

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Haste!”

Dr. Jay Howell

Philippians 2:1-11

December 24, 2022; Christmas Eve

“Don’t know why? I have to drive so fast. / My car has nothing to prove. / It’s not new, ‘But it’ll do 0 to 60 in 5.2. / I’m in a hurry to get things done / Oh I rush and rush until life’s no fun / All I really gotta do is live and die / But I’m in a hurry and don’t know why.” Thirty years ago the country band Alabama offered those now prophetic words skewering a society so consumed with haste it had lost sight of the very reason for all that hustling and bustling. “I’m in a hurry and don’t know why.”

Fortunately, I have the solution. It’s a period of time dedicated to a slower pace of things, a lighter load, fewer things to do, and more time to do them. It’s called...Christmas. Did anyone roll their eyes?

You probably already caught the sarcasm, but honestly there’s something of a tragedy that happens every year. This holiday, this celebration centered around the birth of one we call Savior, Lord, and ironically, the Prince of Peace, but then the preparation and celebration of that birth tends to bring about anything but.

I mean, be honest, how many of you would raise your hands right now and say, “You know, now that I think about it, the past few days really have been peaceful and restorative for me”? I don’t know maybe a handful of people have that blessing, but my guess is the past week has been a flurry of getting things ready for family coming in town, or maybe getting ready to go out of town (and now you’re here), of getting the last few Christmas presents—or all the Christmas presents because you waited too long—or of shuttling the kids to all the number of end of year functions and Christmas recitals, or squaring away all those end of year things at work, because you know next week may not be all that productive, or getting everything ready for Christmas Eve dinner tonight, or for Christmas brunch or dinner tomorrow, you name it. My guess is your last few days have looked like that.

Or maybe, for some of you, the past few days have been days you’ve been kind of dreading, not because of everything you had to do, but because of the ones you’re missing or the ones you’re worried about, because these days leading up to Christmas have made the burden of care or the struggles of health or the sting of loss all the more painful.

And yet, with the frantic swirl, or even the heartache of the past week, still we gather on Christmas Eve and hear the proclamation and the blessing of the angels out there in the fields, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth *peace* among those whom he favors!” *Peace*, they say. It’s almost kind of funny.

Needless to say, we may not be so consistent in reflecting peace this time of year. And let’s be honest, sometimes the church doesn’t do the best of jobs countering the haste that seems to dominate this season, giving in to the temptation and pressure to just add and add and add.

I remember two years ago, this was the Covid Christmas, so we had all these precautions, and it was also the first time we tried our first Christmas Eve service outside. Like it is now, it’s meant for families with younger kids, just a short service of lessons and carols. But that year, to offer an option for those who were hesitant to be indoors for a worship service, we had it outside.

Incidentally, as many will remember, that was also the Christmas Eve when a big cold front and snow came through in a matter of hours, and you could feel the wind picking up and the temperature dropping right during that service outside, to the point, that I knew we didn’t have a lot of time before everyone turned in frozen pumpkins. So, I kind of nudged things along, encouraging shall we say that things be kept moving at a brisk pace. All in all, we were done in 25 minutes, afterward Bob Crawford came up to me and said, “Thank you, Jay. Lovely service. But by the way, I don’t think I’ve ever heard ‘Joy to the World’ played quite that fast.”

But maybe we’re taking our cues, right? I mean, the way we read the story of Jesus’ birth, it doesn’t exactly exude peace or a leisurely pace either.

Think of how it happened. What do you imagine the circumstances to be? Mary and Joseph, taking their time on the road, and then quietly giving birth? No, more likely we think of them both, exhausted, trying to find room somewhere, but it’s all filled up, at which point, Mary says to Joseph, “I think it’s time. I think it’s happening.” And the only place they could come across was a nearby stable, where they hurry to, at which point Jesus was born and laid in a manger. (That may not be quite how it happened, but that’s how we often imagine it.)

Then, think of the angels. Frances and I came across this painting—it’s the one on the front cover—in a devotional we’ve been doing together, one that looks at a particular work of art each day. And in this one, you can see Mary and Joseph and the newly born Jesus, but then above them, you see this swirl of angels. The first thing you might wonder is, how come all the angels are Caucasian? Fair question. Topic for another day, but artistic portrayals of the holy is no laughing matter.

But something else was striking about this. If you look closely, the angels aren’t all just huddled around the holy family. It’s more like they’re passing through. The ones on the middle

are wonderfully looking upon the newborn king; the ones to the left are eagerly waiting their turn; but the ones on the right, the ones who had already seen Jesus, are on their way out, turned toward the next thing, hurrying to what comes next, presumably to where we find them in Luke, declaring this birth to the shepherds in the field.

Compelling thing to think about. It's not in the Bible, just one artist's depiction, but imagine the angels only seeing Jesus for a moment but then hurrying on. Why? Well, to tell the shepherds about it.

Then, we think about the shepherds, there in the fields by night with their flock. Suddenly the angels, recently arrived from seeing Jesus themselves, proclaim the good news of his birth and how they could find him, saying "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

And then what do the shepherds do? V. 16, "So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger." They went with haste. They find Mary and Joseph and Jesus. Then it seems they don't hang around too long either, because they shared around the news of what the angels had told them. You might be hearing echoes of the carol "What Child Is This?": "This, this is Christ the King / Whom shepherds guard and angels sing / Haste, haste to bring him laud / The babe, the son of Mary."

Seems a lot of folks are in quite the hurry after this baby is born.

So for those of us who are coming from a hurry, just looking for a moment to take a slow breath, is there any hope for a weary world seeking out this Prince of Peace?

I can't say that I've ever done much work herding sheep, so I couldn't really speak to how stressful an occupation it is. Fending off wolves and other predators, tracking down wayward lambs, I'm sure all that happens. The closest encounter I've had was a sheep farm, and it was a lot of activity, but it was more an assembly line for wool, so not exactly shepherds tending flocks by night. I couldn't really speak to how hectic a world that would be. Maybe though, with a flock by night, the shepherds were just keeping watch on an otherwise docile, maybe even sleeping bunch of sheep.

Then the angels show up, and say what they have to say. And I find it compelling that it was after this declaration of peace at the Messiah's birth, they hurry.

Makes me wonder whether there can be peace in a hurry if you're hurrying for the right reasons.

There can be all the reasons we're usually in a hurry. The pressures of the season, the pressures we put on ourselves in this season, the oppressive to-do list, or even just the weight of

what we've lost. Or take the season away, and just the standing level of anxiety and rush that we introduce to our own lives. Those can be reasons to hurry, but are they the right ones? Are they good ones? Do they bring us peace?

Or there's the reason that Paul gives us in Philippians, not just of a baby being born, but of a king. And not just of a king who would grow up only to subjugate and enrich himself, but a king rather who would empty himself, humble himself, and give himself up, even unto death upon a cross.

Shepherds didn't know all that at the time, of course. They just knew of a baby heralded as Messiah, as Lord, yet still being born in these humble circumstances. Yet even then, maybe they saw that as reason enough to hurry, that there was no time to lose, and then there was no time to lose in sharing that news. Might not be so bad a reason to be in a hurry.

It seems there's peace in that space in between "Joy to the World" and "Go Tell It on the Mountain." And of course, it's not so delineated, but somewhere in that mix of hearing the good news of great joy and then going out to declare this good news, somewhere there is peace. It's a peace that is defined by having the same mind that was in Christ Jesus, the same love, being in full accord, doing nothing from selfish ambition, regarding others as better than ourselves. It may not always make a lot of sense, but as we're taught elsewhere, the peace of Christ after all is a peace that surpasses understanding.

So make haste this Christmas, friends. Hurry. Hurry to let go of all the other things that make you hurry for the wrong reasons. They'll only wear you down. And instead hurry to ground your lives in the self-giving, sacrificial, joyful peace that comes in declaring in every word and deed that Jesus Christ is born.

Because with news this good, why wait?

Will you pray with me?

Our Lord, our Savior, we praise you this night, for in your coming you bring joy, you bring hope, and you bring peace. Help us to be of the same mind, with each other, yes, but more importantly, with you, of seeking to give of ourselves rather than gather unto ourselves, of seeking the well-being of others rather than our own interests, of seeking humility rather than recognition. And may the peace, your peace, that surpasses all understanding dwell indeed within our hearts and minds, and may you abide within us anew. In your holy, blessed name, we pray. Amen.