

February 17, 2019
Worship theme: Power

Call to Worship:

Our worship theme this month is Power, and my sermon today is about one of the most powerful people humanity has ever known: Genghis Khan. Genghis Khan was the great warrior of Mongolia who lived in 1200 AD and built the largest empire humanity has ever known, stretching across an entire continent.

Putting a sermon topic up for auction is always a slightly nerve-wracking prospect. Cas Groblewski won the auction and I am very grateful to Cas for choosing such an interesting topic. In fact I had easily enough information for 2 or 3 sermons, so if you want to read the long, extended director's cut of this sermon, I'll put it up on the Follen website along with my much abbreviated version that I'll share with you this morning.

I want to warn you, especially young folks, that the story of Genghis Khan is a story about war. Ugly, brutal, terrorizing war. So I will be describing some challenging and disturbing things that happened 800 years ago.

And, these stories of empire-building have spiritual lessons for us today.

I call us to worship with the words of Simone Weil, writing in 1940 as she viewed what seemed like the probable German conquest of Europe: "If Germany, thanks to Hitler and his successors, were to enslave the European nations and destroy most of the treasures of their past, future historians would certainly pronounce that she had civilized Europe."

May we be careful students of history; may we resist empire and seek a greater justice; may we worship together.

Reading: Kubla Khan by Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Coleridge wrote his poem about Kublai Khan, the grandson of Genghis Khan, after an opium-enhanced dream, some 500 years after the life and death of Genghis Khan. So close your eyes and find a dreamy state...

Kubla Khan

Or, a vision in a dream. A Fragment.

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
 Down to a sunless sea.
So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round;
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!
And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,
A mighty fountain momently was forced:
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:
And mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momently the sacred river.
Five miles meandering with a mazy motion
Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,
Then reached the caverns measureless to man,
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean;
And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
Ancestral voices prophesying war!
 The shadow of the dome of pleasure

Floated midway on the waves;
Where was heard the mingled measure
From the fountain and the caves.
It was a miracle of rare device,
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!

A damsel with a dulcimer
In a vision once I saw:
It was an Abyssinian maid
And on her dulcimer she played,
Singing of Mount Abora.
Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight 'twould win me,
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!
And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

Sermon: Creator, Destroyer

“And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!”

We know very little about Genghis Khan except what he did. Strangely enough for someone who achieved that much power in a time period where there was art, there was the written word: There are no pictures. No writings. No direct quotes unfiltered time or interpretation. He came from a society that did not write or create art. Their art was war.

In some ways, as I approached many of the current histories of Genghis Khan, they too felt as though they were written in a drugged dreamy state, as though each historian was gazing with rose-colored adoration from our current world to our conquering hero. Harper's magazine, in a review of Jack Weatherford's proudly self-proclaimed "revisionist" history of the Khan, says breathlessly, "It's hard to

think of anyone else who rose from such inauspicious beginnings to something so awesome, except maybe Jesus.” Jesus.

History is written by the winners.

Think about American history.

How great is George Washington in our histories? He’s an idol: tall, brave, honorable, brilliant, humble. Our founding father. Our first President. He’s on our money. He is celebrated by a federal holiday tomorrow.

I recently learned the word that the Iroquois had for George Washington, which continues to be the word that means “American President” in many native languages, is a word that when you translate it directly means Destroyer of Villages or Burner of Towns.

President.

Destroyer of Villages.

Burner of Towns.

The Great Khan.

Creator of the Modern World.

Father of thousands. Ancestor to millions.

Uniter of the vastest empire Earth has ever known.

Murderer of 80 million humans.

Rapist of thousands.

Oppressor of the vastest empire Earth has ever known.

He won.

His people wrote the history.

Daniel Carlin, the podcaster known for “Hardcore History,” says that the world in 1200 was a dry forest, and Genghis Khan was an arsonist.

He burned down the world and made it his own.

Yes, 800 years later we can point to growth and commerce and art and government that arose out of Genghis Khan’s wars. But Genghis Khan didn’t cause those things. The Khan was the fire. Humanity’s will to survive, humanity’s resilience, is what brought the life and new growth that followed in his wake.

The great Khan began life as a nobody, just another Mongolian kid on the steppe in the 1160s, the Middle Ages.

The steppes of Northern Eurasia were lack a vast ocean with no water—flat lands that go on for 5,000 miles, broken up by a mountain range or river here and there, but mostly just flat, windy land with constantly changing weather.

Before he was Genghis Khan, he was just Temujin, a child born to a kidnapped teenage mother in the constantly battling tribes of the steppe. The *Secret History of the Mongols*—a history written by and for the Mongol rulers—says that when Temujin was born, the little baby was holding in his fist a huge blood clot the size of a man's knuckle.

We aren't sure what Temujin looked like. The Mongolian people had typically Asian features, but of Temujin it is said he had red hair and eyes like a cat. And there are still, to this day, people of Mongolian heritage with red hair and green eyes, so that certainly is possible. He was said to be large and strong.

Children on the steppe were riding horses by age 3, learning weapons and battle from a very young age. The human/horse connection was practically like a human and a dog; the horses followed their owners around, which is very handy when you need to suddenly hop on your horse to attack the person attacking you. The steppe tribes were constantly at war, kidnapping and murder was a fact of life. No one was safe, it was anarchy. It was a perfect example of survival of the fittest. It is said that 10 year old Temujin killed his older brother for stealing his food.

Temujin had a natural talent for leadership and became a leader, conquering tribes on the step one after another. It was here in Mongolia that he started to practice the tactics he would take with him in future battles. Historians look back and marvel at the wonderful proto-nation state that Temujin was creating in Mongolia. With the creation of empire you get all kinds of good stuff: law and order, commerce, personal security—finally you can trade with another tribe, and you won't get kidnapped and raped at any moment. But the creation of empire is a brutal process. Just one example has Temujin conquering a tribe, then having all the male members of the tribe walk past his cart. If they were taller than the linchpin of the cart, his men would cut off their heads. The linchpin of the cart was around the height of a seven year old.

As he conquered he'd find people with skills and engage their loyalty—loyalty is easy to engender when you are so merciless in killing people who are not loyal. He cared more about your ability to help him than any sense of culture, religion, or bloodline.

Genghis Khan is praised for religious tolerance. It is true the Mongolian people had many religions—from a form of earth-worship to Christianity—and the Khan

allowed them to worship what they wanted, as long as their religion did not compete with the slavish loyalty to the Khan. Competing religions actually can be a useful way to maintain empire, something rulers have known since Alexander the Great: the many gods all jostle about, none of them dominant, keeping the people happy and paying taxes to their true god, the Emperor. Historian David Morgan says that “Mongols believed in taking out all the celestial insurance they could.” All the Khan wanted from his subject peoples was that they would pray for his good health and welfare and not use religion as a reason to rebel. He empowered his generals based on their leadership skills, even if they had originally been from an enemy tribe, and had an innate sense of military strategy and organization.

His wars were fought at the speed of a horse. His strategy was to never weigh down or slow down his troops with food or supplies or walking civilians. His troops traveled with many extra horses, mostly mares, and they would drink the horses milk and at times bleed them from the neck and drink their blood. His troops lived off the land, which is less peaceful than it sounds. That means if you want to eat something besides mare’s milk and blood, if you want to wear something warmer than clothes made from sewn together field-mouse skins, you better find a town to loot and rampage. And they did, again, and again, and again.

By 1206, Temujin had conquered much of Mongolia. He was now the Great Khan—not just a khan, a simple ruler, but Genghis Khan, the ruler of all. He called back all his generals and made a declaration. He declared he was the ruler of the entire world. Anyone who did not bow to his rule was a disobedient subject and would be punished by death.

Of course, most of the world had no idea who he was. Had never heard of him. The Chinese to the South had seen him as just a steppe tribesperson who was useful because he killed a bunch of their enemies. But that day in 1206, Genghis Khan declared war on China, and they would soon come to fear him.

There is the question of why: why attack China? Did he just want to keep the loot flowing? Was there a trade dispute?

We don’t know why. We just know what he did. And what he did was attack western China, ruled by the Jin Dynasty led by the Golden Emperor.

When Genghis Khan’s army came up to Zhengdu it was the largest city in the world. It had one million residents and housed the Chinese emperor. It had Walls

of stamped clay 40 feet high, 900 battle towers, 13 gates, subterranean fortified towns! It had art, the written word, civilization. A sermon does not give enough to time to describe the political divisions within Jin China, but Genghis Khan saw all of them and exploited them, finding the cracks in their unity that no wall could protect.

The Khan is good at offering diplomacy, receiving a peace deal, and just when his enemy is breathing a sigh of relief, attacking. When the Mongolians attack Zhengdu for the final time, the people inside are starving, begging to surrender. Instead, the Khan orders his troops to kill everyone. They killed the soldiers; and they killed farmers, merchants, families, children, they raped and killed every single person in that city they could find. A million people. Caravans with thousands of carts hauled loot for weeks. They set fire to the city when they'd looted all they could and the stench of dead bodies became too much. Beyond Zhengdu they ravaged the countryside. The whole of northern China was devastated, burned, leveled, emptied. Any survivors were left homeless, wandering, hungry. The only job was banditry, there was no safety anywhere, civilization had broken down.

A year or two after this Holocaust, some spies of the Islamic Shah in the west were on a scouting mission to the great lands of China they had heard about. They approached the former city of Zhengdu and they saw in the distance what looked like a huge snow-capped mountain in the distance. Yet as they drew closer they realized it was a massive pile of bones. As they continued walking they found themselves on marshy, unstable, sticky ground. The land had become saturated with fat and grease from the incredible number of decaying human bodies. The spies detoured and when they finally found the capital of China, they saw the devastated remains of the largest city they had ever seen. They reported back to the Shah: it was true, the Chinese were amazing civilization of immense power AND there are a people out there—unheard of, unknown—who had the power to destroy that.

Unfortunately for the Shah and the Islamic world, they would soon come to know Genghis Khan and his Mongol army all too well. And finally at this point we have multiple sources. Chinese histories were mostly written a couple hundred years after the events, and by then they were writing about their conquerer, their George Washington, their Creator, Genghis Khan. The winner was writing the history. But the Mongol attacks on the Islamic world was written about immediately by a writer named Ibn al-Athir, titled “account of the eruption of the Tatars into the lands of Islam” and you can tell that while he escaped death, his soul was irrevocably wounded by the events he had seen. He wondered if he was writing an

“obituary for Islam” and how the God they believed in could allow such horrors to happen.

The Islamic world of the early 1200s had already been under attack from the West from the Crusades, but their troops had been holding up. Then in 1218 Genghis Khan sends emissaries to the Khwarezmian Shah, supposedly to ask about trading. The Shah is unimpressed by this upstart and kills them. That was all Genghis Khan needed. His troops attack from so many angles the Shah is stunned, off balance. He pulls his troops in retreat to hide in garrisons.

But Genghis Khan learned plenty of besieging skills in China. And his psychological warfare works here too. He gets the civilians to surrender, meanwhile the troops are still in the garrisons, refusing to surrender. So the Khan tells the civilians that if they want to live, they will need to fight and kill their own troops. Revisionist history says isn't it nice that the Khan spared the civilians' lives. No—the thinking is why waste Mongol lives, have the civilians take up the casualties.

When cities did not surrender, they suffered the fate of Zhengdu.

Every woman and girl over the age of 7 was raped, many in front of their family members to increase the horror. Soldiers killed every person, every animal, every pet, methodically, ruthlessly. In battle a son-in-law of the Khan is killed. After the city is taken Genghis Khan has his daughter sit on a throne and watch every person in the town beheaded, one after the other, as her reward, her right for losing her husband. Leaders were killed in dramatic fashion: the Khan did not believe in spilling the blood of nobility. So instead they might die from having molten gold poured over their eyes and into their ears. In another instance, he tied his enemies nobility together, stacked like cordwood, put a wooden floor on top of them, then with his generals ate a meal at a table on top of them as they were crushed and suffocated to death.

So many revisionist historians say “Genghis Khan abolished torture.” No, he didn't have fancy torture implements the way Crusaders did. He didn't need to. His people killed everyone quickly, a terrorist tactic much more effective than torture. And before they killed any woman, they raped them. If rape doesn't fall under your definition of torture, you might be a male military historian.

Genghis Khan slaughters the Islamic world in three years. What we know as Iran and Afghanistan—ancient civilizations filled with beauty and art and writing and irrigation systems for agriculture and wealth—were devastated by this and a second Mongolian invasion, and some historians say the Middle East never recovered. Ibn al-Athir, writing only a few years later, compares the Mongol invasion to the Biblical apocalypse, a punishment from God.

The Shah spends much of the war running away to the west, being chased by Genghis Khan's best general, Subatai. When Subatai returns to the Khan he has interesting stories of what he saw and heard about in the Western lands—people with narrow faces, light hair, and blue eyes, who have silks and jewels. The Khan sends Subatai back to scout the West and return with reconnaissance.

The initiation of contact between Asia and Europe is something many revisionist historians say is a wonderful thing. Finally great civilizations meet, and the culture and art and military tactics and possibility that emerges, many hundreds of years after the fact, does indeed create the modern world we live in today. It also cost the lives of millions and millions of people.

But Genghis Khan is just a man, and after killing tens of millions of people he dies too, in 1227. He attempted immortality—he had a Taoist monk as an advisor who suggested that he could live longer if he ate less greasy food and “slept alone sometimes.” He didn't like that advice.

There are a few stories of how he died: some say he fell of a horse, others say he finally caught an arrow, others say he was assaulted young princess who had hidden a knife inside her body and so as he attempted to rape her, he was mortally wounded. His tomb is hidden—they say that whoever buried him was killed, and then the people who killed the buriers are also killed, and so on, in classic Mongolian ruthless fashion.

Remember that city of one million, Zhengdu? That is where Genghis Khan's grandson Kubla Khan established his pleasure palace, Xanadu. Zhengdu, a place of death and destruction, covered over with a court of hedonistic luxury. Pleasure has hidden the pain.

What can we learn from Genghis Khan?

Think harder about history.

Don't discount the dead in our rush to find the good.

Empire is not the same thing as peace.

There is a quote from the time of the Roman empire: “The Romans create a wasteland and call it peace.”

Can we really call what Genghis Khan created, peace?

Law and order meant your daughter could be taken from you at any time for the Khan or his generals.

His single super-state was ruled by terror, force, and killing.

No, “torture” was not necessary when any rebellion was punishable by immediate death.

Think of it this way: if Nazis had won World War II, what histories would be written 800 years in the 1,000 year Reich? Would statues of Hitler be everywhere, would history books talk about how he “unified Europe” “increased commerce,” “created law and order”?

As Cas said earlier, these words attributed to Genghis Khan: “If lies can show the truth they can be the truth, they can cause the truth, so I may build an empire on lies, but they are the truth.”

Think about this fact: a half percent of all men living today—16 million men—are direct descendents of Genghis Khan. We can map that because of the Y chromosome. I read that in National Geographic, and the headline of that article was “Genghis Khan a Prolific Love, DNA Data Implies.”¹ Lover? Lover? Lover? He used mass rape as a war tactic. Lover.

Dan Carlin points out our short-sightedness when we look back at the byproducts of these terrible events and hail them as milestones towards progress. He holds up as an example a quote from one author saying: “Every so often civilization works itself into a corner... if new ideas are to have a chance, the old systems must be so turbulently shaken that they lose their dominance. ...Genghis Khan’s Mongol invasion of China in the 13th century shook up what had become a stagnant country. The ensuing mixture of Mongol military tactics, and Mongol horsemanship with Chinese iron technology and administrative know-how, led to political unity, a flourishing commercial sector, and expanded trade routes.” That is a standard revisionist view today. Think about that. The greatest holocaust of all time is considered justified because it “shook things up” to create “new venues for good things.”

I think our political processes are stagnant and could use some shaking up. Would it be worth it if the shake-up killed 80 million people—every single person in Massachusetts, Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New Jersey, and New York?

I quote again Simone Weil: “If Germany, thanks to Hitler and his successors, were to enslave the European nations and destroy most of the treasures of their past, future historians would certainly pronounce that she had civilized Europe.”

There is power in how we tell our stories, power in the way we narrate history. The greatest power of all is being the one to tell the story, being one who gets to decide what is true and good and worth it.

¹ <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2003/02/mongolia-genghis-khan-dna/>

Empire is not peace.

Humans have an innate desire to reach for possibility and hope. Life wants to live. In the stagnant forest that was the Middle Ages, Genghis Khan lit a match and burned it all down.

Humanity survived, wounded, broken, but refusing to give up. Life won.

We can study the fire without worshipping the fire.

We can praise the triumph of life without praising the triumph of empire.

“And all should cry, Beware! Beware!

His flashing eyes, his floating hair!”

Amen.