceful, gentle, loving. This God will come to us in our prayers. We'll form communities of nonviolence that worship a God of peace. And God will fashion us again in her nonviolent image.

So in this latest round of travels, I encourage people to ponder their image of God, to experiment with nonviolence as a clue to the mystery of God. I invite them to ask themselves if the God they worship is violent or nonviolent. If a violent god, then I challenge them to dare to reflect on the nonviolence of God and try to bear up under the scandal of it. And then to read the news, the world, even the Word of God, from this perspective of nonviolence.

Encountering true God is our only hope. It's how we discover our own true nature and reclaim our fundamental humanity as peaceful, loving, nonviolent people. Encountering true God will empower us to become peacemakers and fill us with the sense of being "sons and daughters of the God of peace." On that day, we will fully know God, and peace and justice will flow naturally.

Fr. John Dear and Martin Sheen spoke to nearly 900 people on Sunday night in Los Angeles, signing John's new autobiography, "*A Persistent Peace*" (Loyola Press, with a foreword by Martin Sheen, available from www.amazon.com). This week, John will be speaking in Sedona, Chicago, Milwaukee, Nashville, St. Louis and Memphis. For details, see: www.johndear.org and www.persistentpeace.com. Also, Eerdmans has just published a new collection of these NCR columns, called "Put Down Your Sword," also available from www.amazon.com

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