

# SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## **“Spring in Your Step”**

**Dr. Jay Howell**

Philippians 2:12-13

December 25, 2022; Christmas Day

It's good sometimes when things take a pause, right? I hope that for many of us today is that kind of day. I know it can't be for everyone. I know there are some who by virtue of their work need to be on the job today, whatever that job may be. I was speaking with one of you just a few days ago of how she'd be on call on Christmas Day. It's not a pause for everyone, but for many, on a day like today, it's good when things take a pause, right?

But I hope that today is a day when things take a pause. That at home, there may have been a peace to the household, whether that was with kids bounding down the staircase and rooms full of family, or whether that's happening later today. Or whether that's just a quiet time with close friends, or whether later on today there's a moment of peace and communion around a Christmas table, I hope that today is a day when things take a pause.

We only read a short passage, just a couple of verses from Philippians, which was picking up from what we read last night. Paul had just written about Christ giving of himself, emptying himself, sacrificing himself, and as a result “every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the father.”

Kind of goes against what you would expect. Words of praise usually follow excellence or achievement, but in a different way of understanding it. And indeed, these words of praise from Paul are in response to the excellence, the achievement, the victory of God in Christ; they're just operating by a completely different rubric for excellence. Excellence here is defined not by how much Christ could gather unto himself or lift himself up, but rather by how completely he emptied himself. Goes against logic and reason, but the good news of Christmas is that we worship a Lord who humbles himself, who dwells with us, who gives himself for us.

If that doesn't put a spring in your step, I don't know what will.

But then Paul follows it with a short exhortation. “Therefore, my beloved,”—you always have to pay attention whenever Paul says “therefore,” because it's like he's saying, “because of all that I just said,” so in this case, “Because, my beloved, of all the ways Christ has emptied himself, given of himself, sacrificed himself for you,” “work out your own salvation with fear

and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

Think about the powerful thing Paul is saying. On one hand, because of all Christ has done, because of the good news of the Incarnation, of Christmas, don't be passive; work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. This isn't just sit back and bask in the good news that Jesus is born. But lest we think it's now all on us, or that we could take all the credit, he adds, “For it is God who is at work in you.” Because of Christ, God is at work within you, and also because of Christ, don't just wait around.

A man named Howard Thurman was an early leader in the civil rights movement, a mentor even to Martin Luther King. He was a minister and wrote and taught and preached on the empathy, the solidarity Jesus showed in his ministry, his mission, his very life with the disinherited, the lowly, the cast out.

And among the points he made was that you can't claim to be sincere and true with God if you're at the same time being duplicitous and insincere with other people.

It can be easy, or at least it can feel easier to be closer to God on a day like today, with the chimes of Emmanuel and Joy to the World still ringing, but if that's where it stops, is it the real thing?

Thurman was himself a bit of a poet, and he in fact wrote an entire book of poems about Christmas called *The Mood of Christmas*.

In one poem called “The Work of Christmas,” he shared,

When the song of the angels is stilled  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home  
When the shepherds are back with their flocks  
The work of Christmas begins:  
To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry,  
To release the prisoner,  
To rebuild the nations,  
To bring peace among the people,  
To make music in the heart.

The work of Christmas begins. Friends, I hope today is a day when things take a pause for you, when there might be a day of holy rest and celebration at the birth of Christ our Lord, but

may God who is at work within us stir that hope and peace into the work of Christmas, the work of finding the lost, of healing the broken, of bringing peace among the people, of making music in the heart.

Because there are any number of people for whom Christmas is not a day of peace, not a day of rest, and it's with them that the good news of Christ and the work of Christmas might find a home.

Howard Thurman shared about that too. He wrote:

Where refugees seek deliverance that never comes  
And the heart consumes itself as if it would live  
Where children age before their time  
And life wears down the edges of the mind,  
Where the old man sits with mind grown cold,  
While bones and sinew, blood and cell, go slowly down to death,  
Where fear companions each day's life,  
And Perfect Love seems long delayed.  
Christmas is waiting to be born:  
In you, in me, in all mankind.

Friends, for so many, Christmas is waiting to be born. Will the pause and peace of this day, stir you to take the step to bring it to them?

Will you pray with me?

Holy God, we pray that you would indeed be at work within us, especially on this day of peace. May the peace and rest that is in you stir us to share it, especially with those for whom this day, this season is not a peaceful one. May we seek out those who feel consumed, those who feel drained, those worn down. May we seek out the places where Perfect Love seems long delayed. And may we, by your Spirit, be a glimpse of the good news that this day hope is born. In the name of Christ who came, we pray. Amen.