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Jonah and the mission of peace (part 3)

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

At the height of the story of Jonah, the entire city of Nineveh, in the heart of the brutal empire, repents of its war-making, begs God for mercy and promises to adopt God's way of nonviolence. You'd think the holy prophet Jonah would be thrilled, right? Wrong.

In Act Three, the denouement takes an unexpected turn. Our man Jonah has a complete meltdown. He's resentful, upset and downright furious at God for having mercy on the evil yet repentant people of the war-making empire. They don't deserve mercy, he knows. Worse, he suspected God would be merciful to them because deep down, he knows God is a God of infinite mercy, boundless compassion and perfect nonviolence. After all, God was merciful to Jonah. His self-righteousness comes back to haunt him and unleashes his raging, inner violence.

Turns out, maybe even Jonah needs to do some repenting.

As we take up the story, Jonah throws up his hands in despair, gives up on God and walks off to die. This time, he falls into a pit of his own making. His resentment toward the merciful nonviolent God explodes into uncontrolled anger, plummeting depression and morbid thoughts of death.

I find this story helpful. Jonah is like most of us at our best and our worst. Most activists and church workers can do great public good in the world yet at the same time can be so darn self-righteous, so violent. At times, our self-righteousness, pride, narcissism and anger take over. We reject the mercy and nonviolence of God and allow our inner violence to run wild. That quickly leads to depression, despair and misery.

Jonah, the greatest of the prophets, still has a thing or two to learn. As do we.

Here's the final chapter of the book of Jonah:

This was greatly displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. "I beseech you, Lord," he prayed, "is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? This is why I fled at first to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God -- slow to anger, rich in clemency, loath to punish. And now, Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." But the Lord asked, "Have you reason to be angry?" Jonah then left the city for a place to the east of it, where he built himself a hut and waited under it in the shade, to see what would happen to the city. And when the Lord God provided a gourd plant that grew up over Jonah's head, giving shade that relieved him of any discomfort, Jonah was very happy over the plant. But the next morning at dawn God sent a worm which attacked the plant, so that it withered. And when the sun rose, God sent a burning east wind; and the sun beat upon Jonah's head until he became faint. Then he asked for death, saying, "I would be better off dead than alive."

But God said to Jonah, "Have you reason to be angry over the plant?" "I have reason to be angry," Jonah answered, "angry enough to die." Then the Lord said, "You are concerned over the plant which cost you no labor and which you did not raise; it came up in one night and in one night it perished. And should I not be concerned over Nineveh, the great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot distinguish their right hand from their left -- not to mention the many cattle?" (Jonah 4: 1-11)

Jonah is steaming mad. Why? He wants revenge on the people of Nineveh. He wants God to destroy them. He was hoping for it. This means, despite all his fidelity to God's mission, deep down, Jonah is a person of violence and war. He does not reflect the nonviolence, gentleness or peaceableness of God. He rages at God because God spared Nineveh, then because God took his gourd plant. He is totally unreasonable, dare I say, just like the people of Nineveh -- except they repented and he won't.

Jonah's bad mood highlights the shadow side of every activist, prophet, church worker, do-gooder and peacemaker and deserves our reflection. While we might work hard to do good on God's behalf, inside, we often nurse resentment, anger, despair and hostility. I call this "the Jonah syndrome." At our best, we fulfill the holy mission God sent to us. At our worst, we remain narcissistic, sullen, bitter teenagers, hardly the mature disciples of nonviolence Jesus seeks.

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We don't want a gentle, merciful God. We want them -- someone! -- to get the vengeance they deserve. In the end, we are not nonviolent at all. The violence of imperial Nineveh, of imperial America, lingers within each one of us.

It might be helpful as we conclude our series to ask ourselves: How are we like Jonah? In our self-righteousness, whom do we want to see punished? What resentment, anger and bitterness do we cultivate toward our enemies, toward God? What triggers us to have a meltdown and sulk before God? What makes us resent God's mercy? What leads us to despair? How can we *not* act out like Jonah and instead rejoice at every instance of God's mercy and nonviolence and in the process, discover anew God's mercy and nonviolence to us?

As we meditate on Act Three, we notice the subtle shift of focus from our anti-hero Jonah toward God. Turns out, God is reasonable. God is genuinely compassionate, thoughtful, understanding and merciful, as Jonah suspected. Unlike Jonah and ourselves, God is not narcissistic, angry, vengeful or violent. God tries nonviolently to reason with Jonah, to help him come to his senses. I think that's how God approaches each one of us.

A careful reading of the text shows God asks three gentle questions, the first two about whether or not Jonah really should be angry and the last about whether or not God should be merciful. The questions, particularly the consequential last question, hang in the air. They touch the angry, resentful Jonah who lives inside each one of us. They reveal a God who tries persistently, gently, to reason with us, to talk us out of our self-righteous violence and unreasonable rage, to share God's mercy and compassion.

I think God is always trying to get us to come to our senses, to be reasonable, to see things from God's perspective. But that's a hard task because we "Jonah" people know everything, and we're angry. We know-it-all activists and church workers have as much violence in us as the greatest war-maker. Just as the imperial Ninevites are called to become nonviolent, so are we.

With the birth and death of the gourd plant, Jonah gives up all hope and asks for death. He wants everything his way. But God uses the gourd plant to gently teach Jonah why God should have mercy on the 120,000 people of Nineveh, "not to mention the many cattle." In the face of Jonah's bad mood, anger, violence and death wish, God's kindness stands in stark relief. God, not Jonah, bears the ultimate responsibility for humanity, all creatures and creation itself, and so, God should be merciful. That is the truth and wisdom of God.

What should Jonah have said? "I'm sorry, God. You're right. I'm just being selfish, self-righteous, narcissistic, vengeful and violent. Thank you for sparing the people of Nineveh, and thank you for sparing me. Thank you for taking care of all of us, everyone everywhere, including the cattle and all your creatures. Thank you for being so merciful, gentle and nonviolent. Help me to become more merciful, gentle and nonviolent, that I may always dwell in peace with you. And help me not to be resentful toward you or your wisdom of nonviolence."

For me, that's the lesson of the story: We need to speak out publicly and call people to repent, reject violence and war, disarm and embrace God's way of nonviolence and peace. At the same time, we need to examine our own inner violence, self-righteousness and resentment toward God and others and try to cultivate real inner nonviolence and practice loving nonviolence toward everyone everywhere. And no matter what, we should accept and do whatever the God of peace says.

After all our good deeds, we don't want to end up resentful at God like Jonah, especially because God is so kind, gentle, loving and nonviolent. We should just bow to God, celebrate God's kindness, and get on with the mission of peace that God gives us. In the end, we'll find that it's much more pleasant to be people of peace and nonviolence than sitting under a dead gourd tree, nursing our rage, feeling depressed and begging for death.

The story of Jonah exposes the shadow side of the activist, the part within us that does not want the mercy of God. We are scandalized -- outraged! -- by God's nonviolence, even God's nonviolence to us. But God keeps trying to reason with our unreasonable selves.

The moral? Learn from the mistakes of Jonah. Don't complain; don't nurse resentment; don't cultivate your violence. Let it all go. Cultivate and practice nonviolence instead. Celebrate God's scandalous nonviolence, mercy and compassion.

And get on with the holy work of announcing the good news of disarmament, justice and nonviolence. The reasonable God of peace is counting on us.

John Dear will speak Aug. 9 at the Wild Goose Festival in Asheville, N.C., which will also feature the Indigo Girls. In September, he will embark on a national speaking tour of Scotland. John will undertake a national speaking tour next year on his upcoming book, *The Nonviolent Life*. To see John's speaking schedule or to invite him to speak in your church or school, go to John Dear's website. John is now working with the Franciscan-based peace group Pace e Bene. He is profiled in *Doing Time for Peace* by Rosalie Riegler and with Daniel Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in *Divine Rebels* by Deena Guzder. John's book *Lazarus, Come Forth!* and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings, Put Down Your Sword* and *A Persistent Peace*, are available from Amazon.com.

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