

THE INWARD ARC
NOT TOO LATE

Be not afraid; I bring you good news of great joy!

Christmas Eve, 2012

Perhaps you know Heywood Broun's short story (*A Shepherd*) about a shepherd named Amos who harked the herald angels singing along with all the other shepherds on that holy night, but who would not go to see the Christ child lying in a manger, because his sheep needed him. He would miss the event, for someone had to keep the sheep. For his steadfastness, there comes to him from the heavens a blessing of a different kind.

That story reminds me of *Why the Chimes Rang*, by Raymond Alden. Two brothers have longed for years for the day when they might travel to the great city and attend the high service of worship in the great cathedral on Christmas Day. At last the day comes and they go. But when they encounter a frail woman unconscious in the snow, Elder Brother forgoes the great service and sends Little Brother on alone to make their small offering.

Henry Van Dyke's *Story of the Other Wise Man* rings changes on this same melody. We learn there of a fourth wise man, Artaban, who sets out following yonder star with the famous three. He becomes separated from the others during the journey, as he turns from the quest in order to help one, then another, then another escape evil snares. Too late, he comes to Bethlehem, where all have already fled Herod—and then he spends his life searching in vain for the Christ. He too receives a strange blessing at the last.

O. Henry caught this theme with his *Gift of the Magi*. A deeply loving couple so desire to give one another a Christmas gift, but they are so poor. Each forms a secret plan. She sells her beautiful hair to the wig-maker so she can buy her man a platinum chain for his watch. He sells his watch so he might afford tortoise-shell combs to adorn his wife's long hair. On Christmas day, their gifts come too late, it seems. But the author bows to them in honor, for they have received the gift of generosity. Why, from beginning to end, Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* throbs with a threat that the good each one needs will come too late.

Why is this motif so fitting to Christmas Presence?

Think of this. Every anguish we struggle with is bound in the fetters of the time we fear, of the things that come too late. Whoever mourns their beloved dead this Christmas feels time like granite that will not move. Asked what she most wished for now, the daughter of Dawn Hochsprung, the school principal in Sandy Hook who gave her life for her flock, said of her mother only, "Come back. Come back." Too late. If our dreams have

failed, Too Late is the name of that spirit in the night. If dread disease bears down on us or on one we love, and especially if we know we dealt our body ill and brought the danger in, “too late” is the refrain. If true love has walked us by or marched away; if betrayal, or age, brings to our lips a bitter cup; if a child, grown, has turned his back and gone a lightless path, and children come no more, “Too late,” our sorrows drum.

From long friendship with the gospels of our Lord, and from much study of the times in which these stories were written, I have come to feel that every word here was inscribed by a doctor of the soul to help heal an ailment in the Body of Christ, whose name was Too Late. You see, Jesus was just as gone for them as for us, but way back then he had not been gone long. Too many in the early church thought they were too late to know Christ; that only apostles had grounds for real faith. Too many despaired that they had missed the time for witness, the time for truth, the time to have lived and known the Lord themselves. For people in such despair, and for the sake of real faith, the evangelists blended each of their stories into these gospels to draw off the anxious poisons of error and guilt and untimeliness and fear, in order to shout for all generations, *Be not afraid! Behold. Now in flesh appearing!*

But how can this be, since we have not known the man? *The Holy Spirit will come upon you, says the Angel, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. And to all who receive him, he gives power to become children of God, born not of human will, but of God.* Now. It is not too late.

Oh, it's plain that, if the dark angel of Too Late has your life by the throat, mere contradictions—*is too! is not!*—don't help. But through shadows and glimpses of Christmas, you might begin to hear how all the music of Christ's birth is set to one eternal end. It is this, that you, personally, might feel bodily that your Creator is calling you into life utterly different from the ordinary time of cause and effect, which is bearing all things to oblivion. In your depths, there it is: a light absolute and inextinguishable, burning through every concern and diminishment and threat. By this light, your flesh reads meaning in these words of Howard Thurman: “Death is something that comes in life, but not to life. This is the meaning of the eternal in time.” No condition that you face turns the face of the Eternal away from you. It is not too late. This voice, when you hear it, offers no contradiction, but benediction. If the words seem to strange or hard to make sense of, then they are either nonsense . . . or news. You choose. You can choose to hear them like a shepherd keeping sheep on the night-dark slopes: *Be not afraid; I bring you good news of great joy!* It is not too late.

We tell these stories of Jesus' birth over and again not because they happened, but because they help. To our once-dead, twice born self, they invite

us not to think about what is eternal, but to touch the Eternal as a child would a lamb. The wise one within us learns, by bowing, reverence. The rich residing here is given again the gift to give. The caretaker of sheep, who is you, who is me, who is like a beast with burdens abounding—it is we ourselves whom heralds would bring into the Presence of the One. *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it.* The light is in you. It burns in the night with the hope you hold for the least being. When you are low beyond low, the light burns first for you, keeping the sheep of your self. *Be not afraid; there is good news of great joy!* It is not too late.

“What’s to-day, my fine fellow?” said Scrooge. “To-day?” replied the boy. “Why, Christmas Day.” “It’s Christmas Day!” said Scrooge to himself. “I haven’t missed it. The Spirits have done it all in one night. They can do anything they like. Of course they can. Of course they can.”

It is not too late. Good night.

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps

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*The Riverside Church
in the City of New York*

I
have
a
Christ-
mas
candle,
A candle
tall and red.
I light it in
the evening
And place it
by my bed.
Then if the
little Christ child
Should come on
Christmas night,
He’ll enter into
my small room
And bless me and my light.