Contents

INTRODUCTION

I. Seek Peace and Pursue it:
The Calling of the Peacemaker
1. Seek Peace and Pursue It: Psalm 34 10
2. Teach Us to Count Our Days Aright: Psalm 90 17
3. Teach Me Your Way, God of Peace: Psalm 86, 25 20

II. The God of Peace Ends All Wars:
The Faith of the Peacemaker
5. “A King Is Not Saved by a Mighty Army; Neither Are We”:
   Psalm 33 28
6. “God Stops Wars to the Ends of the Earth”: Psalm 46 34
7. Some Rely on Weapons; We Rely on the God of Peace:
   Psalm 20 40
8. “Their Idols Are Silver and Gold”: Psalm 115 42
9. The God of Peace Takes No Delight in the Strength of the War Horse: Psalm 147 49
III. The Beauty of Peace: The Celebration of the Peacemaker

10.  Awesome! Psalm 8  53
11.  Brother Sun, Sister Moon: Psalm 104  56
12.  The Earth Is God’s: Psalm 24  63
13.  The Heavens Declare the Glory of God: Psalm 19  66
14.  The Hope of All the Ends of the Earth: Psalm 65  68

IV. Taking Refuge in the God of Peace: The Trust of the Peacemaker

15.  Our One True Refuge: Psalm 2  73
17.  Put No Trust in Princes or Presidents;
    Only the God of Peace: Psalm 146  83
18.  You Are My Strong Refuge; I Will Speak
    of Your Mighty Works: Psalm 71  86

V. Give Us Peace, God of Peace: The Cry of the Peacemaker

19.  My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me? Psalm 22  90
20.  Lead My Soul from Prison: Psalms 142, 102, 88  95
21.  I Clothed Myself in Sackcloth, It Is on Your Account
    I Bear Insult: Psalms 69, 30  103
VI. God Will Protect You on Your Journey of Peace: The Hope of the Peacemaker

22. God Will Rescue You, God Will Deliver You, God Will Answer You: Psalm 91 111
23. My Help Comes from the God of Peace: Psalm 121 115
24. The God of Peace Is with Me to the End: Psalm 138 117
25. Lead Me, Shepherd of Peace, into Green Pastures of Peace: Psalm 23 121
26. The God of Peace Has Been Very Good to Me: Psalm 116 124

VII. Praise Be Peace: The Song of the Peacemaker

27. Let All the Earth Praise the God of Peace: Psalm 148 130
29. Sing a New Song to the God of Peace: Psalms 96, 98, 40 137

VIII. Love and Truth Will Embrace; Justice and Peace Will Kiss: The Vision of the Peacemaker

30. Bless the God of Peace, My Soul: Psalm 103 145
32. The God of Peace Will Proclaim Peace to God’s People: Psalm 85 155

CONCLUSION 161

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION AND SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION 164

ABOUT THE AUTHOR 167
GOD’S NAME IS PEACE.

The one who calls upon God’s name to justify terrorism, violence, and war does not follow God’s path. War in the name of religion becomes a war against religion itself. With firm resolve, therefore, let us reiterate that violence and terrorism are opposed to an authentic religious spirit.

POPE FRANCIS, ASSISI, SEPT. 20, 2016

The more deeply we grow into the psalms and the more often we pray them as our own, the more simple and rich will our prayer become.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

The most valuable thing the psalms do for me is to express the same delight in God which made David dance.

C.S. LEWIS

What’s so powerful about the psalms are, as well as they’re being gospel and songs of praise, they are also the blues.

BO NO
To recognize that the psalms call us to pray and sing at the intersections of the times—of our time and God’s time, of the then, and the now, and the not yet—is to understand how those emotions are to be held within the rhythm of a life lived in God’s presence.

N.T. WRIGHT

Strange how repetition, reading the psalms each day, instead of becoming stale and repetitious, becomes even fresher: verses stand out, a light glows on what was obscure and hidden. There is an increase in understanding.

DOROTHY DAY

I grew to love the psalms. Day after day, year after year, they purified, blessed, set one moving to a rhythm that was by no means worldly or stereotyped or willful but lively and tranquil and passionately edgy. To pray the psalms with even half a heart was to be comforted and discomfited, set in motion, set in stillness, set free, set on edge, led outside, led within... The psalms spoke up for soul, for survival; they pled for all, they bonded us when the world would break us like dry bones.

DANIEL BERRIGAN
INTRODUCTION

Driving north along California’s Highway One from my little hermitage beside the Pacific Ocean near the village of Harmony to Big Sur and its mountaintop New Camaldoli monastery, I feel a lightness of spirit amidst the breathtaking scenery and the fresh ocean air. The vastness of the blue ocean, the shocking mountain cliffs, the mysterious rocky coast and sandy beaches, and the array of creatures—the sea gulls, otters, curlews, dolphins, elephant seals, whales, Stellar Jays, egrets, blue heron, and even the ten-foot-long, prehistoric-looking condors—they toss away all worries and open a new liminal space. Suddenly you find yourself in the best of God’s creation. Then almost without knowing it, you start longing for and looking for the Creator of such peace.

Big Sur has long been a refuge for seekers and mystics. Thomas Merton traveled up this road shortly before flying off to Asia and his death. Joan Baez lived along this coast for years, and still lives just north. Writers, poets, artists, and spiritually minded people dwell hidden away along the mountain, while some four million people drive this magical coastal road each year.

I’ve been coming here for over thirty years to visit the Catholic mon-
astery on the top of the mountain. It’s a difficult journey, one I take with a mixture of excitement and trepidation as I approach the steep cliff road. After Rocky Ridge and Limekiln, you come to the new road built after part of the mountain collapsed into the ocean in 2017. Then just before Lucia, you turn right onto a one-lane dirt road and start the hair-raising, life-threatening, cliff-hanging two mile zig-zag up the mountainside, tacking back and forth, until you come to the church, bookstore, guest rooms, and hermitages.

The drive up the mountain terrifies me because it’s only one lane with no guard rails. The “road”—if you can call it that—continues to deteriorate, slowly slipping down the mountain, despite the repairs, made every few months. But once on top, the vista catches your breath. You look out over the vast ocean, the miles of trees and tall grasses, down the mountain cliffs, and take a bird’s eye view of God’s creation.

As you enter the old cinderblock chapel, Rublev’s gentle icon of the Trinity seated around a table greets you. The white-robed monks are just gathering for one of their daily prayer vigils. They stand, face one another, and begin. “O God, come to my assistance,” one chants. “O Lord, make haste to help me,” they all respond.

At every prayer time, whether lauds or vigils, Mass or vespers, they turn to the psalms. In this way, they keep alive a two-thousand-year-old Christian tradition of prayer and song centered on these holy, ancient Jewish texts.

Thomas Merton held a romantic dream of the Camaldolese life. In the 1950s, he begged to leave his Trappist monastery of Gethsemani and join the Camaldolese, where each monk lives in silence and solitude, with his own private hermitage and garden, each close to the church where together they gather for daily prayer and Mass. Merton never left Gethsemani, but the Camaldolese way pushed him deeper into solitude.
and, eventually, to his own hermitage in the woods where he cultivated silence, peace, and grace.

St. Romuald founded the great monastery of Camaldoli in Tuscany under the Benedictine rule over a thousand years ago. Only one text survives, his “Little Rule”:

Sit in your cell as in paradise ... Watch your thoughts like a good fisherman watching for fish. The path you must follow is in the psalms—never leave it. If you have just come to the monastery, and in spite of your good will you cannot accomplish what you want, then take every opportunity you can to sing the psalms in your heart and to understand them with your mind. And if your mind wanders as you read, do not give up. Hurry back and apply your mind to the words once more. Realize above all that you are in God’s presence, and stand there. Empty yourself completely and sit waiting, content with the grace of God, like the chick who tastes nothing and eats nothing but what his mother brings him.

“Realize above all that you are in God’s presence,” Romuald writes, “and stand there.” Be “content with the grace of God.” Use the psalms as your daily text. For a thousand years, monks from St. Romuald to Thomas Merton have sat in that grace, emptied themselves into peace, chanted the psalms, and waited upon God. They not only walk the path to peace; they live the life of peace.

They say Jesus prayed the psalms regularly. He may have even known them by heart. If so, that’s where he learned fearless devotion, dedicated truth, and total dependence on God. If you learn the psalms by heart, you set your heart and mind on God and God alone. For you, there is only God. For the rest of your life, there is only God. With
God, comes love, mercy, generosity, kindness, faithfulness, security, and peace toward yourself, your neighbor, all humanity, and all creation. In the psalms you hear the divine call to serve and liberate the poor and oppressed and establish universal peace with justice for every human being and all creation.

Jesus was meticulously nonviolent, so he must have brought to the psalms his own wisdom of nonviolence. The gospels begin with the story of Jesus’ encounter with God after he was baptized at the Jordan River, where he heard in a moment of prayer a gentle loving God called him “My beloved.” In that moment, Jesus knew God as loving, compassionate, and nonviolent. After that, he set forth on the gospel journey to invite everyone to welcome God’s reign of peace and nonviolence here on earth. He stood up publicly and denounced the ways of empire and injustice and was crucified by the powers-that-be for his divine nonviolence and civil disobedience; but in his resurrection spirit, his campaign of nonviolence lives on.

The best way, then, to read the psalms is through the eyes of the nonviolent, compassionate Jesus, from a Gandhian/Kingian perspective of nonviolence, through the lens of the key gospel teachings—the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount. If we read the Psalms from Jesus’ vision of nonviolence, we will find new strength to turn away from hate and anger toward greater trust and devotion to God and newfound wisdom, gratitude, and wonder.

Reading the psalms as Jesus read them can help us become more faithful, more devout, more fearless, more secure, more loving, more trusting, and more nonviolent. We learn not to place our trust in weapons or violence, not to act arrogantly or unjustly, not to doubt or test God. Instead, like Jesus, we will learn anew to place our security more and more in our gentle, loving God and discover the God of peace as our rock, our strength, our hope, our fortress, our security, and our protection. As we follow the nonviolent Jesus who prayed through the
psalms, we learn to stand in faith, hope, and love, unarmed, vulnerable, nonviolent, our eyes focused on God, our hearts transformed like the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and our souls open to creation and the glories of heaven.

If we read the psalms from the perspective of gospel nonviolence, as Jesus advocates in the Sermon on the Mount, then these prayers take on new life. They make more sense. They lead us out of our inner violence into the spirit of peace, out of the culture of violence into a new culture of nonviolence, out of the world of death into the fulness of life in God.

They become just what we need.

~~

The psalms are one hundred and fifty ancient prayers, about half of them attributed to David, evoking every emotion, from devotion and praise to anger and hatred, from vengeance and violence, despair and dread, to peace and glory. Many are liturgical prayers intended for the leader of a Jewish faith community. Some are hymns of praise. Others offer thanksgiving. Many are individual or communal lamentations. Fundamentally, they are an ancient cry to God, and as such, they are as relevant today as ever.

With sisters and brothers of old, we, too, cry out to God for help and protection, for security and comfort, for justice and peace. We, too, wrestle with both our faith and our emotions in our daily struggles, fears, crises, and breakdowns, as we endure the world's permanent wars, racism and sexism, corporate greed, killings, systemic injustice, and environmental destruction. Like the nonviolent Jesus, we strive to be compassionate and nonviolent, to do our part to bring justice and peace, and to make the world decent and sane.

For two thousand years, Christians have read the psalms as a basic form of prayer. Priests, nuns, and members of religious orders in partic-
ular still read them every single day. They unite the prayer of the global church in a cry for help, a hymn of praise, and a pledge of trust. But for some seventeen hundred years, we Christians have neglected the non-violence of Jesus, and so we have often been misled by the violence in the psalms and other texts to believe in a false god of violence.

Jesus brought his extraordinary vision of universal love, boundless compassion, and total nonviolence to every person, every moment, every situation in life—and so, I presume, even to the Scriptures. He announced that he was the fullness of the law and the prophets, that his understanding of God reached beyond our limited understanding to behold a nonviolent God, a God who does not hate, does not kill, does not want us to suffer injustice. The God of the nonviolent Jesus is a God of unconditional, nonviolent, all-encompassing, all-embracing, all-inclusive universal love and peace. As he prayed through the psalms, Jesus must have found encouragement, strength, and hope to go forward and be faithful to who he was—the beloved of God, sent to proclaim God’s reign of peace.

His was a daily life-and-death struggle to resist the culture of violence and propose an entirely new world of nonviolence, which he called “the reign of God at hand.” The psalms were his prayer book, so they must have helped him fulfill his mission, trust in God no matter what, endure risk and misunderstanding with patience and faith, and lay down his life for God and humanity in a spirit of loving nonviolence. If that is the Christian calling—to follow Jesus on his public campaign of nonviolence—then the psalms can help us too as we try to carry our own public campaigns of creative nonviolence for justice and creation.

Alas, some verses in the psalms clearly espouse violence and uphold a violent god as if violence were a sacred, religious duty. “Blessed are those who seize your children and smash them against a rock,” we read

I suggest the time has come to drop these verses from our prayer, to reject any biblical call to violence, and to adhere only to those texts that help us become people of loving nonviolence, like Jesus. Of course, I’m not the only one who thinks this.

Shortly before he died, legendary Benedictine monk and interfaith leader Bede Griffiths wrote a book about the psalms where he announced that after a lifetime of praying the psalms every single day, he now realized that some verses should no longer be recited by Christians. We Christians are summoned to be as nonviolent as Christ, he argued, and so we need to avoid anything and everything that promotes violence, including scriptural texts calling for violence and war. Bede Griffiths was one of the first major religious figures in modern history to make this bold suggestion, and I think we should take his advice to heart:

It has become more and more difficult to accept many of the Psalms as Christian prayers. Taken in their literal sense many of the Psalms express feelings of anger, hatred and revenge against one’s enemies which are entirely opposed to the teaching of the gospel on love of one’s enemies. ... It has become urgent, therefore, to revise the Psalter, so that all branding of others as "enemies," “wicked” and “sinners” deserving no mercy or pity, should be removed. When one considers the incalculable harm which has resulted from this habit of mind in the Church, as seen in the Inquisition, the Crusades, the wars of religion and the persecution of “heretics,” it is clear that a revision of this kind is urgently needed. (Bede Griffiths, Psalms for Christian Prayer, Harper Collins, 1995, vii-x)
Bede Griffiths makes the case that Christians who love the psalms need to remember the nonviolence of Jesus, and adhere to the boundaries of nonviolence, even in the way we pray and understand God.

At the monastery in Big Sur, when the monks chant the psalms, one of them sings the first line, and then the others join in. “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord,” they sing. My friend the prior tells me that when they start singing the psalms, he enters a dream. It’s as if, for him, the psalms are a door into the Cloud of Unknowing, into the Mystery of the Divine, into the Holy Spirit. He lets the psalms wash over him, through him, and under him so that he finds himself “content in grace,” in the peace of God, waiting, hoping, looking, loving, and being. For the monks, these prayers are the doorway to the fullness of life and grace.

In this book, I offer reflections on various key psalms from the perspective of gospel nonviolence so that you too might find new strength from these ancient prayers to follow the nonviolent Jesus more and more on the path of peace and to be content in grace. May these pages encourage you on your journey and lead you to even greater blessings of peace.

J.D.

Big Sur, California