

The Book of the Prophet Daniel

Review of

At Play in the Lions' Den: A Biography and Memoir of Daniel Berrigan

By Jim Forest

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Reviewed by **Rose Marie Berger**

The tremendous roar of the Atlantic trembles the foundation of “Berrigan’s cottage” on Block Island, Rhode Island. The Works Progress Administration house was reclaimed by Episcopal lawyer and theologian William Stringfellow as a place for prisoner #23742-145 following release from Danbury federal prison in 1972, after 18 months under lock and key. At last, on Block Island, Daniel Berrigan – priest, poet, prophet, prisoner – had a cell of one’s own, in all manner similar to that of John the Revelator’s anchorage on Patmos, where the unrelenting mercy of God was a pounding, pounding, pounding against finisterre, where land ends. Jim Forest’s fine biography and memoir of his friend, mentor and co-conspirator Daniel Berrigan provides insight and context for those familiar with Berrigan’s story and for those coming to it fresh.

Berrigan once wrote that the biblical book of the prophet Isaiah was written in community and was meant to be absorbed in community (see 285). Forest writes of Berrigan in similar tradition. He collected correspondence from those who knew Berrigan, kneaded the personal stories with political and ecclesial history, leavened all with Berrigan’s own poetry and essays, and dusted the loaf with black-and-white photographs rich in detail. *In the Lions’ Den* was written in community and is meant to be read and absorbed or “eaten” in community, like Ezekiel’s bittersweet scroll.

Forest opens with the dramatic scenes of the 1968 liturgical direct action carried out by nine Catholics outside a draft board office in suburban Baltimore to protest the U.S. war in Vietnam. “From this office, letters (Phil Berrigan called then ‘death certificates’) were regularly sent to local young men ordering them to report for physical inspection and, should they be found able-bodied, involuntary induction into the armed forces,” writes Forest (2). These nine entered the draft office, filled wastebaskets with 378 1-A files, carried them to the parking lot, and doused them with homemade napalm. “A match was lit, and a roar of flame engulfed the paper. Then each of the remaining eight struck a match and added it to the blaze, a token to signify that none of them was merely an onlooker” (3). This was the burnt sacrifice the Lord required, not the stench of burning children in Vietnam nor the abominable incense of soldiers moldering in body bags.

The Catonsville 9 action caught the imagination of Catholics and others around the world, launching dozens more protests at draft boards and a Plowshares movement against nuclear weapons that continues today. (See Dan Zak’s *Almighty: Courage, Resistance, and Existential Peril in the*

Rose Marie Berger, a Catholic poet and peace activist, is a senior associate editor at *Sojourners* magazine (www.sojo.net) in Washington, DC. She is the author of *Who Killed Donte Manning? The Story of an American Neighborhood* (Apprentice House Press, 2009). She can be contacted at www.rosemarieberger.com.

Nuclear Age for the story of the Transform Now Plowshares action in 2012 when three Catholics, including 82-year-old Megan Rice, a sister of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, entered the Y-12 nuclear facility holding thousands of pounds of weapons-grade uranium in Oak Ridge, TN, and poured their own blood in a eucharistic gesture over the “highly secure” nuclear chernel house.)

But, as Forest makes clear, men like Daniel Berrigan don’t magically appear – they are made – in the Berrigans’ case, made in an Irish and German immigrant family on the plains of northern Minnesota in the 1920s. Mother Frida was beloved by her six sons. She was fierce, thrifty, deeply spiritual, generous and merciful. Her husband Tom was “short-fused, sharp-tongued, sometimes abusive, occasionally violent, hypercritical, and often-absent” (9), but was also serious about his Catholic faith, an unpublished poet, a union member, founder of the local chapter of the Catholic Interracial Council, and a subscriber to *The Catholic Worker*, “an eight-page monthly tabloid edited by Dorothy Day that focused on social issues and the creation of a society ‘in which it would be easier for people to be good’” (9-10).

Forest traces the peculiar sojourn of this American Jesuit in the mid-20th century from Berrigan’s entry into the order in 1939 at age 18, to his studies in France (during the installation of the first nuclear defenses in Western Europe), final vows in 1956, teaching New Testament in New York (where his student David Miller would later claim front-page headlines for being one of the first to burn his draft card as a protest against the Vietnam War), through his sabbatical in Europe in 1963-1964 (where his friendship with Forest flourished), his “exile” by the order to Latin America, and then to October 1967 when Berrigan became the first Catholic priest to be arrested for a protest against war. In all, we see Berrigan the man – living with ulcers, back pain, making some serious mis-steps, while writing poetry and setting sumptuous tables for friends and enemies alike wherever he found himself. (Too many “good people are overworked and underjoyed,” Berrigan remarked [310], and so beauty, wine and good food were an essential ministry.)

Berrigan’s friendship with Thomas Merton was pivotal, at least for Berrigan. Their exchange of letters began in earnest in autumn 1961 and continued through to the time of Merton’s death. Merton’s essay “The Root of War Is Fear” prompted lively exploration between these inquisitive Catholic thinkers, leading to an invitation from Merton for Berrigan to bring some “peace people” to Gethsemani. In November 1964, these peace people arrived at the abbey to take up the questions of the spiritual roots of protest: Daniel Berrigan, Philip Berrigan, John Howard Yoder, Jim Forest, Tom Cornell, A. J. Muste, John Oliver Nelson, W. H. Ferry and others (see *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest*, Gordon Oyer’s well-researched, in-depth exploration of this historic gathering). Thick with crucial theological questions on how to live as human beings in the modern world, Dan Berrigan commented that “the church’s fearfulness is our confession of unconvertedness” (71).

Forest’s book is like Berrigan’s supper table – a sumptuous meal where flavors are balanced and the wine chosen for the course. One can read and be nourished by a bread that satisfies. Berrigan’s life, however, was not about hagiography, but about reading the Gospels and acting on them. It was about the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, including beating swords into plowshares. It was about calling the Catholic Church to “study war no more,” to “get out of the tomb,” as Forest writes, “and make some gestures, however modest, that favor life” (308).

Two weeks before Dan Berrigan died just shy of his ninety-fifth birthday, I was in Rome attending the Vatican’s first global convocation on Catholics, nonviolence and just peace. At the opening, Cardinal Turkson read a message from Pope Francis reminding us that “our thoughts

on revitalizing the tools of nonviolence, and of active nonviolence in particular,” are a needed and positive contribution. “In our complex and violent world,” wrote Pope Francis, “it is truly a formidable undertaking to work for peace by living the practice of nonviolence!”

Following the conference, Fr. John Dear, Berrigan’s friend and collaborator, flew from Rome to New York to take news back to Dan’s bedside. “[Dan] was amazed to hear about our conversations on nonviolence at the Vatican,” wrote Dear. “So glad I was able to tell him. We had a good visit . . . but please keep Daniel Berrigan in your prayers, along with this Vatican initiative on nonviolence.”

Dan Berrigan, as Forest writes, “was one of those who has helped speed the day when Christians, whether Catholic or otherwise, could no longer attach the adjectives ‘just’ or ‘holy’ to the word ‘war’” (307). The Catholic Nonviolence Initiative (nonviolencejustpeace.net), which grew from the Rome convocation, is engaged in a global conversation to re-center the heart of the Catholic Church on the nonviolent peacemaking of Jesus. This gesture in favor of life has received a portion of the prophetic Berrigan spirit. At Dan’s funeral Mass, his sister-in-law Elizabeth McAlister implored those who revered Dan not simply to hold him up as a hero or icon, but to follow his example. “How much better would it be if we asked for a double portion of Dan’s spirit, and better yet, if we acted on it?” (305).

Christendom is at a close. The empire is once again breaking the earth. If the church has anything to offer the world, then it is to name and practice the difference between habits that lead to life and addictions that lead to death. All who follow Jesus are all called to holy actions in unholy places – even unto land’s end, our own finisterre. Let Berrigan’s life convert you, driving out fear. Where will your portion of his spirit lead?