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 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Texts: Isaiah 32: 1-4; Luke 24: 13-19, 28-29
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Shoring Up the Ruins: An Invitation to T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land"

"I'm walking through streets that are dead..."

-Bob Dylan, "Love Sick,"

From the 1997 album *Time Out of Mind*

Last year, T. S. Eliot's formidable masterpiece, "The Waste Land," turned 100. Like Joyce's *Ulysses*, it was published in 1922, and it became one of the central pillars of 20th century literature. This past September I learned that none other than Ralph Fiennes, Voldemort himself, was doing a public reading of the poem in New York, and while I couldn't get tickets, I was led to revisit it for the first time in 25 years. It had been assigned in an American Lit class I took in college, but I hadn't really connected with it then. When I picked it up again this past fall, I found it almost intoxicating, even strangely addictive. You know what it's like when you become infatuated with a song, and you want to hear a melody over and over again? That's what it was like for me with "The Waste Land" this fall, only it was specific phrases that I wished to hear again and again. Phrases like: "Come in under the shadow of this red rock," "I will show you fear in a handful of dust," "He'll want to know what you done with that money he gave you to get yourself some teeth." For several weeks in October and November, I listened to different readings of the poem almost every day. Soon I began to chase some of the poem's references - in Ovid and Augustine, in Dante and in Shakespeare, and little by little, it came to seem not as though I was absorbing the poem, but that it was absorbing me. It wasn't me reading the poem any longer, but rather the poem was somehow reading me, reading us, reading our entire world, as a sumptuous piece of imaginative theology.

It wasn't long before I began imagining what it would mean to incorporate it into one of our services. Eliot does, after all, belong to a long tradition of New England writers - he had deep family ties in Boston, and spent a good many formative years there. And like Emily Dickinson, his poetry has had a powerful impact upon the life of FCCOL over the years. Eliot too lives in these walls. And so this coming Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, we'll be doing a complete read through of the poem at 6:30 here in the Meetinghouse.

As a lead up to that reading, I thought I'd offer a kind of primer to "The Waste Land" this morning. It won't be a comprehensive reading - I can't explain the poem to you. But I'd like to walk you through a handful of key moments that take place across its five sections. It's an effort to give you something to steer by should you choose to come on Wednesday. But it's also an effort to convince you that these are words meant for you, words meant for us, reaching into our common afflictions and struggles as human beings. How do we make meaning when things seem to be falling apart? How do we find healing, and solace, when we are surrounded by catastrophes? How are we to find a source of life when the landscape around us can feel so lifeless, so empty? "The Waste Land," then, is a sort of pilgrim's progress for the modern world, in which we are all in search of healing, wholeness, peace. In the words of our opening hymn, we become as pilgrims through a barren land, searching for streams from a crystal fountain. I'd

like us to yield to Eliot's vision for a few minutes this morning, to see what the poem might disclose about our lives.

Eliot, you probably know, wrote his poem in circumstances remarkably akin to our own. World War I had recently ended, and Eliot was working as a banker in London, feeling anxious and burdened. So too, a global pandemic had swept through the US, the UK, and the entire world, killing and disabling scores of people. It was a world of fear and loss that Eliot, and really that everyone, inhabited. To add to that, Eliot himself was trapped in a loveless and contentious marriage, and so he was subject to an inner turmoil that somehow matched the mood of a shell shocked and traumatized Europe. Eliot, then, is writing from the abyss, his own abyss, and that of the world.

In its final form, the poem presents a gallery of images and scenes in which the world is out of joint - a world of ruined landscapes, haunted by ghosts of those now dead. Classical characters, myths really, hover about the edges of the poem. Some are malignant. Some beneficent. There are domestic scenes of individuals who are carrying great wells of emotion within them, while having no idea how to speak of those things, how to reach the depths within their own lives. Characters talk past one another - they chatter away, while gramophones play, while the noise of traffic circulates outside apartment windows, while snatches of overheard conversation drift in. Beneath it all, there is a kind of insistent throbbing, a low level hum, which is the call of the depths, the call of being, the call to one's own deepest humanity. "The Waste Land," then, presents human existence as a quest, in which the poet, and the reader, are somehow trying to hear those depths, and to answer that call of being.

Let's turn now to the first passage, the first waystation on our tour through the poem. You'll find it printed on the insert to your bulletin. It's found at the beginning of the poem, just after a nostalgic description of the Munich Hofgarten and the surrounding mountains, an aristocratic European world forever lost after the war. From that idyllic recollection, Eliot shifts the scene, locating us in a mythic, poetic - we might even say, a biblical - space. Here are the lines:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
 Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
 You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
 A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
 And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
 And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
 There is shadow under this red rock,
 (Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
 And I will show you something different from either
 Your shadow at morning striding behind you
 Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
 I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

Eliot's questions are worth attending to. When confronting a historical event such as a pandemic, or a war, or in our case, an attempted coup - what keeps you grounded, rooted? What continues to grow deep within your soul after an overwhelming event? Are those roots stabilizing, or might they be more ambiguous, producing branches and shoots that are less than desirable? What roots did Europe, and America, cling to following the 1918 pandemic, and the

war? There were roots in that ground, branches growing out of that soil, that would prove every bit as devastating as what Eliot was confronting. It's a question worthy of our consideration too: what roots continue to clutch at us, for good or ill? What branches will grow in the soil of our own lives, of our own democracy, having gone through several successive crises?

Eliot then turns to a form of address, directed at us, his readers. "Son of Man," he says, which is how God addresses the prophet Ezekiel in the book bearing his name. It's also how Jesus refers to himself, a phrase simply meaning, "The Human One." At the beginning of the poem, then, we as readers are addressed in our humanity. But we, the readers, become as prophets receiving the word of God. Borrowing language from the prophet Isaiah, we are afforded a place of shelter, a place of shade, from which to ride out the rest of the poem. Eliot, or perhaps it is God, warns us of what is to come (I will show you fear in a handful of dust), but like Elijah sheltering in a cave during a desert storm, we too have been given a sheltering rock from which to withstand the stormy blasts. Come in under the shadow of this red rock.

The second and third passages that I've selected belong together. After providing us with a kind of spiritual shelter, we are delivered unto the streets of London, in the very district in which Eliot worked. "Unreal city," he writes, "I had not thought death had undone so many. Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled," the poet observes, as crowds of people throng across London Bridge.

It's a quote taken directly from Dante's *Inferno*, as the poet sees a vast throng of people, waiting to enter the bowels of hell. Eliot's invocation of Dante gives us to understand that the residents of London, shuffling to their jobs with downcast eyes, are sleepwalking through a kind of hell - traumatized, shellshocked, uncomprehending. A church keeps the hours. It's bell tolls, but like the bells in John Donne's famous poem, it is the sound of death's approach. The bell tolls for thee. Like Bob Dylan in the lines that open his own "Waste Land" on *Time Out of Mind*, Eliot is walking through streets that are, in more ways than one, dead.

To get to the next passage, we're forced to skip a number of notable episodes in a section called "A Game of Chess," in which an unsettling, and yet also highly recognizable scene of missed conversational cues takes place. But we soon arrive at yet another domestic scene in a section entitled "The Fire Sermon." This time a young woman, a typist in a London office, is soullessly going through the motions of her evening routine. Listen to Eliot's language:

At the violet hour, when the eyes and back
 Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits
 Like a taxi throbbing waiting,
 I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,
 Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see
 At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives
 Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea,
 The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights
 Her stove, and lays out food in tins.
 Out of the window perilously spread
 Her drying combinations touched by the sun's last rays,
 On the divan are piled (at night her bed)
 Stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays.

It's a dreary and depressing scene, and yet I love it. I love the image of the human engine waiting like a taxi, throbbing at the violet hour, a transitional and promising part of the day. As the typist makes her way home to a shabby London flat, to pass a dull evening, we encounter a figure from the classical world, Tiresias, one of several ancient persons haunting the text. Tiresias is a blind and androgynous prophet, both male and female, who is thus enabled to perceive the human condition more fully. Tellingly, it is Tiresias that greets Odysseus in the Underworld, showing him how to get home. In "The Waste Land," it is the presence of Tiresias that begins to move us from out of the Underworld, out from the land of the dead, out of hell, and into the land of the living. Here, Tiresias presides over the domestic scene as the woman lights her stove, lays out food in tins, sorts her laundry. She will shortly have a loveless sexual encounter, after which she'll feel glad to be left alone, listening to her gramophone. Through it all, though, we have the sense of a human being, and maybe all of humanity, idling, waiting, throbbing, pulsing with a life force that we somehow cannot access.

As the scene comes to a close, Eliot invokes the language of St. Augustine, from his *Confessions*: "To Carthage then I came, burning, burning, burning." It is the scene just prior to Augustine's conversion, when he is agitated and restless, in search of a spiritual healing and homecoming that he cannot achieve on his own. He feels the questions of his heart burning within him, even as God prepares to draw near to Augustine, and, by extension, to Augustine's, and to Eliot's readers. Have you ever felt such burning within you, the poem seems to ask? When have you felt that burning, scorching heat in your soul? When have you been driven to change yourself?

That sensation of a burning spiritual desire prepares us for the transition that follows, in which a nameless Christ appears. We are suddenly on the road to Emmaus with two unnamed disciples, whose hearts are also said to burn within them. Here is how Eliot puts it, in the next passage I selected:

Who is the third who walks always beside you?
 When I count, there are only you and I together
 But when I look ahead up the white road
 There is always another one walking beside you
 Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
 I do not know whether a man or a woman
 —But who is that on the other side of you?

We are no longer in London now, for we have returned to the mythic, stony, biblical landscape with which we began, the scene of the prophets, which doubles as a space within each of our souls. Has there not been, Eliot seems to ask, a nameless one walking beside us through the dust and sand, a hooded figure, shrouded so as not to be recognized, but present all the same? Who is the third who walks always beside you, the poet asks? Has there not been an accompanying presence with us throughout our journey into the barren lands? Has Christ himself not preceded us into the Inferno of the world?

And then, in what I consider to be the climax of the poem, we find these words, our next passage:

What have we given?
 My friend, blood shaking my heart

The awful daring of a moment's surrender
 Which an age of prudence can never retract
 By this, and this only, we have existed
 Which is not to be found in our obituaries
 Or in memories draped by the beneficent spider
 Or under seals broken by the lean solicitor
 In our empty rooms.

To put it more colloquially: when, in the secret places of our hearts, in the secret moments of our lives, when have we risked disturbing the universe with our deepest questions, with our own burning desires? When? What have we given? When have we been asked to give not this or that, nothing that could ever be located in our obituaries or mistaken for assets, but to risk our very selves? What have we given? And when have we cowered, taken cover, unwilling to speak what we know to be true, unwilling to stake our lives upon something higher and nobler than we are? How often have we been the typist, blandly opening her tins of food while the engine of her humanity idles? How often have we remained denizens of the Unreal City, half alive, staggering through our lives? What have we given of ourselves for the sake of the world? What have we risked?

The poem concludes with a series of quick images: the sound of thunder, the long awaited fall of rain in a parched land, and then a wounded man seated on the shore of a lake, fishing. The wounded man is a medieval figure known as the Fisher-King, drawn from legends of King Arthur and the Holy Grail. But he is also each of us, wounded human beings with one part of ourselves trapped in the waste land, while another part gasps in relief as the clouds deliver rain to our parched lives. Eliot then supplies a Hindu benediction, of all things, written in Sanskrit: Shantih, Shantih, Shantih, or, Peace, Peace, Peace, an echo of St. Paul's own benediction in the book of Philipians: "The Peace of God, which passes all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

I have barely scratched the surface of this elusive and magisterial poem. I hope you come on Wednesday to expose yourself to its power and force. I hear in it one of the finest descriptions of the modern world, and of the human condition, that I have ever encountered. I hear it as a set of questions delivered unto a world in crisis: what cultural myths have we relied upon - the myth of the frontier, say, or the myth of the heroic individual, or the myth of capital accumulation - and what myths or stories might actually bring the healing that we most desire? And I hear in it the summons of a Lenten pilgrimage, in which we are all asked to risk ourselves for the awful daring of a moment's surrender, rendering ourselves as unto God.

Shantih, Shantih, Shantih...Amen.