

The Psalms of Peace, part four (Ps. 85)

John Dear | Jul. 24, 2012 | On the Road to Peace

Editor's note: This meditation is the fourth of a five-part summer series on the peace writings in the psalms.

"I will listen for the word of the God of peace. Surely the God of peace will proclaim peace to God's people, to the faithful, to those who trust in the God of peace ... Love and truth will embrace; justice and peace will kiss. Truth will spring from the earth; justice will look down from heaven." (Ps. 85: 9-12)

Psalm 85 [1] is one of the most beautiful prayers, one of the most imaginative poems, one of the greatest pieces of writing in all of literature. Better than Shakespeare, Yeats and Eliot rolled into one. It combines our best prayer for God's mercy upon humanity, our best hope for God's word of peace, and our best vision of what that peace might look like.

I think this psalm is the hope and vision of the nonviolent Jesus. He dreams this dream and acts upon it, and in his Sermon on the Mount, teaches us how to make this hope and vision come true. His prayer fulfills Psalm 85: "Your reign of peace, your will of justice, be done on earth as it is in heaven."

The text instructs us in the basics of prayer, and in doing so, gives us a way forward. All we have to do is listen attentively every day in our contemplative prayer for the word of the God of peace, and then act on that word. If we do, good things will follow.

That means we sit in silent meditation and ask the God of peace to speak, wait for God to speak, hear exactly what God has to say, and try to fulfill that word. This is the journey of a lifetime. This is what we will be doing in heaven, so meditation is actually just practice for the new life of peace to come.

The psalm urges us to build our lives around that word of the God of peace. We let God give us peace and say peaceful, loving words to us, and we thank God for this kindness. Next, we go forward and speak that word of peace to others. We teach that word of peace, and help each other unpack that word of peace. And we try to create the conditions where that word can take root, bear good fruit and eventually come to a new harvest of peace.

Psalm 85 calls us to live and breathe God's holy word of peace. It presumes we want to be the people who are faithful to the God of peace. As people who trust the God of peace, we spend our energies heralding a new world of peace without war, injustice, poverty, violence, killing or nuclear weapons and promoting a new world of nonviolence.

In light of the violence in our world -- the horrific movie theater massacre last week in Aurora, Colo., that killed and injured 70 people; the ongoing U.S. drone attacks and killings in Afghanistan, Yemen and Pakistan; the massacres in Syria and Iraq; the slow death by starvation of thousands of children each week; the maintenance of our nuclear terrorist arsenal -- we have our work cut out for us. In such a world of permanent violence and war, the God of peace can only proclaim peace to God's people.

But I've often wondered what this poem means. What does it mean to say that love and truth will embrace, and justice and peace will kiss? How does truth spring up from the earth and justice look down from heaven? These are beautiful, poetic images, and well worth pondering.

We can all name the countless ways hatred and untruth have embraced, that injustice and war have kissed, the myriad times when lies have sprung up and injustice looked down upon us. But it's harder to imagine love, truth, justice and peace coming together like some cosmic breakthrough.

I think this beautiful, poetic image makes sense only if we are attentively listening to the word of peace from the God of peace, and if we are trying to be the God of peace's faithful peacemakers.

Psalm 85 always makes me think of Coretta Scott King, whom I so admired and knew slightly. I remember her description of the March on Washington on Aug. 28, 1963, when Martin Luther King Jr. announced his famous dream of reconciliation. She wrote after his death that the sight of hundreds of thousands of people, standing before them at the Lincoln Memorial, was the most extraordinary experience of her life. For a brief moment, she wrote, that sea of smiling, hopeful black and white faces revealed to her the reign of God here on earth.

Perhaps there are moments when love and truth embrace, when justice and peace kiss, when the fruit of our work suddenly becomes a harvest of peace. The joyful fall of the Berlin wall; the release of Nelson Mandela from prison and his election as president of South Africa; the People Power movement in the Philippines; the hammering of nuclear weapons in a plowshares action; the victory of Leymah Gbowee in Liberia; and so forth. These historic moments fulfill Psalm 85.

Psalm 85 invites us to attend to the word of the God of peace, to hear that word of peace, to base our lives on that peace, to speak only that word of peace and to do our small part to help make real that great unforeseeable, unimaginable moment when love and truth embrace, and justice and peace kiss.

But if you go back and read Psalm 85, it does not start that way. I've jumped ahead to the good part. It begins as a lament. It pleads with God to relent, to forgive us, to let go of anger because of our rejection of God's way of love and peace, and to give us the gift of life once again. It begs God to save us from our own our violent self-destruction.

Once, God of peace, you favored your land, restored your faithful people's fortune, forgave their guilt, pardoned all sins, withdrew your wrath and turned away from anger, the psalmist writes. "Restore us once more, God our savior ... Please give us life again, that your people may rejoice in you. Show us, God of peace, your love; grant us your salvation."

Scholars say the psalm evokes the prophetic voices of the post-exilic period, around the fifth century B.C. In other words, it was written the same hopeless, violent, imperial context we suffer through today. In light of our wars, weapons, greed, massacres and environmental destruction, we, too, need to cry out to the God of peace to have mercy on us and help us reclaim the wisdom and sanity of peace and nonviolence.

Certainly, that's my prayer these days. Like many, I spent July 20 mourning those killed and injured during the insane massacre in Colorado. The sick young man who killed and injured all those people just walked into a gun shop and bought weapons of mass destruction and ordered thousands of rounds of ammunition legally online. Toys are regulated, but thanks to the National Rifle Association, weapons intended for mass murder are not.

We have to ban AK-47s, handguns and bullets, but also, drones, Trident submarines, nuclear weapons and every weapon of mass destruction. We have to fight the greed and domination among us that leaves billions in poverty and despair. As we ponder this impossible challenge, we realize once again our need for the God of peace. We

sense our complete global rejection of the God of peace and God's gift of peace and turn back on our knees in repentant prayer.

Psalm 85 leads to a whole new kind of prayer, a prayer not just for ourselves individually, but for all humanity:

God of peace: We don't deserve it, but give us your peace anyway. We've rejected your gift of nonviolence, but give us your gift of nonviolence anyway. We've renounced Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, but teach us to live by its principles and practices anyway. Give us the gift of your reign of peace on earth. End our wars in Afghanistan, Yemen and Pakistan. Help us to dismantle our nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction. Help us to close the Pentagon, Los Alamos and all our military bases, and to invest instead in nonviolent methods of conflict resolution. Help us to feed the hungry, heal the sick and abolish poverty so the causes of war are eradicated and everyone can live in dignity with equal justice, that we might welcome your reign of peace here on earth. Make us once again, your faithful people, your holy peacemakers.

If we can return to the God of peace and pray for God's gift of peace for the whole human race, like Coretta Scott King and the psalmist, we might be given the vision of truth and love embracing, justice and peace kissing. But we have to lament our wars and violence. We have to take up God's way of nonviolence. We have to beg the God of peace for the gift of peace. We have to listen attentively each day for the holy word of peace from the God of peace.

Only then might we be ready for those breakthrough moments when love, truth, justice and peace meet in joyful celebration.

John Dear will speak Aug. 4-5 at [Occupy Los Alamos](#) [2] in New Mexico; Aug. 22 at the spirituality festival in Edinburgh, Scotland; and Aug. 26-28 near London at the annual [Greenbelt Festival](#) [3]. His new book, [Lazarus, Come Forth!](#) [4], explores 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 see John's 2012 speaking schedule, go to [John Dear's website](#) [5]. John's talk at last year's Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book [Challenging Empire](#) [6]. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, [Divine Rebels](#) [7] by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including [Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings](#) [8]; [Put Down Your Sword](#) [9] and [A Persistent Peace](#) [10], are available from Amazon.com.

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[4]

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[5] <http://www.johndear.org>

[6] <http://www.fosna.org/>

[7] <http://www.amazon.com/Divine-Rebels-American-Christian->

Activists/dp/1569762643/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1326209314&sr=8-1

[8] http://www.amazon.com/Daniel-Berrigan-Essential-Writings-Spiritual/dp/1570758379/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348569&sr=1-1

[9] http://www.amazon.com/Put-Down-Your-Sword-Nonviolence/dp/0802863574/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348607&sr=1-1

[10] http://www.amazon.com/Persistent-Peace-Struggle-Nonviolent-World/dp/0829427201/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348624&sr=1-1

[11] <http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup>

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