

In the beginning, was the Word. So let's open the book: Isaiah 64, Page ____ of the Old Testament side of the bible, and Mark 13, page ____ on the new testament side.

Our texts today yearn for the apocalypse, the sure and certain revelation of God that will also mean the destruction of the world as we know it. These words are hungry for a new life, a new world, a new start, a new year. And yet, in dreaming of the future, past and present speak loudly. T.S. Eliot wrote about what he called the historical sense. He said "the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels [us] to write not merely with [our] own generation in [our] bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the [tradition of writing, ancient and modern] has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order."¹

As I read these old texts from another time this week, I feel their poetry. To let them come into our present moment, to let them be simultaneous with our own time, we will need poetry more than exposition. We will need dancing by moonlight and conversation over cups of mint tea in the dark evenings. Shall we begin?

I. *O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil.*

We begin the new year with fire. It is the fire of destruction: Burn this whole thing down. Is that not a real desire in this, our moment? Our leaders are intent on legislating destruction, and frustrated trampled people have no choice but to wish to burn it down! It is the ultimate expression of frustration: I can't see how to make this better so burn it up!

¹ <https://britlitwiki.wikispaces.com/Allusions+in+Eliot>

The fire causes water to boil. Isaiah speaks the desire: O come on! Don't let these wicked things just keep happening! Show up, God, and set it on fire! Fire-causing-boiling is not about making tea on the hearth. It is fire boiling to cook, to burn, to express wrath. Like when Beyoncé walks through the streets with her yellow gown, smashing cars, and followed at every corner by a fireball. Mommy, why is she smashing and burning? Well, dear, she is very angry.

This first word of the new year is desire for God fueled by anger. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are you if you are angry! The first word of the new year comes in the middle of our chaotic, violent, unjust failure, and is angry about it! The word comes to us from another time when society was in freefall. When we had lost our senses, lost our common ground, lost our knowledge of Good and Evil, lost faith in Truth, lost our way.

The fire of anger the beginning of the dream of healing. Beginning of desire for God: **Tear open the heavens and come down! Show yourself to this befouled nation!**

II. Who is this God we are invoking? Who is this One we discover we desperately need?

*From ages past no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who works for those who wait for him.*

No ear has heard, no eye has seen. Have we never seen this God?

No, it is the opposite: we have known no other God but this God. We do know God. Intimately. As a “you” we can address. In anger, in desperation, in sorrow, and in thanks, we know the “you” is the One.

And this One will be there, will ‘work’ for us if we wait for him.

Ah, there’s the great Advent theme: wait. Wait, wait.

We desire a fire RIGHT NOW: “HURRY UP PLEASE IT’S TIME.”²

But this is the God who works when we wait.

III. Who wants to wait? So hard not to give up. And so the prophet says:

*We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
...you have hidden your face from us,
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.*

Hey God! Say something! (I’m giving up on you.)³ How long are we to wait? People are suffering now- why do we have to wait while you let the way of the wicked prosper?

And we lose the thread. The line goes dead. We are left alone with our policies and our patterns of oppression and our slowness of heart and our little meanesses, our little lazinesses, our impotence, our iniquity. [I think we are in rats’ alley/ where dead men lost their bones.⁴]

IV. But the prophet is our guide. Isaiah turns the corner for us, calls us back from waste land to promised land. **It is never too late to ask for help.**

² T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land

³ Song lyric from A Great Big World, written by Ian Axel; Chad King; Mike Campbell.

⁴ T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land

*Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;
we are all the work of your hand...*

Now consider, we are all your people.

We are all your people. There is not one who is not ‘your people.’ The old song goes, “Once we were no people, but now we belong.” Without you, God, we are nothing more than specks of dust and to dust we shall return. But with You, we are a people. We belong. **We can be re-formed.**

V. *Jesus said, “In those days, after that suffering,*

the sun will be darkened,

and the moon will not give its light,

and the stars will be falling from heaven,

and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

Jesus is the fulfillment of the dream: *O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.* Well here He is. Jesus too, dreams of fire. Fire of love, passion for God, for the Good, for the just: a different fire? But now at his end, (as it begins again,) our Jesus is singing the burn-it-down kind of fire. (Just before this passage-) persecution, destruction of the temple, suffering on a grand scale- and the very sun and moon will be ruined. A bigger fire than Isaiah dreamed, who wished for a sign to show the nations the truth! Now, with Jesus, we are beyond nations. Now we see that **to tear open the heavens and come down, the heavens will be torn apart.**

Like the prophet, the Son of Man will turn the corner for us, from despair at these things, to the promise of these things: we will be gathered from the ends of earth. Once we were no people... scattered. But now we belong... now we will be gathered.

VI. *when you see these things taking place, you know that **he is near, at the very gates.***

When the world becomes a trash fire, that moment, precisely that moment, is when we know he is near...right here...at the very gates...

VII. ***Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.***

We will all pass away. Even heaven, it says, will pass away. What lies beyond the land of heaven, already the furthest limit we imagine? Too large even to contemplate such a beyond. Yet such a beyond is the golden thread that pulls us through the present darkness. It is the beacon whose light, feeble at times, we must cling to.

VIII. *Therefore, keep awake—And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.*

Waking up- to ash and dust. We wake and discover the worst in the world. But this is it: the apocalypse⁵: the revelation of God in and through and of the darkness of the world. Be not afraid. When you wake to these things, I am near, at the very gates. Keep awake- wait, and watch. I am coming to you.

⁵ Song lyric by Imagine Dragons, written by Alexander Grant; Ben McKee; Josh Mosser; Daniel Platzman; Dan Reynolds; Wayne Sermon