

Claire Feingold Thoryn  
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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 warrior leader of Mongolia who lived in late 1100s and early 1200s 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-racking prospect. I am 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 imminent  
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 and a larger law;  
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 momentarily 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 momentarily 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!”

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, a great military strategist, a family man. 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 American 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 over 50 million humans.

Rapist of thousands.

Oppressor of the vastest empire Earth has ever known.

He won.

His people wrote the history.

Daniel Carlin, creator of the podcast “Hardcore History,” says that the world of the 13<sup>th</sup> century was a dry forest, and Genghis Khan was the world’s greatest 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.

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 Middle Ages.

The steppes of Northern Eurasia were like 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 Temujin.

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.

Children on the steppe were riding horses by age 3. The horses were sort of like dogs, they followed their owners around, which is very handy when you need to suddenly hop on your horse to attack someone. The steppe tribes were constantly at war; kidnapping, rape, and murder was a fact of life. It was anarchy, a perfect example of survival of the fittest. 10 year old Temujin killed his older brother for stealing his food.

Temujin had a natural talent for leadership and as a young man began building an army and conquering neighboring tribes, turning Mongolia into a proto-nation state. 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. This is what Temujin's law and order looked like: After conquering a tribe, he would have all male members of the tribe who were not useful to him, or who would not submit, 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.]

Genghis Khan is praised by revisionist historians for religious tolerance, but he didn't do it to be nice. 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."

Temujin never slowed down his troops with caravans of food and supplies. 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. Sounds peaceful, but it meant that 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 some people to loot and rampage. And they did, again, and again.

By the early 1200s, Temujin and his troops had conquered "All the people who live in felt tents"—most of Mongolia. He declared himself to be the great Genghis Khan, ruler of the whole world.

He turned his eye towards his neighbor: the Jin Dynasty of western China, led by the Golden Emperor from his enormous capital city of Zhongdu.

Zhongdu was the largest city in the world. Hail that glorious, golden city: It had one million residents and even more in the surrounding countryside; walls of stamped clay 40 feet high; 900 battle towers; 13 gates; subterranean fortified towns; art; the written word; civilization.

When the Mongolians conquered Zhongdu after months of besiegement, the people inside were starving, begging to surrender. Instead, the Khan orders his troops to kill everyone. They killed the soldiers; 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. When they'd looted all they could and the stench of dead bodies became too much, they set fire to the city.

Beyond Zhongdu's walls they ravaged the countryside.

The whole of northern China was devastated, burned, leveled, emptied. Any survivors became homeless, wandering, hungry, desperate bandits. There was no safety anywhere.

Civilization had broken down.

It was on the land formerly known as Zhongdu where Genghis Khan's grandson Kubla Khan established his pleasure palace, Xanadu. Zhongdu, a place of death and destruction, covered over with a court of hedonistic luxury. Pleasure hiding pain.

Around 1210, 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 Zhongdu 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.

When the spies finally found the former capital of China, they saw the burned out remains of the largest city they had ever seen. They reported back to the Shah:

it was true, the Chinese were an amazing civilization of immense power AND there are a people out there—unheard of, unknown—who had the power to destroy it.

The destruction of Zhongdu was the greatest Holocaust the world had ever seen...until Genghis Khan's next attack.

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 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 were written about contemporaneously by a writer named Ibn al-Athir.

The Islamic world of the early 1200s had already been under attack from the Western Crusades, but their troops had been holding up.

In 1218 Genghis Khan attacks from so many angles the Shah is completely stunned, off balance. He pulls his troops in retreat to hide in garrisons.

The Khan 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 immediately surrender, they suffered the fate of Zhongdu.

Soldiers raped every female, and killed every person, every animal, every pet, methodically, ruthlessly. In one battle a son-in-law of the Khan is killed. Genghis Khan had his daughter sit on a throne in the town square 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 more theatrical ways, such as pouring molten gold into their eyes and ears. In another instance, he tied enemy nobility together, stacked like cordwood, put a wooden floor on top of them, a table on top of that, then sat for a meal with his generals as the people below were crushed and suffocated to death.

So many revisionist historians say “Genghis Khan abolished torture.” He didn’t have fancy torture implements the way Crusaders did. He didn’t need to. His troops killed everyone quickly, a terrorist tactic much more effective than torture. And before they killed any woman, they raped them. Think about this fact: a half percent of all men living today—16 million men—have a Y chromosome that shows they are direct descendants of Genghis Khan. National Geographic wrote about this with the headline: “Genghis Khan a Prolific Lover, DNA Data Implies.”<sup>1</sup> Lover? He used mass rape as a war tactic. Lover.

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

You might be a male revisionist historian if... rape doesn't fall under your definition of torture.

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 and wealth—were devastated. Ibn al-Athir compares the Mongol invasion to the Biblical apocalypse.

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 stories about people with narrow faces, light hair, blue eyes, with silks and jewels, and armies that can't even begin to match the Khan's. Subatai's reconnaissance mission begins the initiation of contact between Asia and Europe. That contact will not go well for the people of Europe. The Khan's well-chosen successors carry out millions upon millions of deaths.

Genghis Khan 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. The Khan finally died in 1227.

Some say he died assaulting a young princess who had hidden a knife inside her body and so as he attempted to rape her, he was mortally wounded.

There is a quote from the time of the Roman empire: “The Romans create a wasteland and call it peace.”  
Empire is not the same thing as peace.

Here is a quote from a standard revisionist view today: “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.”

The greatest holocaust of all time, 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?

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 the story of human 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.

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 learn from 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.*