

**Get Out out of the Gun Empire with Father Abraham
Lent II : Gun Violence Prevention Sabbath Weekend**

March 16, 2014

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The Lord God said to Abram, "Leave your native land, your relations, your father's home and go to a country I'm going to show you. I will give you many descendants and they will become a great nation."

What is happening here ... at this moment seen by faith as world-changing? Why is Abram called by God to GET UP and GET OUT? Is it because getting up and getting out is the only road forward? Is it the only path to God's blessing, for Abram and his own family, but more critically, for all humanity: "through you, Abram, all the families of the earth will be blessed?"

Perhaps it is only by getting up and getting out that the Shalom of the Lord God, that deep communion between God, neighbor, and the creation itself will be established on earth ... just as the Lord God imagined and intended at the beginning of all things. Get up and get out, Abram. Get out with all your household, your women, your slaves, your herds, your heir and nephew, Lot. And don't look back ... Lot, are you listening?!

What was it, haunting the tents of Abram, that made it necessary to strike camp, get up and get out? What was so mesmerizing, so terrifying, so dangerously enthralling that Abram hadn't even realized his plight?

The first eleven chapters of Genesis narrate the answer to that question. It's the old, old story: a cascade of snow-balling violence spilling out of blessed Eden with our first parents, Adam and Eve. The trajectory of their failed attempt to "be like God" infects the inaugural generation that follows. Right at the foundation of social life beyond the garden is a murder: brother kills brother, Cain slays Abel in a fit of jealousy and rage. The snowball of violence gains momentum as it rolls on towards Cain's grandson, Lamech, who vows, "I kill a man for wounding me, a young man for a blow. If sevenfold vengeance was to be exacted for anyone killing Cain, For me it will be seventy-seven fold."

Redemptive violence, that use of violence to restore fragile social order, is already on the move in the first chapters of Genesis. Still the snowball rolled on until the violence and wickedness of humanity caused the Lord God to regret having made mankind, whose "every thought and inclination was always wicked" (6:5). Only one righteous man, Noah, who walked with God, was left standing. Yet even the cleansing power of the great 40-day Flood and the promise of a fresh start, sealed with a rainbow, doesn't stop the rolling snowball of violence and self-conceit, signified in the City of Man, with its defiant Tower of Babel, rooted in oppression, war and blood sacrifice.

The call to Abram to GET UP and GET OUT is the Lord God's answer to the rolling snowball of brutality and violence. On one hand, it's a simple call: run for your life! On the other hand, it's a sacred call: when you run, run to Me. Leave your father's house and come to the country I want to show you, Abba's country, a place of abundant life rather than death, violence, revenge and terror.

Does the urgency of God's call to Abram ring in our ears this second Sunday in Lent? What does "run for your life" mean to us on March 16, 2014, here in the U.S. of A., on Gun Violence Prevention Sabbath Weekend? Our brother and sister Episcopalians at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., who sponsor this Gun Violence Prevention Sabbath Weekend with Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence, ask us to consider what enthralling forms do age-old violence and murder take in our own day, in our own father's land?

RUN FOR YOUR LIFE from the Gun Empire. The Gun Empire is what James Atwood, in his book, *America and Its Guns: a Theological Expose*, calls the particular form of the principalities and powers that hold us in thrall to violence in America today. It is a thralldom that exists on every level of our gun culture.

Just as the Golden Calf gave Abram's descendants a false sense of security, Americans look for our security in weapons. To quote Atwood: "When our leaders are absent or fail us; when our God is invisible and from all appearances absent in our lives; when we don't know how we can keep going; when we are consumed by our fears and threatened by those who are not like us, those are the moments when new idols are imagined and fashioned and desperate people give them their ultimate concerns, devotion, and focused attention." (p. 24)

Our fear is translated into vicious empirical facts: there are 300 million guns, almost enough for every man, woman, and child, circulating in America today, with 3 million more sailing off the assembly lines each year. The big brother of this gun "snowball" is our vast military-industrial rolling juggernaut, not just a snowball but an entire ice planet like "Hoth," that spends \$698 billion dollars a year on military preparedness, equal to the expenditures of the next nineteen countries combined... "for me, saith Lamech, vengeance will be seventy-seven fold."

Those 300 million guns circulating on our streets account for 30,000 deaths a year. More American citizens were killed with guns in the 18 year period between 1979 – 1997 (651,697) than all the servicemen and women killed in battle in all U.S. Wars since 1775 (650,858).

One half of all gun deaths are suicides. Every 36 hours a U.S. war veteran takes his or her life. 3,285 children are killed unnecessarily by guns in this country every year, many in the tragic and stupid accidents we read about in the newspaper. Yet no sane gun legislation on behalf of reducing these numbers has passed Congress since the Brady Bill, celebrating its 20 year anniversary on Feb. 28, 2014.

Our lawmakers are paralyzed and prohibited from even engaging in meaningful dialogue on this issue. But they aren't so paralyzed that legislation in support of the Gun Empire is slowed down: for example, the 2004 removal by Congress of the ban on assault weapons or the 2005 Lawful Commerce Act, which denies victims of gun violence the right to sue manufacturers, distributors or dealers for negligent, reckless or irresponsible conduct. Atwood points out that no other industry in America enjoys such blanket immunity and protection. Thus, when 30,000 Americans die by gunfire, Congress reacts to protect guns, along with their institutions, factories, distribution systems, and private sellers.

Atwood contrasts the failures of government to respond to our gun epidemic with its response to outbreaks of disease: when 5 persons were hospitalized in the Southwest with e-coli found in spinach, the government immediately shut down the entire spinach industry, putting it under surveillance 24/7 and quarantining suspected forms. But with guns ... more is better! Guns save

lives. An armed society is a polite society. More guns mean less crime. Gun rights are god-given rights. In Kentucky, churches are raffling off guns to increase attendance.

RUN FOR YOUR LIFE! How do we, as children of Abraham, wandering in the wilderness, find our way out of our violent fatherland into Abba's country? In today's gospel, Jesus points the way in his exchange with Nicodemus, a jurist on Judea's highest native court, the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of the time.

Nicodemus, a man of power and stature, comes to Jesus at night, under cover of darkness, afraid to be seen with this unpredictable, controversial figure, yet drawn like a moth to light. Nicodemus begins: we know you are a teacher sent by God because of the prophetic signs you perform: so who are you, what are you? What should I do about you and the unease you stir in my heart? Jesus cuts to the quick: in all truth I tell you, unless you are born again, Nicodemus, you can not and will not have any idea of what the Kingdom of Abba is like. Anyone living in the old world of redemptive violence, where the Spirit of fear, murder and death rules, is unable to imagine or grasp what life in the Spirit of Abba might be. Anyone who trusts in steel and lead to save them will mock as weakness and stupidity a life grounded in trust and faith in Abba's Spirit.

You must be born again, Nicodemus, of that Spirit who blows where it will, like the wind: unseen, just as love is unseen, and patience and generosity and kindness and peace and trust and hope: those fruits of the Spirit that St. Paul proclaims in his letter to the Galatians. There will never be a law against any of these: these define true freedom... a liberty of the heart, calling to us from a far country where my rights never trump your rights, except in love ... whatever Amendment might be cited in the terms of the appeal.

Like Nicodemus, we are afraid but we want to be like Jesus. An old saying perhaps sums up the situation best: "a lie travels half way around the world before the truth can get its boots on." I believe it's past time for all of us baptized into Christ's Spirit to pull on our boots, lace them up, and Get Up and Get Out out of the Gun Empire with Father Abraham. Let us proceed with purity of heart, intent on one thing: the truth of God, standing up to the lies of all the powers and principalities, whatever the cost. In the struggle, let's remember Lamech, who promises vengeance seventy-seven fold. And then, we'll follow Jesus, who invites us to forgive our brother or sister seventy times seven, just as Jesus forgives us!

Amen.