

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

December 14, 2010 at 10:43am

Joseph and Mary's Advent vision

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

A few years ago, Bob Dylan was asked about his plans. "I'm looking forward to some dreams," he answered. "Excuse me?" the befuddled interviewer replied. "It says right there in the Bible," Dylan explained, "Your young men and women will see visions, and your older men and women will dream dreams. I'm ready for my dreams."

Good for Dylan to know the book of Joel. The Bible is filled with dreamers and visionaries. That might be one way to describe Joseph and Mary, the two main characters in Advent -- besides John the Baptist.

When I think of them, I imagine a gentle young couple in dire straits in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq or Haiti. In my image, they have no money, no possessions, no home, no healthcare, no bank account, no car, no job, and no prospects. But they do have hope. Their hope is in God.

In their utter dependence they live and breathe God morning, noon and night. The brief references to them in the Gospels portray them as devout people who seek solely to do the will of God. That's a key Advent lesson.

Joseph's vision comes in two extraordinary dreams where he learns from an angel that Mary's child is the Holy One and his job is to care for mother and child. He is "righteous," we are told, which is high praise -- rare for the Gospel. He discerns God's will in that dream, and spends the rest of his short life serving mother and child.

My image of Joseph is of a consciously nonviolent man who humbly worships a loving God and places his life at the service of his God. In this image he stands counter to the men of his day. He prepares to leave Mary quietly because he thinks she has hurt him, but notice he does not intend to hurt her in return. But after his dream he allows God to change his heart and mind.

By saying "Yes" to the movement of God in his dream he becomes a consciously nonviolent father who risks his life and reputation to protect mother and child. Later on, in the second dream, he discerns God's spirit leading them out of harm's way so the child might have a chance.

Joseph invites all of us -- especially men, especially fathers -- to follow him in loving nonviolence, compassionate care and wise discernment. He places God's peaceful will and the care of others first and foremost and invites us likewise to seek God's will and be a nonviolent presence in our circle of concern. His dream of doing God's will -- fulfilling his part in the story of God -- comes true.

Mary, of course, also models the faithful, humble, nonviolent servant attentive to God's will. In her vision she sees an angel who announces God's will -- the coming of the Holy One with a reign of peace that will last forever. Despite the disruption to her life, Mary says "Yes." Her next vision includes a neighbor in need, so she reaches out to her elderly cousin Elizabeth, pregnant with John the Baptist. Her final vision widens into a global panorama that takes in the whole world -- all of human history, all of heaven and earth.

Mary's Magnificat is the ultimate vision of peace with justice, a 3-D living color dream where God rescues the poor and hungry, pulls down the rich and powerful, pours out mercy and compassion on all, and remains faithful to God's children. No wonder Jesus grew up to be a nonviolent revolutionary!

Joseph and Mary, poor in possessions but rich in faith and hope, envision a God of love and peace and God's reign of love and peace, so they could envision and say "Yes" to their Christ of love and peace. There is the Advent story in a nutshell.

Alas, our dark times lead us deeper into blindness and nightmares. Our violence, greed and selfishness blind us to the possibilities of seeking the Christ of peace. We walk around blindly in something called the American dream, in pursuit of money, power, honor, fame, control, military hegemony, and global domination.

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Our dream, as Dr. King taught, is a nightmare for the rest of the world. Our Advent texts state simply that this is not the will of God.

And that is the invitation of Advent -- seek the will of God, do the will of God, join the will of God, no matter what everyone else is doing, no matter how much we are commanded to do the Pentagon's will, or the government's will.

These dreamers and visionaries, Joseph and Mary, invite us to open our eyes even in this darkness -- to follow the light in our dreams, to join the biblical vision of justice and peace, to listen to the voices of our angels, to let go of control, and to surrender ourselves to the will of God. In that process, we too can play our part in the ongoing work and mission of the peacemaking Christ.

Both Joseph and Mary are contemplatives, people of prayer who live in relationship with the God of peace, ready for the coming of God into their lives, ready for angels to appear and speak.

Both are terrified. And both are told not to be afraid. Both then remember that first and foremost they seek God and God's will, so they calm down and say "Yes." They're bold "Yes" comes, I think, from a lifetime of daily "Yeses" to God and countless "Nos" to all that is not of God, to the darkness and

nightmare of violence.

Joseph and Mary, I presume, were always saying "Yes" to God, so that when God asks something big of them they are ready to say "Yes" again. They are willing to let their lives be disrupted, to make that "Yes" a reality, to live not according to their own will but God's, to trust that light within as they face the world's darkness.

These thoughts lead me to ask the basic Advent questions:

Where is God's angel for me? What is God's angel saying to me? Dare I let God enter my life again and disrupt my plans? What makes me afraid? Who tells me not to be afraid? How do I move from fear into love, grace and peace? What is my part, where is my place, in the story of the peacemaking Christ? Indeed, what is God's dream and vision of me, of humanity?

"When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home" (Mt. 1:24).

"Behold I am the servant of the Lord," Mary said. "May it be done to me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her" (Lk. 1:38).

The nightmares and blindness of these violent times are destroying us -- personally, physically, emotionally, spiritually, communally, politically, economically, nationally, globally. We need to dream dreams and see visions like the nonviolent Joseph and Mary if we want to find our way out of the darkness into that Light.

Advent summons us to place the God of peace and God's reign of peace first and foremost in our lives and to practice saying our "Yes" to God and our "No" to the culture of war and greed. It invites us to play our part in the story of the peacemaking Christ, here and now. Joseph and Mary show us how to do that.

Like Bob Dylan, I'm tired of the long American nightmare of war and greed. I'm ready to see visions and dream dreams. I want to welcome, like Joseph and Mary, the Christ of peace and his reign of nonviolence.

With Mary, I want to sing that ecstatic Magnificat: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the God of peace. My Spirit rejoices in God my savior. God's mercy is from age to age. God has helped us, remembering God's mercy, the great promise of nonviolence, forever."

May we all join her hymn of praise and peace.

For further information, see: www.disarmnowplowshares.wordpress.com and www.jonahhouse.org. John's collection of the writings of Nobel Laureate Mairead Maguire, *The Vision of Peace*, has just been republished by www.wipfandstock.com. His new book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings (Orbis)*, and other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile's *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' "Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund," go to: <http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn>. For further information, or to schedule a lecture or retreat, visit: www.johndear.org.

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