

Candle Talk, Christmas Eve 2024

If you could send a message to the future, what would you say?

One of my husband's hobbies is patching up old violins. These aren't valuable instruments—FYI, the fiddle in your attic probably isn't, either—but they all have a story to tell, if only we could read it.

Recently, my husband found a story we could read. When he took the top off one old instrument, he found the following message, written in pencil on an inside surface:

Germans are 60 miles from Moscow. Outlook very bad. In other words, the world is in a terrible condition. I hope when this is read it will be much better. October 12, 1941.

It was signed, “Leon Peabody, RD 1, Chester County” – probably Pennsylvania, since this violin came in with others from around Philadelphia. From America, Leon Peabody was watching the Second World War in Europe. He sent a message to the future to tell us how that felt; but he included a word of hope. A word of hope, cast into the future—doesn't that feel familiar?

Take the top off our holy scriptures and you'll find they contain a lot of messages to the future, usually coming out of a terrible condition. Think of the years described by the prophet Isaiah, with Assyria raining fear and destruction on the people of Israel. Like Leon Peabody, Isaiah could say—and did say—that the world was in a terrible condition. But Isaiah also said:

*The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined. (Isaiah 9:2)*

A word of hope, cast into the future.

The years around Jesus' birth were a terrible time in Palestine. Herod the Great, a paranoid and increasingly delusional king, ruled the people through terror. Divided against each other, Jewish factions watched for opportunity. Herod's death unleashed a battle for power that Rome finally put down by force.

Luke's gospel says that out of that terrible condition came a message from an old man named Zechariah, who said:

“By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” (Luke 1:78-79)

A word of hope, coming out of a terrible condition, cast so far into the future that we can still hear it today.

If you could send a message to the future, what would you say? Thinking of war in Ukraine, devastation in Gaza, starvation in Sudan, division in America, would you write something like what Leon Peabody wrote in his fiddle? “The world is in a terrible condition”?

And would you stop there? Or would you cast into the future a word of hope? Like Isaiah or Zechariah, would you tell the future to expect a light?

The stars are so far away that their light is a long time reaching us. The light we see from the stars is thousands, tens of thousands, *millions* of years old. Every star, then, is a little like Isaiah, a little like Zechariah, a little like Leon Peabody, casting a word of hope into the future. A hope that the world will not walk in darkness forever. A hope that light will shine.

And here we stand, with light in our hands.

It's time to send a message to the future. A message that the people walking in darkness have seen a great light; that that light, even now, is guiding our feet into the way of peace. Because thousands of years ago, amid terrible conditions, that light broke upon the world when a child was born.

Are you ready to cast a word of hope? If so, then let's sing it; and on the final verse of our final hymn, I invite you to raise your candles high, the better to see the light; the better to spread the message.

“Christ the Lord, the Lord most glorious, now is born, O shout aloud!” Let us stand and sing.