

Third Sunday in Advent
December 13, 2009

The Very Rev. Bill Lupfer

Abraham Heschel, the Jewish philosopher of the last century that many of us know. Heschel described eternity and he said eternity is not future presence, but perpetual presence now. Eternity is not that future presence that we long for and hope for, but eternity is now. Perpetual presence. D. H. Lawrence, the English writer talked about the present moment of the eternal now. Now isn't that sort of pointing us to the spiritual task through the ages? How do we have Christian hope now when hope is about then? How do we bring that future into the present? How do we live in such a way that we know the future's O.K. if we live in perpetual presence with God now? If anyone has the answer would you come forward please? There's a microphone right there. It's the tough question and it comes to us I think again from scripture especially in this season of Advent when we're waiting expectantly for something that we kinda know about already, you know, are you really going to be surprised at Christmas? They were the first time, but two thousand repetitions later, you're not surprised any more. How do you manufacture surprise? We've tried, haven't we? It's kinda like trying to tickle yourself. It doesn't really work, so we Christians in Advent we're kinda trying to tickle ourselves. It's just kinda hard to find that surprise and majesty especially when a mature faith lives now and finds hope now. I think that's what Paul is talking about to the Philippians when he is saying, "Rejoice in the Lord always" and then as if they didn't get it "Again I say, "Rejoice". In Philippians the word *joy* and *rejoice* in that short little letter is found fourteen times. It's his point to rejoice. And if you read Martin Luther as Luther reads Paul like I have for this sermon, you'll know that Luther says he thinks the way Paul is getting towards "rejoice" is through thanksgiving, so if you read it again, you'll see Paul saying the way to rejoicing is through thanksgiving. You see spiritually rejoicing is a bit like surprise or being tickled, you can't manufacture it. Rejoicing happens, so when you practice your faith in a way and open your heart in a way to be open to that surprise from God, that rejoicing, we do it through a practice of giving thanks. That's what Martin Luther says and today I'm with Luther. So this fall, this whole season this fall at Trinity we've been talking about this haven't we? -- about counting your blessings because we stand in that tradition that's been the last two thousand years and more of counting blessings, of giving thanks, of giving sort of a measured, mature approach to our faith that focuses on thanksgiving and then enjoys the surprise of rejoicing when it comes like it did to the angels when Jesus arrived to the shepherds to the rest that we're still waiting for even though we know how it works out. So we make thanksgiving and making something takes work. My son right now really wants to make a great go-cart – you ever made a great go-cart? It's hard. My brother did when I was young, so I saw how you do it, but I can't quite do it; how do you make thanksgiving? You have to get the right tools. You have to lay them out in the right way, you have to get the right materials, and you have to have time. Making thanksgiving is big work and you're busy. How do you do it in a busy life? That's the question that Paul's words are asking us today and that's the practice we've been living together this year as we do every year, so we make thanksgiving. Sometimes we do that with someone else

who sort of shines or mirrors the thanksgiving to us and so we keep good company spiritually, people who are mirrors of God's grace to us. I hope you have a few names and faces in your mind's eye right now as I say that. It's critically important to have those people around you. I have you all around me so I have it easy, so you all need those too. A while back my wife was that to me, that mirror of thanksgiving. She just started teaching again after thirteen years, she called it sabbatical. Before that she taught for seven years when we were first married – a high school language -- and then she took thirteen years off to make sure our children know their mother's tongue as well as their father's tongue, so our children know Japanese and English. It's important to know your mother's and your father's tongue, so she taught her kids Japanese – my kids too, right? She's still working on her husband, but that's another story. Now she's just started again in August, teaching full time at Grant High School in a Japanese immersion program. And if you've followed anything in Portland Public Schools you know that Portland Public Schools are in flux, right? They're gonna get better in the next few years, which means change and anyone my age or older doesn't like change, so I'm kinda wondering, I'm watching my wife out of the side of my eyes – how's she gonna handle this? Coming right in, getting licenses, which takes a bit in Oregon, her supervisor wants her to do internet courses, so she's pretty busy and then there's change. So she reflected to me a while back: "Bill I feel so privileged to be a part of Portland Public Schools in this time. I almost went off the road. I was expecting her to mope, that feeling of feeling kind of mopey and sad for ourselves; that's what I was expecting, but instead of that, I got this mirror of strength and making thanksgiving. I could see in her and others in my life that we make thanksgiving when it's not easy. It's like building the go-cart in the cold garage – that's how we make thanksgiving as Christians. We don't have time, distractions come in, people maybe are not as nice to us as they could be. That's where God calls us to open our hearts. Paul shows us that example today when he wrote those words to the Philippians, he was in prison. When he wrote "rejoice always, be joyful", he was in prison and he knew the consequences that would probably face him. He was put to death finally. Or John the Baptist who talks to us today through the Gospel of Luke – the same, he was put to death and he knew when he stood there challenging people as he did, he knew the possible consequences. We have these giants coming to us from scripture to challenge us today, to lift our own selves up out of our mope – Well it might be icy on the road today – that's what I thought – whatever the mope is -- my tires aren't good enough – that person was meant to me – I don't have enough money, I'm too busy, I just broke my back; whatever it might be – the invitation to mope – today the giants from our faith tradition show us, they don't tell us, they show us. This is a mope-free zone, because we are people who make thanksgiving. Thanksgiving does not fall out of heaven in a glad bag; it's made in difficult places and the good news is we all have those places. We have those places, the materials required to make thanksgiving and we have friends and exemplars that show us how to do it. So we don't have to tickle ourselves; God is there. Rejoice!