

## Living in an Age of Violence: Lessons from Noah

Philadelphia Fellowship Christian Church

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(This sermon is based upon Psalm 46, Genesis 6:9-22, Matt. 7:21-27)

### **The problem:**

We live in a militaristic society driven by fear. To hear many politicians one would think we were the puniest society, regularly threatened by the ‘bad guys’ in other parts of the world. Yet, we own nearly ½ of the entire nuclear weaponry in the world ourselves.

Our military budget each year is more than the total combination of every other military budget in the world. We outspend China, the next leading military power by 8 times.

Since 1945 the US has bombed 21 separate countries and not one has become an democracy. From 1900-2005 we have spent 37 years in war or 35% of the time.

President Eisenhower, a General in the army warned against the military industrial complex and the dangers it presented to our democracy back in the early 60’s. Yet, the latest is that there is even a newer evil combined with this one. It is the military corporation complex that insures that the corporations seemingly as innocuous as Pepsi, for example, now make huge amounts of money in its subsidiaries by selling to this military industrial complex.

Now, you don’t have to tell Philadelphians about violence because we have been named this year as the murder capital of the nation. Male teens carry assault weapons to bolster their manhood and to protect themselves from the dangers on the street. Boys cluster into gangs and blow away their enemies in broad daylight on public streets and in the neighborhoods often completely unaware of the children in the streets between them and their targets. And 39% of our teens know someone who has been shot and every 2 years more Americans die from fire arm injuries than the total of American soldiers killed in 8years of war in Viet Nam ([www.ichv.org/statistics.html](http://www.ichv.org/statistics.html)) There is gangsta rap and media stars who glorify violence through their art form making millions in the process. And in our country 39% of our teens know someone who has been shot and every 2 years more Americans die from firearm injuries than the total of American soldiers who were killed in 8 years of war in Viet Nam.

And, I am not even talking about the violence of self-loathing or self-hatred. I am not even talking about the violence to the human spirit brought on by a widening and deepening poverty cycle or attempting to negotiate a dehumanizing welfare system. I am not even talking about the violence that comes about through ongoing racism and classism and homophobia.

It is important that we understand and admit, as Christians, that we live in a very violent society, one that is violent towards the physical body and particularly the so-called enemy, as well as towards the inner spirit. We need to understand this because this is the kind of world that Noah lived in.

See Genesis 6:9-22 (special emphasis on verses 11 and 13 “the earth was filled with violence”)

In all the artistic depictions of the pre-flood art I have never seen violence portrayed. Instead, the artists have always painted naked people doing all kinds of activities that are clearly what were the hang ups of the artist but not based on the scripture.

Now the story of Noah is a myth. It is a myth told in many different cultures long before Genesis was ever written down. It was a very popular story told in many different ways. But what makes a story a myth is when there is a powerful message underneath it. A myth speaks to us on a deeper level, a symbolic level instead of as a factual story that we would find in the newspaper this morning. Our task, as it is the task in every generation, is to reinterpret to find out what these deeper meanings have to do with our day. Where is the truth for us? Is there any good news for us today in this story?

The writer says simply that at some point after the expulsion from paradise and daily walks with a Creator God, humanity took a wrong turn. Some place between finding out the difference between good and evil after eating from the Tree of knowledge, humanity began to do evil. And this evil is corrupt and the result was violence. The scripture says “every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually.” 6:10 Corrupt hearts are those that forget their higher purpose is for righteousness, right living, right relationships.

You see, we are an adaptable species. The thing about violence is that when you grow up in it, it seems normal. When someone is beaten as a child, she or he grows up to think it is normal. When we teach that the way to solve a dispute is to beat someone up, then violence as a conflict resolution strategy is normal. When we teach that talking to a so-called enemy is stupid then we grow up to sneeringly dismiss the art of negotiation by calling it “appeasement.” Corrupt hearts have forgotten whose they are. They have forgotten what it is to walk with God.

No doubt in Noah’s day life was cheap, just like it is in our own. No doubt in Noah’s day the musicians sang about going out in a blaze of glory or doing in their enemy before he did it to them. And when the human species, or shall we say, when a nation gets to *this* point one can no longer even envision a world with a just peace. One can no longer envision a way to stop tyrants without nuclear weapons. One can no longer figure out a way to stop arguments without reaching for a weapon.

Then one day when the earth was filled with violence, God had had enough. The earth was going to hell in a hand basket and God said “enough is enough.” And God says “Come on, Noah. Covenant with me. I’ll tell you what to do.” (verse 18) Humanity, according to the Genesis writers, was in an awful mess. At this time it might be wise to remember the psalmist says that God is in the midst of the city and it shall not be moved. God will help it when the morning dawns. And when the nations are in an uproar and the kingdoms totter, God speaks. And, when God speaks the earth melts. Out of that desolation of a melted earth (or in the case of Noah, a very wet and soggy earth), God makes the wars cease, breaks the bow, shatters the spear, and burns the shields with fire. (46 chapter)

You see, Christians and other people of faith live by a different understanding. We know that what violates human life, what rips apart the human spirit, what destroys families when it is humanly caused by corrupt hearts. This is not the way the human race was created to be. It is not the way it has to be. We have a different vision. We live our lives by the beat of a different drummer. We refuse to walk in step with the ways of the world. We understand that we are called to sound the alarm. We are called to remember whose we are. The poet says of those with corrupt hearts:

### **Iowa to Ibaden (1)**

Men would make borders as proof of their pride  
    marking their limits of loyalty.  
Men would draw boundaries as lines in sand  
    marking those who now become illegal.  
Patriots disguise their macho ego,  
Partisanship, the ruse to cover greed.  
    Inside or outside the halls of power  
    One-up insures some are always one-down.

The wise ones know this is clearly folly  
    for it violates humanity's heart.  
To see God in one another, in the least,  
    These will insure a just future of peace.

For how shall they eat if we do not feed them?  
    How shall we know if they do not teach us?  
How shall they work unless we bring healing?  
    How shall we understand if we don't care?  
How shall they escape if we don't protect them?  
    How shall we survive if they aren't our neighbors?

From Iowa to Ibaden, they come.  
From Ireland to Israel they arrive.  
    Social workers, humanitarians,  
Sharing a view of neighbors connected.  
    Diplomats and teachers and preachers too.

Walking in step they  
    experience each other.  
Weaving the vision they  
    laugh at those borders.  
Side by side they  
    are saving the children.  
Hand in hand they  
    are breaking down walls.

We are called to break down the walls that divide us into enemies, those walls that make it so easy to trivialize another, so easy to allow or cause violence to happen to some. The songwriter says,

“We can build a wall, or you can build a bridge. It all depends upon the love you give. If you build a wall, your world is small. But a bridge of love will conquer all.”

We live in a society, the leading society in the world, that is propagating violence through the planet. We live in a city where too much violence reigns. Too many relationships are destroying lives and damaging spirits. Christians, we are to be the salt that flavors a world that has lost its taste for goodness and righteousness. I am not talking about a hunkered down, bunker type of Christianity, though some Christians take that view. I am talking about the ways people who have no hope walk in the shadows and cannot see the light. I am talking about those who are building their house on the sands of shifting fads or believing the lies about whichever enemy of the day we are warring against. I am talking about those who have never seen it modeled that there is a better way, those who don't know a better way.

Christians, I am afraid we have failed to permeate the world with soul power, this God-Source of the Holy Spirit that makes for peace. Gandhi called it Satyagraha. Satya means love and graha means firm. It is a firm love that translates to meeting violence, actively and spiritually with non-violence. It means saying a resounding ‘no’ to the ways things are currently being done and an equally resounding ‘yes’ to a peaceful way of being in the world. It means not conforming to this world and its war-like ways but transforming the world That's what soul force does.

## **Soul Force (2)**

It is war without violence. It's the weapon of the brave.  
It's the source of our courage. It's the power for this new age.

We will counter the untruth for the lies that they are.  
For they cannot oppress us if we don't kneel to power.

We were meant for more than this. We can show so much goodness.  
But war misuses power and denies that there is Oneness.

So we shall deny them the power to reign with military might.  
We deny the satisfaction of believing that might makes right.

Our power is much greater than any threats or bombs or guns.  
We will not listen to the threats and we shall not turn and run.

For the power of the soul and knowing love is greater still  
Has the power to transform the world and I believe that it will.

So remove your clothes for fighting and put down the guns of war

We are called to do much better and to believe in something more.

We are one another's neighbor and on this we must agree  
The earth is the mother of us all and gives the same air for us to breathe.

It is futile to think guns make war end. Only understanding will do  
To find a way out of the mess we made. It is so overdue.

It is the power deep in the soul to find the strength that comes from peace  
To stand for right is to stand up for those who are the least.

We shall not give in to the old. It's time to try a different way.  
Soul power inside each human heart is the model for today.

We must stand up for justice. Believe in right as Gandhi and King  
Because when we stand together we can hear all humanity sing.

It's a new song, a different way of being. It's a vision that we share  
It is right in front of us and God knows we can do it, if we dare.

William Penn saw the vision and the "holy experiment" that is, nonviolence as the established authority happened in Philadelphia. And on December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1682 the "Great Law" even abolished war.

Emperor Ashoka saw the vision and vastly expanded his empire throughout his 50 year reign doing it all non-violently.

Ghandi saw it and non-violently led a revolution that saw the end to English rule of India.

Delaware Valley Veterans Against the Iraq war see it and Iraq veterans Against the War see it and are telling the stories of what war based on lies is really like in Iraq.

Mothers in Charge, led by a Lutheran woman, Dorothy Johnson Speight, sees it in Philadelphia.

Quaker George Lakey sees it in West Philadelphia in his work with the international non-violent peace force.

And Philadelphians know the additional Iraq war spending for next year alone that is being requested would pay for the health care for nearly 121,000 Philadelphians and or an additional 10,721 public safety officers for one year. We see it. (3) We do not have to live this way. There is another way. It is heart unity. It is soul power. And we simply need to plug into it.

Noah just had to do as God asked him to do. He entered into a covenant with his God. This is building your house on solid ground. This covenant will hold us firm when the winds blow and beat on us, when the nations are in an uproar, and the kingdoms totter. Those of us in covenant with a Life-giving God know this One created us for greater things than a military industrial complex aimed at obliterating our so-called enemies. Our very economy is based, not on food production and plow shares but on weaponry. But, we follow one who said to the sword carrier, "Put down your sword, Peter." And to his followers he said, "Blessed are the peacemakers."

The rainbow promise after the flood was to denote that God will not punish us again for our corrupt and violent ways. But it also means that God will not save us from our violence again via an ark. We have been shown the way. We follow a Peacemaker named Jesus. May we be so plugged into soul power that we spread peacemaking throughout our speech, throughout our actions, every day until we build the realm of God on earth as it is in heaven.

(1) By Beverly Dale written for and dedicated to Louise Shoemaker, PhD, Dean Emerita, School of Social Work, University of Pennsylvania

(2) By Beverly Dale

(3) Statistics are from the national Priorities Project [www.nationalpriorities.org](http://www.nationalpriorities.org) effective May 31, 2008