

Christmas Eve
11: P.M.
December 24, 2009

The Very Reverend Bill Lupfer

Merry Christmas! This is an ancient holiday that we practice together, isn't it? When we mingle family rituals and friendships together into something that's very meaningful to all of us and important I think in our own ways. I think Christmas and the rhythm of coming to it again and again can really shape who we really are and have an impact on our souls; it can be part of what makes us our deepest self in our soul. And so I ask you, when you go to that deep place in your own soul, what is God like there? And how do you pray to that God? We're talking a lot about God tonight, right, in these hymns and the prayers, so who is the God that you encounter when you say your prayers? Sometimes I read someone named Martin Smith, who's an Episcopal priest and teacher. He used to be a monk, led the Order of SSJE, Society for St. John the Evangelist. Martin talks about – sometimes we imagine a God who is sort of remote and distant and when we pray seeking God's will, he imagines that we're a bit like maybe kids at summer camp, sneaking into the camp director's office and we pull the file out and we find our name and if we can just peek into the file of God in our prayers we can find out what we're supposed to do. Is that your kind of intercessory prayer? Martin thinks a lot of us pray that way. Sometimes when I'm sorta in those unconscious prayers, like right before the sermon looking at the Christmas tree where someone cut it to make it perfect right over here. I was thinking – Lord, help me! Help me say something that makes sense. I often go to God that way as someone to help – sort of swoop in a make sure it's O.K. Martin Smith says that we ought to challenge ourselves with our approach to God because Martin says that the God he reads about in Christmas stories and in scripture and in history, that God is a God who invites us into a radical relationship. He says the God he sees is a God that is full of joy in creation, full of joy in creating life and that creation didn't just begin long ago and that it's gonna stay steady, but our God that we worship is a God that is constantly creating. In fact our God created us. Martin goes further and says: "Our God created us to be co-creators with God". Imagine that you are created in the image of God and that that image is of creativity – a creator and that God, our God, is so enjoying this creation together that he invites us into that creative act, that life is a creative act that we do with God and that what we think actually matters to God. So then imagine that your prayer becomes instead of – "Help! Or what should I do?" becomes Lord, what shall we make of this? "Mmm, this is interesting, Lord. What shall we make of this?" It's an English expression, you've heard it, right? "Well, what do you make of that?" "What shall we make of this, Lord?" Imagine we're co-creators together – that you are a co-creator with God, and that the future is not determined like a clock that just keeps ticking and ticking. But that *you* help create the future. It's so easy to settle into our own inner spiritual poverty and lose sense of that incredible opportunity we have to be in relationship with God, a God who is creative, a God who invites us into that creativity, a God who invited Mary into that herself in a way that ruined her life in one way, but also brought her into the fullness of life in another. That's what's unleashed here at Christmas time in the story. And then we read about Jesus,

don't we, this person who sort of is in a rhythm of life in his active ministry between action and reflection; he's either with the crowd and working with them – the crowd, right – that's us and then he goes away. Don't you love it in the Gospel – he goes away and he's alone and this is what he said. I don't think he said what the Gospel said. I think he was saying "Lord, what do we make of this? Do you see those people?" And then he'd go back out. It was a creative act. Jesus, when you read the Gospels, doesn't say the same thing to everyone. It's always different. Just when you think you've figured out what he said, it makes sense; the next time he's talking to someone else in pretty much the same context, he says different – different – Jesus is creating his way in his ministry and so he invites us to be in relationship with God, a creative relationship, a relationship where we are empowered to move past our own personal depression or spiritual poverty or: "well, I can't do it because of this or that" – a relationship where God almost pulls us into an embrace of creativity. It's amazing when people move past their poverty, what power they can unleash. I have some statistics to prove this in case you're feeling a little skeptical. This comes out of the newspaper, so it's gotta be right, right? This was an article in the New York Times about climate and they talked about India. India if you look at it from one perspective is an incredibly poor nation. India has per person, per capita income, India is the 167th poorest country in the world – 167th poorest! But when you put all those people together, India is the fifth richest nation in this world. Or you can look at China the same way. China per capita income is at 133rd down and yet collectively they are the third richest nation in this world. When people of poverty, spiritual poverty like us, who sometimes feel that our God is not fully embracing us, even people of poverty like us can come together and do something strong, something strong for this world. I believe that's part of the message of Christmas. This little infant Jesus who comes into the world with the odds stacked against him, unleashing a meaning in our own lives. A while ago I was celebrating Christmas with a dinner with friends, I'm sure you've done some of that yourselves. We were sitting around the table. There were six of us. The conversation coalesced into most of us giving advice to one person. You ever have a dinner like that and you realize you're kinda targeting one person? Well this person really needed it. It's true; you know him, our Mayor, Sam Adams. He needed a lot of advice and he was getting it. It was good advice and he was behaving; he was listening and then a person so you could see her almost catch herself and say gees we've been working him, roughing him up a lot and then she said: "Well, Sam what's your advice to us? What would you tell us to do this New Year? And so he went around the table. When he got to me he said: "Bill, you're Dean of Trinity Episcopal Cathedral. That community is filled with incredibly talented people who make a big impact in Portland and beyond. If you could do one thing this year, challenge them to step further, even a little further ahead so that they can work together to help with the healing of this city." So there it is. There's the Christmas challenge: to not live in our poverty, but to embrace the creator who calls us into creating this world together with God and to go further, to step further together so that we can do the work of Christmas. Let me tell you what the work of Christmas is. It's in a poem in my pocket. This is a poem by Howard Thurman who was a professor at Howard University for many years. Howard Thurman says: "When the song of the angels is still; 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 brothers and sisters, to make music in the heart.” You all are a lot more talented than you might think and my hope for you on this holy evening is that you embrace the creativity in your heart, that you don’t just keep it for yourself, that you walk back out into this world and you reach sideways so that together we can do the work of Christmas and bring God’s healing into this world. Together we can make it.