

Christmas Eve Meditation – The Work of Christmas
Sunday, December 24, 2023
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Westminster Presbyterian Church
Springfield, Illinois

The title of the meditation: The Work of Christmas

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, as we reflect together on the meaning of Christmas, may the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the work of our hands be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

A beloved tradition of the Westminster Choir is to attend the Millikin University Vespers each advent. Peter and I have embraced this ritual and find our spirits uplifted in the well-choreographed musical presentation by the gifted students who fill the space with lovely harmony and graceful movement. This year one anthem was particularly inspirational: Dan Forrest set music to Howard Thurman's poem, "The Work of Christmas Begins."

Howard Thurman was an American author, philosopher, theologian, pastor, educator, and civil rights leader. Born in 1899 in Daytona Beach, Florida, Thurman grew up in a segregated all-black community and traveled a hundred miles to Jacksonville where he attended one of three high schools for African American students in the entire state of Florida. He was profoundly influenced by the faith of his maternal grandmother who had been enslaved.

Thurman graduated as valedictorian from Morehouse College and Rochester Theological Seminary. In 1932, he became the Dean of Rankin Chapel at Howard University, in 1944 he crossed the color line and cofounded the inter-racial Fellowship of All Peoples congregation in San Francisco, and in 1953 he returned to academia as the Dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University. While at Boston University and with the strategy of Ghandi's non-violent civil disobedience, Thurman mentored future human rights leaders, including Martin Luther King, Jr.

In Thurman's most indispensable work Jesus and the Disinherited, he presents an uncompromising vision of Christian ethics and the meaning of Jesus's life to the least, the last, and the lost. Returning to the roots of Christianity, Thurman argues that Jesus has always been a partner to the oppressed—not a tool of the privileged—to embolden tyranny and hatred.

Listen to the poetry within these lyrics.

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 flock,
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 peoples, to make music in the heart.

When my work began at Westminster with the call to be your eighteenth pastor in 2013, a dear friend, colleague, and Methodist minister, the Rev. Dr. Jack Heyward, gave the charge to the congregation at my installation, sharing that his grandmother was born into slavery. Westminster's founding by 30 ardent abolitionists in 1835 deeply and personally moved Jack, and he called us to continue our work for freedom, justice, and equity. A decade later following years of developing our mission both in the neighborhood and around the world, we continue the work of Christmas with our 2024 Welcome Corps refugee initiative.

Last Sunday, Westminster archivist Sue Cull poignantly reminded us of our long history welcoming refugees, and, in so doing, freeing those captives of other nations escaping tyranny and hatred. On November 13, 1849, fourteen years after our founding, this abolitionist congregation expanded our work of Christmas to include the welcome and support of Presbyterian refugees fleeing religious persecution by the Roman Catholic Church in Madeira, Portugal. Fourteen years later in 1863 amidst our civil war to free the captives of this nation, our congregation provided homes for refugee children fleeing warfare in Arkansas, just months after our church bell tolled in celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation. A century later, in 1962 members opened their homes to Cuban refugees fleeing the Castro regime, and, a decade after that, in 1975, our congregation welcomed a Vietnamese family fleeing communism and their war-torn nation.

Now, nearly half a century later, in a time of heightened rhetoric regarding tyranny, hatred, and immigrants, our work of Christmas with the Welcome Corps begins anew. Once the angels are stilled, the star is gone, and the shepherds are back with their flocks, may we honor the child born to us this night through the labor of Mary, as we find the lost, heal the broken, feed the hungry, release the prisoner, and make music in the heart.

By the grace of God, may the work of Christmas begin. Amen.