

THE INWARD ARC  
READY THE MIND

Texts on Sunday, December 16, 2012

*Philippians 4: 4-9; Luke 3: 7-17*

It is hard to speak in the aftermath of great harm. In Newtown, Conn., where the dead are not yet buried, songs, silence, embraces, candles—these matter. Lots of words don't. Politicians are mostly awkward with real speech and real feeling, yet they are given the microphones. Over and over, they stutter the word *awful tragedy*, as if saying it could soothe the ravaging beast. It does not. Fortunately, Mr. Obama let his person feel a way through the words he offered for all of us. There was help in that. Still, it is hard to utter a word in the wake of woe. Pastors who suppose they have the answers from the back of the book mislead their sheep. Poetry can work, if it is just right. A long time ago, in the aftermath of endless of warring bloodshed, Emily Dickinson went down to find words just right:

After great pain a formal feeling comes—  
The Nerves sit ceremonious like Tombs—  
The stiff Heart questions—was it He that bore,  
And Yesterday—or Centuries before?  
The Feet, mechanical, go round—  
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought—  
A Wooden way  
Regardless grown,  
A Quartz contentment, like a stone—  
This is the Hour of Lead—  
Remembered, if outlived,  
As Freezing persons recollect the Snow—  
First—Chill—then Stupor—then the Letting go—



Here, in the space after great pain, the future we need, the future which wants us, we can sometimes see. You have witnessed this in families, sometimes, when members sorely driven apart and angry confront a death all out of season, and feel, sometimes, who they really are. Perhaps you have seen the future appear like the Son rising over a church which had been split into shards of truth, which was no truth. For a second or two after September 11<sup>th</sup>, the world saw the future that must come. Then the war-makers shut the blinds and put us back at our business—Halliburton, homeland, and hatred.

Let's face it: It is easier to run our lives 'round and 'round on the familiar wheel of our old hamster cage. Most of the time, we don't even know that we can get off the wheel, or that we're in a cage, or that its door is open, or

that the path beyond that door is not set, but uncharted. If we sense that this unusual feeling after evil is done just *must* mean more than a shot of endorphins in the blood, then let us choose the hardest, highest reading for what might be happening, not the easy one. Let us find a meaning that will require more of us, not that same old easy which ordinary religion and politics and culture tempt us into. Let us wonder if what is now appearing might be the future showing herself in strange glory. Are we seeing one of the dresses God wears for us when our tears have cleared the eye enough to see? If we say Yes, it will want more of us. It won't be easier. But it will be possible. The old ways will not stay possible for long. The roof of the old house is gone, the timbers are rotten. A hard rain is gonna fall.

Perhaps in thousands of churches today, the message is about new laws and regulations for gun control,. As a citizen, I will sign on—not because any laws can solve our crisis or send us the future, but because the people need to join together in right action. Just laws do help us learn who we are, and sometimes they are the only way to stop the powerful from abusing the powerless. That said, as a spiritual guide, I would warn you against the false hope that the future of God is the same as a new set of laws and righteous action. Neither is the future of God the vaunted comforts in heaven, nor the fierce wrath that animated the shrill cry of John the Baptist. Laws and dreams and shrill cries for justice are the way of all the earth. They will come and go through all ages.

John the Baptist belonged to that old way that has been coming and going forever. When the people asked him in the urgent moment of the new, What then should we do? he said *Be nice. Share your things with the poor. Don't cheat. Be satisfied with things as they are.* Really? This! was the preparation for the coming of the Lord? Be good? Be fair? No. John's word was just that same moral porridge preachers always feed the people when they do not understand what is coming. The good thing about John was that he knew that he did not understand the future that must come. He only knew that the old is done. He knew that his baptism was plain water compared with God Holy Spirit, God fire. In this way, the story of John the Baptist serves as a warning for us, to goad us to acknowledge that our religion, too, and all its old practices, with all our politics, are plain water compared with the future that must come—the future that is showing herself in strange glory in this windless place after evil has touched us.

Are there intimations of the Son rising, the new birth to come?

Here is one. Every Friday, before I leave my study here, I pull a few books from my shelves which, I hope, if I ride with them for a few hours before Sunday, may take me to an overlook on a world worth saying some-

thing about, come Sunday. I made my choices this past Friday, too, wondering how this awful incursion of violence on all our hearts would turn the path of my preparation for holy worship. I mostly chose books that fitted my long-planned theme. But one by Howard Thurman caught my eye simply because his words have often nourished me. *Meditations of the Heart* it is called. It contains about 150 essays of one or two pages each. I have not read them all. I drew the finger-wide volume from its place and packed it.

Yesterday, I opened it without a plan to an essay called “All Life Is One.” There Thurman wrote:

It was a very simple statement—“They, as part of us, have done this to us.” Think it over very, very carefully. One of the most direct results of a sense of injury is the element of divisiveness . . . that it introduces . . . Such an attitude establishes a gulf between men, made possible by the effect of their deeds on their own kind . . . The injured person seems instinctively to feel that the person who injures him must be deeply and profoundly different, or else the thing that was done would not have been done . . . But when we begin with the idea that all life is one—that there is no such thing as an ultimate detachment of any part of life from the whole—then the meaning of the simple statement, “They, as part of us, have done this to us,” begins to make sense . . . What the other person does to me is, in some very real sense, a part of me doing that thing to a part of us . . .

To some, it may seem too soon, or even harsh, to draw our eye to such a lesson; to turn away from the keening anguish of the families of the dead and set our attention on a far horizon where perhaps by the grace of God we see ourselves related to all life, and all that happens in life, whether for good or for ill. Yet throughout this Advent, we have been affirming the power we have in God to grow into spiritual maturity. Therefore, like a dove determined for peace, may the word of God fall fast upon us and break beneath the ordinary waters of our ordinary beliefs. May we be baptized into the Word of the One in whom all life is One. May we be graced with the Eye of Spirit, to see—much more than feel the heat of our fear, our anger, our confusion, our loss—to see our Eternal union with all life.

At that horizon, the dress of God is shimmering in fire. At that horizon, we feel that the violence spurting horrifically from our people every few months or weeks is our violence; that follows straight from our nation’s myths of war and glory; of hatred, Halliburton, and homeland. And of course our worst weaknesses are manifest through the actions of minds gone weak wild and weary. Of course! But it is our disorder, or faithlessness, our despair that is showing in Sandy Hook. If you take in what Thurman proposes—“What the other person does to me is, in some very real sense, a part of me doing that thing to a part of us . . .”—not as a burden of error or guilt, but as a possibility, the “you” who tries this thought will grow great in the possibility.

No, love is not enough. No, justice and good laws are not enough for the future that must come. Rather, to you yourself the word comes. Your God asks you to become a vessel in whom the world's fires can burn but not burn you. Become a vessel in whom sorrows and joys will pass, as all passions do, touching you really but consuming you never; for you can pass through these trials into Holy Spirit fire, and know eternally the meaning of the prophecy, The Lord is near. Ready the mind, O faithful. Become such a flame and show the way for others. It is the greatest gift you can give. This is the manifestation of love and justice the future seeks from you now. In Christ, you can bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things. The Lord is near. Let your gentleness be known to all. Do not worry about anything. Do you feel it, how greatly the world needs you who are growing up into the fullness of Christ to stand for the union and communion of all things, living and not living? Not as one who believes stuff with the mind—stuff that divides and separates you from others to their injury—but as one whose mind is ready for insight, to apprehend the future that God is sending. In that vision, rejoice. Again, I say, Rejoice. This is how you know the Lord is near.

*Rev. Stephen H. Phelps*

© 2012 Stephen H. Phelps

*The Riverside Church  
in the City of New York*