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Jesus and the falling towers

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

Ten years ago, I was having breakfast with my parents in a Central Park hotel when news came of the terrorist attacks at the World Trade Center. My folks left town, and I walked downtown to see how I could help. I remember the clear blue sky and the million people walking uptown toward me. The subways, bridges, tunnels and roads had all been closed.

When I reached St. Vincent's Hospital, I found hundreds of doctors, nurses and stretchers standing silently along 12th Street, waiting for the wounded to arrive. I offered my services as a chaplain, and they invited me to wait with them. After several hours, we finally realized: no one was coming.

As I made the long walk back uptown to the Jesuit Community, I wondered what the nonviolent Jesus would say about this terrorist attack. Only the month before, I had told a large audience in Los Angeles that our own terrorist violence around the world would surely one day come back upon us.

This was not some prophetic, doomsday prediction; just a simple observation. What goes around, comes around. You reap what you sow. Those who live by the sword, die by the sword.

Violence in response to violence always leads to further violence; terrorist attacks always lead to further terrorist attacks. War is terrorism and we've been engaged in war in the Middle East and Afghanistan almost non-stop since 1991.

You can see this in Los Alamos, N. M., where we prepare diligently to threaten the entire planet with our nuclear arsenal. Los Alamos and the Pentagon are the flip side of al-Qaida. In the end, we're all using violence and death in various forms to gain and maintain power.

According to UNICEF, the World Health Organization, the Vatican and other organizations, during the

1990s the United States, along with the U.N., killed half a million Iraqi children through our economic sanctions on Iraq.

Our funding of the Israeli occupation killed, injured and oppressed thousands of Palestinians. These grievous injustices naturally infuriated countless millions.

In the age of suicide bombers, it's no wonder that a handful of people went insane and planned violent revenge. The terrible violence we brought upon Iraqis and Palestinians was bound to ricochet back upon us. Any peacemaker could read the writing on the wall.

And so the terrorist attacks at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were not a surprise to me or my friends. The only surprise was that they had not happened sooner. Today, I'm amazed that we have not suffered further attacks, despite the billions spent on "security."

We bomb people from Libya and Iraq to Afghanistan and Pakistan, we have more than 700 military bases around the planet and we maintain thousands of nuclear weapons ready to vaporize any nation that threatens us. With our drones flying in the skies and unleashing death upon children, we turn millions against us.

We are not exemplifying creative nonviolence to the world; we are imperial masters of war. This cannot go on forever. Our weapons cannot protect us. Only God and God's way of nonviolence can protect us.

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But what would the nonviolent Jesus say about the fall of the towers, I wondered that night 10 years ago. Surely, he advises universal love, active peacemaking, justice for the poor, liberation for the oppressed, and an end to empire. When I got home to my community, I opened my New Testament and came upon a rarely discussed passage in the Gospel of Luke (13:1-5). There I reread his comments about the collapse of a nearby tower which killed 18 people:

At that time, some people who were present there told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with the blood of their sacrifices. He said to them in reply, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were greater sinners than all other Galileans? By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did! Or those 18 people who were killed when the tower at Siloam fell on them -- do you think they were more guilty than everyone else who lived in Jerusalem? By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did!"

"If you do not repent, you will all perish as they did!"

I remember how shocked I was, on the evening of Sept. 11, 2001, when I read this text. Where is the spirit of compassion in these words? Where is the magnanimous love for which Jesus is so famous? Is this nonviolence? To me, the words sounded cold, harsh and pessimistic.

I believe in the nonviolence of Jesus, and follow him precisely because his nonviolence makes all the difference. He teaches us to break the cycle of violence through our nonviolent resistance, through love, justice and truth. He points toward the God of gentleness, love, compassion and peace. He gives me hope for another way, another world.

And so, I decided to give the Gospel a chance. I stayed with the text for days.

I carried it around inside as I walked back down to Lower Manhattan at 6 a.m. that Thursday morning to volunteer at the new Family Assistance Center opened in the old Armory on Lexington Avenue. Within minutes, the head of the Red Cross asked me to help counsel any grieving relative who needed assistance. Some 10,000 people lined the street outside waiting to come in.

That day, I kept to the Gospel as I listened to more than a hundred distraught relatives. Around 6 p.m., the Red Cross leader asked me to help coordinate the chaplain's program at the Family Assistance Center. The next day, I stood at Ground Zero and listened to dozens of grieving rescue workers who lined up to talk. I knew the words of Jesus came from a gentle, humble heart, and there, as I stood before the seven story "pile" of burning ruin, I found an opening.

"If you do not repent, you will all perish as they did!" These are words of compassion and nonviolence, I realized at Ground Zero. There, in the face of the unspeakable horror, I saw that if we do not repent of our violence, our greed, our wars, we will all suffer and die in mindless terror. He wants us instead to live in his peaceful way of loving nonviolence, resist the culture of greed, war and empire and go to our deaths in a peaceful spirit of universal love, generous forgiveness and trusting surrender.

Jesus is like the awakened Buddha, perfectly centered, mindful, alive and at peace, gently telling us:

Do not continue on your present course! Your global destructive violence ensures your own destruction! Renounce your greed and war making. Stop your wars, dismantle your nuclear weapons, stop funding terrorist regimes, cut all funding for Israel's occupation of Palestine, spend billions to feed the world's starving, build new schools and hospitals in Iraq and Afghanistan, overcome evil with good, love everyone on the planet, reverse your violence and become people of global nonviolence. If you do not do this, you as a people will be destroyed. It will not be God's doing. Your own violence will come down upon you.

His message was hard to hear 2,000 years ago. It's hard for us to hear it today. The crowd must have presumed that those brutally killed by the Roman procurator deserved death, and that the 18 people who died from the tower at Siloam died as punishment for their outstanding sins.

It's not because of their sin, Jesus says. It's because of the foolish greed that led to the hasty building of an unsafe tower, and their cooperation with that greed. If you do not repent of your complicity with greed -- and with the Roman Empire, with war, with the Zealots -- you too will die as they did, stuck in the foolish greed of building an unsafe tower, instead of my loving peace.

Just before this exchange, Jesus tells the crowd that he has come to bring division, to set the earth on fire. He asks two potent questions: "Why do you not know how to interpret the present time? Why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?" (Luke 12:56-57) These questions help explain his reaction to the accidental deaths from the falling tower at Siloam.

Deal with reality! he says. *See what is happening, judge what is right, and do the right thing!*

I hear the nonviolent Jesus asking us those same questions today: "Why do you not know how to interpret the present time? Why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?"

We do not know how to interpret what is happening to the world right now, and we certainly do not judge for ourselves what is right or wrong. We are as ignorant as the crowd he addressed. We let our blind political and religious leaders tell us what is right and wrong, and ignore the path of greed and war that leads toward our destruction.

It does not need to be this way. We can wake up, change our lives, disarm our hearts, turn back to the God of peace, renounce greed and war, and build a global grassroots movement of nonviolence for the coming of new more just, more peaceful world. That is what the present time requires. That is the right thing to do. That is God's will for us.

Sept. 11 is a good day to repent of our violence, greed and war making, a good day to return to the God of peace, a good day to prepare anew to live and die in peace with all humanity. Life is short, we suddenly remember. Let's turn from our common foolishness and embrace Jesus' wisdom of peace, love and nonviolence.

From February-April 2012, John Dear will undertake a national book tour for his forthcoming book, *Lazarus Come Forth!*, which portrays Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. To host John for an evening talk and book-signing at your church, send an e-mail through www.johndear.org. John's latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), and other recent books 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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