

The God of the Mountain:
Isaiah's 3 Movements of the Spiritual Life
By John Dear

One day while Philip Berrigan and I were preparing to walk onto the Seymour Johnson Air Force Base in Goldsboro, North Carolina in December 1993 to hammer on an F-15 nuclear fighter bomber in a "Plowshares" disarmament action, he said to me that we did not need courage to undertake this act of civil disobedience and risk years of imprisonment, we needed something much deeper: Faith.

I remember my shock at his insight. Later, as we walked passed the no-trespassing sign, broke through the military war games, were arrested, endured trial and suffered long months in a tiny jail cell, I began to understand. What I needed to do was believe that God called me to love my enemies, that is, to stop my country from killing my enemies, and trust that God would be with me as I tried to do these things. If this active nonviolence was the heart of Christianity and true peacemaking, then anyone who engages in such nonviolent actions would be deeply blessed. As I walked into the unknown and endured one ordeal after another, I needed to believe even more in the active presence of God, even though there was little evidence to go on.

Faith, not courage!

One way to understand our global crisis of wars, nuclear weapons, terrorism, corporate greed, poverty, executions and environmental destruction is to see it as a lack of faith. We do not believe in God. We do not believe that God is present among us. We do not believe that God is a God of peace and nonviolence.

If we believed in the God of peace and nonviolence, we would not permit such atrocities to occur in our names, in God's name. We would cross the line and walk into the culture of war with the difficult, biblical imperative: Stop the killings, stop the wars, stop preparing for war, stop maintaining weapons of mass destruction, stop our terrorism.

The classic image of humanity's encounter with God in the second chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah teaches us not only how to get out of the madness of war--through our active disarmament--but how disarmament can happen--through faith in the God of peace. In a few verses, Isaiah sums up humanity's journey to peace as our journey to God. If we dare journey up the holy mountain to God's house and meet God, we will one day journey back down the mountain toward disarmament and create a new culture of peace and nonviolence. Our world will change because we have changed. In the process of walking in faith, we will have met God and discovered what it means to be a human being.

Simply put, the nations of the world must climb the mountain of God, Isaiah wrote. On the mountaintop, God will instruct them in God's ways. Then, they will proceed back down the mountain where they will immediately dismantle their weapons, share their resources with one another and live at peace.

The text itself has become the ideal image of the journey to peace:

In days to come, the mountain of God's house shall be established as the highest mountain and raised above the hills. All nations shall stream toward it; many peoples shall come and say: "Come, let us climb the mountain of God, to the house of God, that God may instruct us in God's ways, and we may walk in God's paths." For from Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of God from Jerusalem. God shall judge between the nations, and impose terms on many peoples. They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. One nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again. Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!" (Isaiah 2:2-5)

Isaiah offers three basic movements of the spiritual life. In the first movement, the nations of the world climb up the mountain of God. This mountaintop pilgrimage is humanity's spiritual journey. All the world's nations, cultures, races and religions must diligently search for God. That search is like an arduous mountain climb. It takes preparation, discipline, effort, and determination.

Of course, we have not yet come close to beginning, much less realizing, this global search for God, yet as Isaiah foretells it, one day all the nations of the world, even the people of the United States will conclude, "We have not found purpose, meaning or happiness in money, power, consumerism, presidents, the Pentagon, wars, revenge, or Wall Street. Let's go find God and hear what God has to say."

The second movement is the encounter with God. When the nations of the world, and each of us individually, meet God, according to Isaiah, it is God who speaks. Our role will be to listen.

This is the definition of prayer. Prayer is not so much talking at God, talking to God, complaining to God, yelling at God, or even praising God. It means falling in silence at the feet of God and listening attentively to God. It is not just letting God get a word in edgewise. It is allowing God to say whatever it is that God wants to say to us. It is listening for God, taking God's word seriously, and deciding that no matter what we may think, we are going to obey what God says.

According to Isaiah (as well as Jesus, the prophets and the saints), God has a definite message for us. God wants us to become people of nonviolence and live in peace.

Specifically, the text tells us that God instructs the nations in God's ways. God tells the nations that God is a God of nonviolence, that God does not approve our killings, that God does not bless war, that God does not justify warfare, that God does not support our retaliatory violence, that God considers our nuclear weapons as idols, that God condemns our nuclear arsenal, that God sees war as sinful, that God turns away from our desire to wage war, that God wants peace, and that God wants us to be people of nonviolence.

God commands the nations not to kill or wage war any more, but instead to be at peace with one another, with all the peoples of the earth and with the earth itself.

“From Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of God from Jerusalem,” we are told. “God shall judge between the nations, and impose terms on many peoples.” God will instruct us, give us God's word, judge us, and impose terms on us. God is in charge. God is the one taking action. God is the teacher, the master, the ruler, the one who tells us what to do.

The third movement is the journey down the mountain and the immediate dismantling of our arsenals, the creation of social justice, and the promise never to hurt or kill one another or to wage war again.

After listening to God, the nations of the world immediately undertake one specific political, social and economic task: they disarm. After meeting God, the nations pledge never to wage war. They beat their swords into plowshares, and thus convert their weapons of death into instruments of life. They beat their spears used for killing human beings into pruning hooks to help feed human beings. Instead of murdering one another, they help each other grow fruit and vegetables so that all people have enough to eat. They refuse to raise the sword against another. They no longer threaten one another with war, bullets, chemical weapons, bombs, napalm, nuclear weapons, or depleted uranium. Indeed, “they refuse to train for war again.” They stop studying, funding, building and preparing for warfare. They stop acting like there will be another war. In other words, they grow up and start acting like sons and daughters of the God of peace.

Once we meet God and listen to God, our whole way of thinking and living as nations changes. We immediately set to the task of disarmament and the practice of nonviolence. According to Isaiah, one day all nations will live within the terms of nonviolence outlined by God. They will seek nonviolent solutions to international crises. Most of all, they will address the root causes of war by eliminating greed, hunger and poverty. They will assure everyone on earth plenty of food, housing, healthcare, employment, dignity, and the fullness of life. They will embrace diversity of the nations with an

all-inclusive love because they have met God and recognize God in all the nations.

In short, peace and justice occurs whenever we encounter with God. The atrocious lack of peace and justice in our world today, we can conclude, results from our steadfast refusal to meet God, listen to God, and do what God says.

The great surprise, according to Isaiah's testimony, is that the God we expect to meet--a god of violence, vengeance and wrath--is not the God we encounter. To our shock, we discover on the mountaintop that God is not like us at all. On the holy mountain, we come face to face with the God of peace and nonviolence. We realize the goodness and loving-kindness of God and worship God as the God of peace. We feel deeply, infinitely loved by this compassionate God, and so we listen eagerly to God's instructions on how to live in the world. Once we experience the nonviolence of God, we realize that our primary task in life, the ultimate political, social, economic and spiritual journey in life, is to become people of nonviolence.

When the nations of the world meet the living God and realize that nonviolence is God's way, they will agree to be nonviolent with one another. It is the spiritual encounter with God that leads us to dismantle our weapons, make justice a reality for the poor, reconcile with our enemies, and never wage war again.

If we so-called people of faith here in the United States worshipped the God of Isaiah, the God of the mountain, the God of peace, we would not support war or allow war to be waged in our names. We would not pay taxes to support the immoral military budget. We would not enforce unjust sanctions on Iraq (which have killed one million Iraqis since 1990). We would not maintain tens of thousands of nuclear weapons; militarize outer space or destroy the environment. We would not allow anyone to starve to death or suffer in misery.

If we believed in the God of nonviolence, we would work to dismantle every nuclear weapon; make restitution to those who suffer in poverty; close down every U.S. military base and U.S. terrorist training school; abolish the death penalty; feed every starving children and refugee; clean up the earth and create nonviolent international peacemaking teams to solve conflict. Because we do not believe in the God of peace and nonviolence, because we have not listened to God's instructions, we do not do these works of peace. We do not practice nonviolence simply put because we do not believe in the God of nonviolence. We do not worship the God of peace. We do not have true faith.

Instead, we think God uses violence, vengeance, retribution, and warfare

just like ourselves. We think that because we are violent and warlike, God must be also. Our faith is placed not in the living God of peace, but in the false gods of weapons, the idols of death.

The great revelation of Isaiah and Jesus is that God is not like us in our preference for violence. God is not violent or warlike. God is peaceful, nonviolent, compassionate, gentle and loving. If we truly believe this, if we want to be near God, if we want to listen to God, if we want to be like God, if we want to be in God's company, if we want to be at peace with God, if we want to be at one with God, Isaiah declares, we must renounce war. This renunciation of war is, for Isaiah and Jesus, the key to the spiritual life and the solution to all the world's social, political, and economic problems.

Jesus commands us not only to beat our swords into plowshares but to love our enemies, and justifies this active nonviolence because he says, this is what God does! God lets God's sun shine on the good and the bad and God's rain to fall on the just and the unjust. God loves God's enemies, Jesus explains. Therefore, we are to do the same.

When we reach the top of the mountain and meet God, God disarms our hearts and orders the nations to disarm their arsenals. God does not condemn us. Instead, God instructs us to reverse our direction, take apart our weapons, institutionalize nonviolent social justice for everyone and create a new non-military, peaceful world.

Though this passage is dismissed as pious poetry, it stands as the apex of spirituality, religion, and the meaning of life itself. If we had the courage--the faith!--to take it seriously, the world would be transformed. So would each one of us.

Isaiah's image also explains the basic movements of prayer. Simply put, prayer is right relationship with God. Though God created us and loves us, we reject God, ignore God, resent God, fear God, pretend God doesn't exist, and even hate God. The spiritual life of daily meditation leads us back to friendship with God, even to intimacy with God. Prayer is the attention and ongoing development of our individual and corporate relationship with God. As we relate to God, we find peace. We center our lives and our world in this core relationship of love and peace.

Isaiah's image of a world disarmed comes about because the nations of the world have learned finally to live in right relationship with the God of peace. When the nations of the world journey up and down the mountain of God, when they live in relationship with God, they will act according to the ways of God. It is as simple as that.

In the end, the communities of faith, including Christians, Jews and Muslim, may be the only ones who can lead the nations up the mountain of God to meet the God of peace. Government and military leaders will continue to wage war and threaten the use of nuclear weapons. They worship the false gods of war and revenge, and lead us to do the same.

The churches in particular must not only refuse to bless or justify war, they must lead people to the God of nonviolence who will instruct us in the work of disarmament. Our task is to help one another up the mountain of peace so that we can do God's work of nonviolence.

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