

JOHN DEAR

WALKING
THE **WAY**

**FOLLOWING JESUS ON THE LENTEN
JOURNEY OF GOSPEL NONVIOLENCE
TO THE CROSS AND RESURRECTION**

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Sample

Blessed are the peacemakers;

they shall be called the sons and daughters of God...You have heard it said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," but I say to you, offer no violent resistance to one who does evil....Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons and daughters of the God who makes his sun rise on the good and the bad and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust.

MATTHEW 5:9, 38-39, 44-45

When the days for his being taken up were fulfilled, he resolutely determined to journey to Jerusalem, and he sent messengers ahead of him. **LUKE 9:51-52**

The Lord appointed seventy-two others whom he sent ahead of him in pairs to every town and place he intended to visit. He said to them, "Go on your way. Behold, I am sending you like lambs among wolves. Into whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this household.'" **LUKE 10:1-3, 5**

I have told you this so that you might have peace in me. In the world you will have trouble, but take courage, I have conquered the world. **JOHN 16:33**

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	I
CHAPTER ONE	
THE TURNING POINT	7
CHAPTER TWO	
THE MISSION	12
CHAPTER THREE	
THE GREAT REBUKE	19
CHAPTER FOUR	
WHENEVER YOU STAND TO PRAY, FORGIVE	24
CHAPTER FIVE	
THE THINGS THAT MAKE FOR PEACE	32
CHAPTER SIX	
ZECHARIAH'S NONVIOLENT KING	38
CHAPTER SEVEN	
CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE IN THE TEMPLE	45
CHAPTER EIGHT	
THE EUCHARIST'S NEW COVENANT OF NONVIOLENCE	55
CHAPTER NINE	
HOLY THURSDAY FRIENDSHIP AND BETRAYAL	62
CHAPTER TEN	
LORD, HERE ARE TWO SWORDS!	69

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SLEEPING THROUGH JESUS' PRAYER IN GETHSEMANE 75

CHAPTER TWELVE

THOSE WHO LIVE BY THE SWORD WILL DIE
BY THE SWORD 79

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

TRIAL, TORTURE AND STEADFAST NONVIOLENCE 86

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ATTENDANTS OF THE NONVIOLENT JESUS 91

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

PASSERS-BY AT CALVARY 97

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

GOOD FRIDAY'S LAST WORDS 101

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE CROSS AS THE WAY 111

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THERE ON THE SHORE STOOD JESUS,
AND IT WAS MORNING 115

CHAPTER NINETEEN

WHAT THINGS? 122

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE RESURRECTION GIFT OF PEACE,
THE NEW LIFE OF NONVIOLENCE 128

CONCLUSION 134

ABOUT THE AUTHOR 137

INTRODUCTION

AS I GET OLDER AND WATCH THE CRISES IN THE CHURCH and the world get worse, Jesus seems to get greater and greater. I know that sounds simplistic, to say the least, but it has become a source of hope and consolation for me. The more I read the gospel and try to keep my eyes on the peacemaking Jesus, the more I discover that he is far more loving, more truthful, more compassionate, and—especially crucial today—more nonviolent than I ever realized. There is hope, despite all.

The more I wake up to the radical life of Jesus, the more I decide to throw my lot with him all over again. I continually find myself choosing not to follow any politician, celebrity, or religious leader but to keep myself focused on Jesus and follow in his footsteps even though I'm not sure where they lead. Though I do not know the outcome or the end of the journey, I am sure that this conscious focus on the nonviolent Jesus gives my life ever-new meaning and inspires me to continue to work for justice and disarmament in the world, whether or not I'm able to make any difference.

This ever-new discovery of the profound political significance of Jesus' life and teachings comes from reading the four gospels through the lens of Gandhian nonviolence almost every day for over thirty-five years now. Gandhi taught that Jesus was the greatest practitioner of nonviolence, that his teachings offered humanity a new vision for the coming of a new, non-violent world, and that Jesus' nonviolence demanded practical, political action. Gandhi could not understand how any Christian could support war or violence of any kind, given the track record and teachings of the nonviolent Jesus. Christians

are required to put down the sword and seek first the kingdom of God, Gandhi believed. To him, that meant dedicated, committed, active nonviolence in the footsteps of Jesus.

From a Gandhian perspective, the gospel story portrays the nonviolent Jesus as a movement organizer. He's constantly healing people of violence, expelling the demons of violence and war, teaching the way of nonviolence, and announcing the coming of God's kingdom of nonviolence. Gandhi even concluded that "the kingdom of God *is* nonviolence."

Most chapters of the synoptic gospels show Jesus explicitly training his disciples to be nonviolent in every situation so that they will have tools at their disposal when he sends them forth into the world of violence and empire as agents of disarming love and God's reign. He forms them and sends them forth to walk his way of peace and love. In this light, we realize that Jesus is creating a permanent movement of revolutionary nonviolence that he wants to spread to the ends of the earth.

As a movement organizer, Jesus speaks out, teaches, builds a campaign, and takes action. He's a political and spiritual activist. And he's constantly on the move. Jesus is always walking. He doesn't stand still. He never remains in one place for long. He's on a long march from the desert outback of Galilee to the holy city of Jerusalem, where he will confront the empire and its injustice head on, even if that means arrest and execution. He's looking for followers to join his global campaign of active nonviolence. Whoever shows the slightest interest in his mission is immediately invited to join the campaign. "Follow me," he tells anyone who expresses curiosity. He wants his community to grow and his movement to spread far and wide. He wants his movement of nonviolence to keep moving, which means he wants us walking his way of peace.

Jesus is still seeking followers today. He's still building a

global campaign of active nonviolence. He's still trying to disarm everyone, heal everyone, confront empire and war, and transform the world to welcome God's kingdom of nonviolence. Given the widespread violence around us and throughout the world, Jesus' movement of creative nonviolence is needed now more than ever. It remains the most important requirement of Christian discipleship today, and perhaps the most neglected.

Every day is a good day to renew our gospel nonviolence and to take another step forward in discipleship to the nonviolent Jesus. But the holy season of Lent offers a particularly good time to return to the nonviolence of Jesus and start again with him down that path. With church members around the world, we can use the forty days of Lent to ponder the nonviolence of Jesus and experiment with it in our own lives as we head toward Holy Week, Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday.

Lent is a time to turn from violence to nonviolence and to become practitioners of gospel nonviolence. We can use these holy days to let Jesus teach us the wisdom of nonviolence, to renounce our own violence and be healed of the culture of war. We can let him disarm our hearts and form us into people of nonviolence. As we renew our nonviolence, we can start again on the journey of discipleship on the way of the cross and the resurrection to do our part for justice, disarmament, environmental stewardship, and peace.

Jesus does not want us just to talk the talk, but to walk his walk. His walk takes us on a very particular way, the narrow path of nonviolence. Indeed, as the Gospel of John announces, Jesus embodies this narrow path of nonviolence. He is the Way we must walk. Lent is a good time to start walking again in the footsteps of the nonviolent Jesus.

During the first three centuries, the early church insisted on

the nonviolence of Jesus. It became a requirement for baptism, a hallmark of the faith. If you were baptized as a follower of Jesus, you took up the path of nonviolence, which meant you faced the real possibility of martyrdom at the hands of Roman soldiers. They named their faith “the Way.” In a world of empire and permanent war, Jesus was the Way. His life was a path, and we his followers walked that path knowing that it meant walking against the entire culture of violence, the empire of permanent warfare, toward a whole new realm of peace, love, compassion, and justice, where there is no more violence, war, killing, or death.

We walk that way of nonviolence because our first priority is to follow the nonviolent Jesus. We want to follow the nonviolent Jesus and do what he says, even if we don’t fully understand it. We will try to follow him along the way of the cross, to resist systemic injustice and war, to enter the new life of resurrection and the kingdom of God, and to inspire many others to join us on the journey.

Our world of war, poverty, corporate greed, racism, sexism, nuclear weapons, and catastrophic climate change demonstrates the total failure of violence. Its consistent failure shows us how right Jesus was and why we should finally take him at his word and accept his methodology of nonviolence.

We need to start again and take the gospel personally. We can read the stories and teachings of the nonviolent Jesus as if they were directed at us. When we hear them that way, we will find ourselves disarmed, healed, and transformed. As we enter the story of the gospels, we let the nonviolent Jesus form us, teach us, train us, that we too might walk his path of active nonviolence. He wants us to heal every one we know of violence, to expel the demons of war and empire, and to announce the coming of God’s reign of nonviolence through our political work to end war, poverty, and environmental destruction. He

wants us to practice what he preaches, to learn his lessons, and to take up where he left off.

Jesus wants to send us out as missionaries of peace and non-violence into the world of war and violence. For that, we need training and preparation. We need a daily practice of quiet meditation, the support of community and friends, and a long-haul view of salvation history. Renewed by the nonviolence of Jesus, we can take a step forward, walk the way of nonviolence, and offer sisters and brothers everywhere his gift of peace.

The meditations in this book focus on the journey of the nonviolent Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem, where he engages the culture of violence and empire and undergoes arrest and execution. We watch as he decides to face Jerusalem, sends emissaries ahead of him on the mission of peace, trains his followers to practice nonviolence with him as he embarks on his campaign, and enters Jerusalem on a donkey as a symbol of a nonviolent king. Even through his last supper, betrayal, abandonment, arrest, torture, and execution, we notice his meticulous nonviolence.

Then, when he rises from the dead, he stuns us by his usual nonviolence. Without a trace of anger, vengeance, resentment, or bitterness, he gives us his gift of peace and sends us back to Galilee to start our own journey to our own Jerusalems. He sends us forth to walk the way of nonviolence in his footsteps. As we walk with him, we will be invited to take new steps in our own lives to put his way of nonviolence into practice for ourselves.

This little book is intended for prayerful personal reflection and small group discussion. It can be used at any time of year, but is recommended for use during the holy season of Lent as a time to restart the journey, to get us walking the way of nonviolence once again. Lent is a time of conversion, what the gospels call *metanoia*, which means turning from the di-

rection we are going toward the opposite direction. Instead of walking the path of violence, war, greed, nationalism, and empire, we turn around and walk in the opposite direction, on the narrow way of peace, love, compassion, prayer, humility, grace, and nonviolence. We follow the nonviolent Jesus as the highest priority in our lives, and we become, in the process, more and more like him—practitioners of peace, love, and nonviolence. That is what he wants of us.

At the end of each chapter, I have added a few questions for personal reflection. I recommend that you keep a lenten journal and write down your reflections on these questions, that you might understand better your own gospel journey on the road to peace and your next step.

As we ponder his journey of nonviolence in these meditations, I invite us to take time each day in daily meditation, mindful peace, gospel reading, and some experimentation with gospel nonviolence. I invite us to turn from the world's way of violence, to renounce our own violence, to cultivate inner nonviolence, and to walk anew the path of nonviolence that Jesus has set out before us.

As we walk with Jesus on this way of nonviolence, we will be more and more disarmed and transformed to become full-time practitioners of gospel nonviolence, mature disciples, and apostles. Like Gandhi, Dr. King, Rosa Parks, Oscar Romero, and Dorothy Day, we will become gospel peacemakers to a world of violence and war and fulfill our vocations to be the sons and daughters of the God of peace.

May these meditations encourage you to walk the way of the nonviolent Jesus and herald anew the coming of God's reign of nonviolence.

John Dear

chapter

ONE

THE TURNING POINT

JESUS APPEARS ON THE SCENE IN NOWHERESVILLE, Palestine, on the outskirts of the brutal Roman Empire, and announces that “the kingdom of God is at hand.” His proclamation is a bombshell or, better, a spiritual explosion of peace, hope, love, and nonviolence. Out of nowhere comes the answer to every question—nonviolent love is the way forward—but it comes with a price: it has to be practiced. Sign up now and get an all-expense-paid pass into an eternity of peace. The kingdom of God is at hand. Come on in, the water’s fine!

Almost immediately, our nonviolent messenger calls the poor and disenfranchised around him to follow him as his disciples. In light of his loving charisma, they drop everything and follow him. Overnight, he creates a community of prayer, hope, friendship, political awareness, and nonviolent action. He builds a community of peace around him and then hits the road.

In other words, he sets off walking.

Jesus and his peace community go everywhere. And everywhere they walk, they announce the good news of the coming of God’s reign of nonviolence. Jesus heals people of their

violence, expels the demons of empire, and invites everyone to welcome God's reign of nonviolence and peace. Within a fortnight, he becomes wildly famous. His presence is transforming, healing, electrifying. Even creation responds to his peacemaking words. The disciples are both awed and astounded. And completely confused. And yet they keep on walking with him on his way of peace.

This Jesus looks a lot like Gandhi, training his followers to practice *satyagraha* and nonviolence, or like Dr. King, training civil rights activists to enter Birmingham, Alabama, and confront Bull Connor's segregated city of racial injustice with active nonviolence. This Jesus becomes Gandhi and Dr. King, if you will permit the convoluted analogy.

But all of a sudden, the story abruptly changes. Jesus announces he's going to Jerusalem. He turns his direction, sets his face toward the holy city, and sets off.

At some point, all of us who claim to be followers of this person need to change direction and set off with him toward the center of government, empire, and religion, with the announcement of God's nonviolent kingdom at hand. Jesus is going to confront the world of systemic injustice head on, and he's taking us with him.

Luke marks the moment in chapter 9, verses 51–52: “When the days for his being taken up were fulfilled, he resolutely determined to journey to Jerusalem, and he sent messengers ahead of him.”

With that sentence, the story of Jesus and the implications for every disciple down through the ages take a turn for the worse—or for the better. We no longer walk aimlessly about Galilee, doing good and healing the broken. Now we have a mission. We are marching on a campaign of nonviolence toward the center of systemic evil—the Roman Empire's coop-

eration with the religious authorities to oppress the people of Palestine—in the holy city of Jerusalem. From now on, we are missioned to confront systemic, institutionalized, global evil.

Jesus walks deliberately to Jerusalem, which means his followers have to do the same, and they know that can only mean trouble. From that moment on, they are terrified.

Why does Jesus go to Jerusalem? The City of David is the center of Judaism, and also the center of commerce. It's where the religious leaders collaborate with the empire and require a heavy payment from the poor if they want to worship God in the Temple. It's the place where the prophets of old were killed by the ruling establishment. Jesus is determined to fulfill the Scriptures and his prophetic vocation, which means that he has to go there, take a stand, and face the music.

In *God and Empire*, Scripture scholar Dominic Crossan puts it this way:

Jesus went to Jerusalem because that was where his deliberate double demonstration against both imperial injustice and religious collaboration had to be made. It is crucially important, especially in the light of ancient and enduring Christian anti-Judaism, to be quite clear that this double demonstration was not against Judaism as such, not against Jerusalem as such, not against the Temple as such, and not against the high priesthood as such. IT WAS A PROTEST FROM THE LEGAL AND PROPHETIC HEART OF JUDAISM AGAINST JEWISH RELIGIOUS COOPERATION WITH ROMAN IMPERIAL CONTROL. It was, at least for Christian followers of Jesus, then or now, a permanently valid protest demonstration against any capital city's collusion

between conservative religion and imperial violence at any time and in any place. (*GOD AND EMPIRE*, JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN, HARPERSAN FRANCISCO, 2007, PP. 131-132.)

Think of Gandhi on the salt march, going on a two-month walk to the sea, picking up the illegal salt, inspiring 300 million people, and bringing down British rule over India. Or of Dr. King marching from Selma to Montgomery, bringing down segregation. Luke 9 says Jesus embarked on a deliberate campaign of nonviolence to Jerusalem, that it was well organized and perfectly nonviolent, and that it led to a dramatic public act, resulting in his arrest, torture, and execution by the empire.

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem,” he laments along the way, “you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how many times I yearned to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were unwilling!” Jesus wants to shepherd the people of Jerusalem, but they refuse. He will have to try anyway, regardless of the consequences.

So it's onward to Jerusalem.

What does Jesus' journey to Jerusalem mean for us today? If we are going to walk the way with Jesus, we must always be Jerusalem bound. Every follower of Jesus is on a long walk to the center of power, not to attain power, but to stand up and speak truth to power. We walk to our own modern-day Jerusalems, where we too confront systemic injustice, war, and empire, using the power of gospel nonviolence, come what may.

What?! Who wants to do that? That doesn't sound like fun or the feel-good spirituality we're all secretly looking for.

Surely a large part of us winces at this journey. We do not want to go to our own Jerusalems or confront systemic injus-

tice or risk our lives as Jesus did. But life is short, we do want to follow Jesus, we know how severe the crises of violence and injustice are today, and we can rise to the occasion.

Yes, we can walk to Jerusalem with Jesus. We need not be afraid, anxious, or confused. We can take a stand for justice and peace, even in the places of power. We can join the grass-roots campaigns of nonviolence that resist systemic injustice and empire and announce God's reign of nonviolence as a new world without war, poverty, nuclear weapons, and environmental destruction.

Most of all, we can trust that we will be greatly blessed, because we walk in the footsteps of the nonviolent Jesus. And so, we walk on!

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION AND JOURNALING

- *What does the nonviolence of Jesus mean for you, the church, and the world, and how can you renounce violence more and more and begin to practice Jesus' nonviolence more and more?*
.....
- *How do you walk in the footsteps of the nonviolent Jesus in your day-to-day life and announce that God's reign of peace and nonviolence is at hand?*
.....
- *What does Jesus' turning toward Jerusalem on a public campaign of nonviolence mean for your life and your discipleship? What modern-day Jerusalem do you go to?*