

Proper 7 Year A 2026

I read to you this poem some fourteen years ago in a sermon. In my humble English major opinion, I think it is the most important poem written in the twentieth century... at least in western thought. So here it is again:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
 The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
 Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst
 Are full of passionate intensity.
 Surely some revelation is at hand;
 Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
 The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
 When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
 Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
 A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
 A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
 Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
 Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
 The darkness drops again; but now I know
 That twenty centuries of stony sleep
 Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
 And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
 Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

This poem, entitled *The Second Coming*, that I'm sure is familiar to some of you, was written by William Butler Yeats soon after the First World War I. Yeats is giving us a dose of post-modern, apocalyptic eschatology....y'all can use that phrase to impress your friends!... "Post-modern" in the sense that the poet sees the collapse of the western world, perhaps the entire world, into a nihilistic state never known before....a state

in which what we had held as truth had been dashed into meaningless fragments....a new civilization, or lack thereof, torn loose from the socio-economic, moral, spiritual and political underpinnings that had held it together....cut loose from the source as it were...with no center.... And things thus fall apart....mere anarchy and its violence is loosed into a dark nothingness;... “Apocalyptic,” in that a stunning revelation, an unveiling in the poet’s eyes is at hand...apocalypse means revelation;....and “eschatological” in that the poet sees civilization in the end times...Eschatology is the study of the end times, the last days, the final consummation; or, for Yeats... the final destruction.

Yeats was horrified that the human imagination could take the knowledge gained in the sciences and in the industrial revolution and use it in a demonic machine-like efficiency for killing: 8.5 million people on the battlefields of Europe; 21 million more wounded. My God, what insanity.... The world much smaller then, so these numbers were incomprehensible surely.... After WWI Karl Barth, the great German theologian said that theology had to be re-written, re-articulated...that the old paradigm was shattered...that now we could only speak of God as “wholly other.” That’s as sad as it is terrifying....a glimmer of the despairing post-modern nihilism, its hour come round at last.

Yeats saw history as a cycle... a spiral...a helix in time....cycling through the ages held together by a central axis of truth and ceremony....civilizations being made....and falling and being remade....violence an outward and visible sign of the close of an age and the beginning of another... and in hindsight, predictable: Ancient Troy....Rome....Dublin....but now with an astounding, exponential capacity for violence...what new age?...what rough beast is to come?The human imagination, that regenerative force, now co-opted, shackled by greed and self-interest and violence...and things fall apart....the center has lost its hold....the cycle of history lost from its moorings; “the blood dimmed tide is loosed” he says....and perhaps the most chilling line in the poem... “the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.”

Needless to say the poem is prophetic, and we, in our own day, are living the prophecy.

Of course we now have a hundred years of hindsight since the writing of this poem. We know that WWI birthed WWII, a renewed darkness,...the human imagination again called on to sell its soul to violence.....a passionate intensity to harness the suicidal power of the atom.... A darker nihilism in the machine....the prophecy truer than even Yeats knew...millions more in a century of violence killed for no good reason that we know of....and now

Iran, a new scapegoat....Israel and the United States gone rogue... genocide in Gaza and Lebanon....desert worlds literally and figuratively....Bethlehem occupied.... Pitilessly slouched upon by Post Modern Empire.... And now the threat of AI, a conscienceless, faceless intelligence beholden only to the algorithmic whims of mega-data... the cycle come round, the falcon uninformed by the falconer's voice...And what new age waits to be born, we wonder?....History and technological hubris tell us that it will be more violent than the last..... Corporate greed and the military industrial complex are out of control...answering only to the profit motive of Capitalism, once our friend, but now untethered... become the engine of our insatiable greed for wealth and power. Our government complicit. We find ourselves in the ever expanding sands of deserts....the croaking carrion wheeling, hungry, indignant..... impatient for their decaying prey. I wonder what Yeats would have thought of our now moribund democracy in America.

In our Gospel reading for today, Matthew is calling on the collective imagination of his people Israel Reminding them in his high rhetorical art that the time is nigh to return to the center, the source for the world's sake....his world too, falling apart....the Jerusalem Temple destroyed...Roman occupation turned brutal in its capricious violence. Matthew begins with a quote from Proverbs speaking of teachers and

students; masters and servants, reminding his first century audience of the great tradition of the sages...prophet/teachers who taught and led the people in the ways of Torah...the way of truth...the way of goodness....Moses....Joshua...Samuel...David....Elijah and Elisha...and now Jesus of Nazareth, the one from Galilee...the time honored tradition of one who will teach us the ways of mercy and justice....a royal priesthood, a holy nation....a way that claims for dignity those on the margins of life, a way that will thwart the helix of hate and violence and injustice....Then he quotes the prophet Micah....about daughters against mothers, and daughter in laws against mothers in law....these are the things that happen, according to Micah, at the coming of the messiah...at the end of the age...the Eschaton...the world coming apart and now....now ripe for the remaking.....a chapter ahead he reiterates this eschatological proposal...the dead are raised, the lame walk...the sick healed...all signs the imagination can't resist....all signs that the time is now.... A mystery, a reckoning.

This is in short, as this gospel is as a whole, a creation story... a story about the world being made and remade....the cycle of history spiraling into a future yet to be known, provisional, ambiguous...subject to human choice, and pregnant with possibility....Matthew sees in his time what Micah saw in his own...that the time is now and the stakes are high....the wrong world

must die; the wrong world of violence and self interest; the wrong world must pass away; and the world must be remade, made new..... and such transformation comes at great cost; and yet, Matthew tells us time and again....Do not fear.... Walk with courage this sacred path.... live into the life God imagines for God's world, choose a life unshackled, unbound by fear.....and that's a word for our time; a word for our time in which fear rules... courage is the choice, good people.... Just a few chapters before in the sermon on the Mount we were told what the path forward looks like:....We are to attend to our poor; we must attend to those who grieve; we must act justly; we must be merciful; we must be peacemakers; we must risk for the good.

The life of faith dear people of God is not an assent to some cumbersome and antiquated and culturally biased belief system, laden by the church's arrogant religious baggage laid on over the centuries; the life of faith is an assent to act for the good....plain and simple....theology and belief systems come and go....they keep theologians and biblical scholars off the streets....but faith is sacrificial love in motion....sacrifice the means of the imagination, the means by which the Holy Spirit is set loose, unbound in our world.....moving over the parched sands of the proverbial desert bearing living water...imagining anew what the world might look like

through God's eyes.... And we....we are implied in this high drama....this drama sprung from the mythy mind of the Creator...and we are in on the climax and denouement, and the end....artisans, servants of the master, students of the teacher, co-crafting a story of the coming of unimaginable joy...Our choice to give ourselves over to this life of grace and truth and beauty matters to the universe entire....and do not fear....our God is with us...our God inhabits God's people as imaginative fire....as life giving water...as mercy and compassion; as peace and justice, and a love alive raising the dead of our world to dignity....God as *Word* that moves over the face of the deep as it was in the beginning....and the time is now, no less crucial...just read the signs. They are everywhere.

We are promised in our sacred lore...our holy writ...that this way of love...the way of the kingdom of God will endure, a prophecy perhaps....but that depends on all people of faith...all people around the world in all religions and cultures...yes, God is a universalist...the Book of Genesis tells us so.....the fate of our world depends on our choosing, standing at the center, so that the center will hold....that is the essence of free-will....not that we choose whether to sin or not, that was a decidedly Augustinian premise....free will is of God, given to us, God's people... a gift to make the noble and privileged choice to love..... To sacrifice for the good of the

world that God loves passionately....To be in Christ and in solidarity with our neighbor is to embody the Second Coming. That is discipleship: to be the second coming of Christ.

It seems that each prophet of every age imagines their world to be the worst.... But the world is as it is.... Power corrupts and tends towards violence. The eschaton, the apocalypse, are forever upon us. We live but for one thing my friends: to bear the power of Love in the face of evil, with the courage that Love engenders; and with the knowledge that Love is stronger... stronger than any rough beast that comes our way.