

New Heavens and a New Earth

Isaiah 61-66

WHAT WE FOUND

The anointing of 61:1-3 gathered everything the study had met, and then we found Jesus, in his hometown synagogue, handed the scroll of Isaiah, reading from chapter 61 (with a line of 58:6 folded in), sitting down, and preaching a one-sentence first sermon: *“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”* (Luke 4:21; CCC 714). He stopped mid-verse, before the day of vengeance, a clause many have heard held for his return: the year of favor is now. And the anointing presses outward, as the Church's chrismal tradition makes explicit: the Christ shares his chrism, and the job description of 61:1-3 is ours.

Zion was renamed Hephzibah and Beulah, delight and married, and the exiles' bold prayer, *“O that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down”* (64:1), was answered, in Mark's telling, by one Greek verb used twice: the heavens *torn* open at the Jordan (1:10) and the veil *torn* top to bottom at the cross (15:38): heaven ripped open so God could come down; the veil, so we could come in. Then the new creation (65:17-19; CCC 1043-1045): no more the sound of weeping, the wolf and lamb of chapter 11 closing the book's own frame, and chapter 40's *comfort* delivered in a mother's arms: *“As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you”* (66:13), the Jerusalem above, our mother, the Church (Galatians 4:26; CCC 757).

We faced the book's actual last verse, 66:24, without flinching: Jesus himself quotes it of Gehenna (Mark 9:48). The Church holds both truths the book holds: God predestines no one and desires all to be saved (CCC 1036-1037); hell is definitive self-exclusion (CCC 1033), *“and you would not”* followed to its terminus, possible because, as the Church's pastors have often put it, love that cannot be declined is not love. The warning is one of love's urgent forms: seek the LORD while he may be found. Then the ending almost no one knows: God sending *survivors* to coastlands that have never heard, and, in the book's closing paragraph: *“some of them also I will take for priests... says the LORD”* (66:21). A priesthood from the nations, in which the Church has always heard her own: the parish down the street, glimpsed in Isaiah's final paragraph. The book that began with one volunteer ends with God sending a whole people. We answered together, out loud: here am I. Send me.

THE THREAD LEDGER (COMPLETE)

- **The Holy One of Israel:** heard from the seraphim (6), dwelling in Zion's midst (12:6), looking at the last to the humble and contrite (66:2).
- **Zion:** harlot city smelted faithful (1); banqueting mountain (25); barren mother singing (54); house of prayer for all peoples (56); bride (62); nursing mother (66): the Church.
- **Light:** walk in it (2:5); dawn on Galilee (9:2); a person (42:6; 49:6); breaking forth through mercy (58:8); sunrise (60:1); a city beyond the sun (Revelation 21).
- **The arm of the LORD:** guessed, sealed, revealed (53:1-12): the Servant, pierced (53:5), alive beyond death (53:10-12), and 59:16 for a postscript: his own arm brought him victory.
- **Comfort:** commanded (40:1), embodied (61:2), delivered in a mother's arms (66:13).

- **Here am I, send me:** one volunteer (6:8); Philip's chariot (Acts 8); beautiful feet (52:7); a sent people with priests from the nations (66:19-21). The title was the assignment.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Ambrose • *Exposition of the Gospel of Luke*

The Anointed One reads the prophecy of his own anointing, and the eyes of all are fixed on him. The Church's chrismal tradition presses the anointing outward: the Christ shares his chrism, and the mission read aloud in that synagogue is read over everyone she anoints. The scroll of Isaiah 61 is quietly handed to the baptized.

St. Cyprian of Carthage • *On the Unity of the Church* (5-6)

He cannot have God for his Father who does not have the Church for his mother. We are born of her womb in baptism, nourished at her breast in the sacraments, and there is no such thing as a motherless Christian.

St. Irenaeus of Lyons • *Against Heresies* (4.20.7)

The glory of God is a living man, and the life of man is the vision of God. The new heavens and new earth are not God's escape from his creation but its healing: what he made, he remakes, and the creature fully alive, beholding God, is the point of the entire project.

LIVING IT FROM HERE

- Pray Isaiah 61:1-3 over your own life this week: the Anointed shares his anointing, and the job description is now yours, in your coastland.
- Write tonight's date and Isaiah 6:8 on the back of your old sealed guess, and keep it in your Bible at Isaiah 53: a relic of your own formation.
- Begin the book again, alone: one chapter a week, sixty-six weeks. It is a different book now, because you are a different reader.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives."

Isaiah 61:1 (RSV2CE)

THE STUDY IS COMPLETE

Fourteen sessions, sixty-six chapters, one commission. The seraphim are still singing; the feast is still free; the coastlands are still waiting. Here am I, send me.