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Japan's tsunami, the Stations of the Cross, and resurrection

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

Last week, I was in Los Angeles visiting friends by the ocean when we heard the terrible news of the earthquake in Japan. We turned on the TV and watched the horrifying pictures coming in of the tsunami. Like everyone else, we were stunned, shocked, and numb.

On Friday, we were nervous as the local beaches were cleared in case of a tsunami wave. Over the weekend, while serving at my parish on the Mexico-New Mexico border, I kept watch over news reports of the hydrogen blasts, radioactive leaks and possible meltdown from the damaged Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plants along the Japanese coasts.

As with others after the Haiti, Chile and China earthquakes, and the massive Indian Ocean tsunami a few years ago, I feel profound grief for the victims of these natural disasters, and hope and pray for the injured and the survivors.

On Friday afternoon, I spent five hours with my friend, the Rev. James Lawson, the well known Civil Rights leader who led the Nashville sit-in movement and the Memphis garbage strike. He was chairperson of our national council when I served as executive director of the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

Lawson asked: How can we continue our destructive policies of corporate greed; global warfare; apartheid; mass starvation; nuclear weapons; systemic injustice; institutionalized racism and sexism; and environmental destruction when life is so hard for so many people who undergo earthquakes, tsunamis, tornadoes and hurricanes?

We are waging a global tsunami against the world's people, he said, when we should be creating justice and dignity for everyone, and systems to prevent loss of life from natural disasters.

I share his angst over the needless death and destruction that the nations of the world, beginning with our own, wreak upon the human race.

In particular, I have never believed reports that nuclear power plants are safer since the Chernobyl catastrophe of twenty-five years ago. The risk of a nuclear meltdown from natural disaster or terrorist attack is simply too great, as we are learning this week.

We have over one hundred nuclear power plants in the U.S., with many nuclear fuel and weapons facilities. All of them are vulnerable. We need to convert these nuclear plants into wind and solar farms and alternative sources of energy.

While in L.A., I visited friends who recently boarded a ship bound the area of the Pacific Ocean far beyond Hawaii to see for themselves the "Pacific Trash Vortex" -- the floating mass of plastic garbage twice the size of Texas which swirls about in the ocean. They saw the mass of plastic bottles with their own eyes and were profoundly disturbed and affected by it. One now dedicates her life to ending all use of plastic.

It is overwhelming to think of such destruction, devastation and waste, to ponder the suffering of the Japanese people -- much less the potential horrors of a nuclear meltdown or nuclear warfare.

Once again, we are reminded that life is short; that our policies have consequences; that we have choices.

Lent is a time to hear Jesus' call to repent from our participation in systemic injustice and to welcome God's reign of justice and peace with all our hearts. His call to repentance certainly means turning away from personal sin back toward his grace, but it also includes turning away from social, national, global institutionalized sin.

Jesus wants us to reject the systemic injustice that kills millions around the planet. He wants us to change our lives, to start down a whole new path of love, service, nonviolence, and peace.

I was so moved to hear Jim Lawson, now 82 -- who once lived in India as a young Methodist minister and knew Nehru and Gandhi's friends, long before he befriended Dr. King -- tell me that the journey of personal transformation never ends, that he is working as hard on himself now as he ever has.

Our Gospel calls us to renew ourselves, to serve those in need, to do what we can to relieve human suffering, to stand with those in pain, and to join Jesus' grassroots, nonviolent campaign to resist systemic injustice.

It teaches the bottom line truth that every human life is equally valuable, that we should not support sociopathic systems that allow "collateral damage" or mass starvation or relievable disease or nuclear destruction.

Part of Lent's turning back to God and God's way means standing with the distraught, the grieving, the suffering people of the world as best we can. And so we mourn for our Japanese sisters and brothers, and everyone from Haiti to Afghanistan, and try to support them as best we can.

Sometimes life feels like one long season of Lent. Billions of people are now suffering needlessly because of these global systems of injustice, what Jim Lawson calls the "plantation colonialism" of the First World to the Fourth World.

Indeed, the whole world seems to be undergoing the Stations of the Cross. One day, we'll each take our turn carrying that cross, but surely, each one of us is called now to accompany those who are carry it.

The Christian, we could say, is the one who walks the Stations of the Cross. But as Dorothy Day pointed out, if we want to enter the new life of resurrection we all have to walk the Stations of the Cross.

Sometimes that means standing like Mary and John at the foot of the cross before the world's crucified people. We do not turn away from those in pain. We do what we can to comfort them, to relieve their pain, and to stop the ongoing crucifixion of the world's poor and disenfranchised.

All of this is hard. Life is hard. So when I get overwhelmed, I return to those once in a lifetime moments when I found life to be good, when I felt my hope renewed.

One such moment happened for me a few years ago in the Pacific Ocean. During a break in a speaking tour of Hawaii, a friend and I boarded a whale watching boat in Maui and headed out into deep waters.

It was March, when hundreds of whales swim into that area to feed and breed. Dozens of water spouts could be seen on the horizon. It was a gorgeous day, with a clear blue sky and bright blue water. I felt like I had stepped into a postcard.

Just as the captain was explaining that he had not seen a whale breach for nearly two years, suddenly, about thirty yards off the bow, an enormous whale jumped straight up, completely out of the water, held itself there for a second, and then slowly crashed back down into the water!

It was thrilling. People shouted for joy and wonder. For me, it was a sign of resurrection, when the beauty of creation reminded me once again that life is good. I return to that moment and others like it when life gets to be too much.

In the meantime, we walk the Stations of the Cross with eyes wide open beside our neglected, distraught, suffering sisters and brothers, and we do what we can to welcome Jesus' new world of peace, justice and nonviolence.

Next week, John Dear will speak in Kentucky at Brescia University in Owensboro, Berea College, and the Church of the Epiphany in Louisville. To hear a new podcast interview with John Dear, go to www.jesusradicals.com. His latest 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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