Christmas Eve 1983
LIGHT AND WARMTH

What is it we human beings need more than anything else, in addition to food, water, and shelter? This is the basic questions that all religions attempt to answer. It's also a question which each one of us answers in one way or another throughout our living. We do not answer it with words, but with the way we live, with what we live for, with the direction our lives take.

In a biography of Johann Wolfgang Goethe, a man who managed to become competent in every significant branch of human knowledge in his time - he was a historian, a philosopher, a poet, a dramatist, and a scientist — it is said that as he was dying, all at once he sat upright in bed and cried out with passion, "Light, light, more light!" and with that fell back dead.

No words could have summarized more accurately the thrust and direction of Goethe's life. His consuming passion had been to learn more and more — to keep increasing the circle of his understanding. In that sense he searched always for more light.

It is said that years later the Spanish philosopher Unamuno was reading Goethe's biography and that when he came to this scene of Goethe's death, he put down the book and said to his wife: "For all his wisdom, Goethe was mistaken here. Instead of crying for 'light, light, more light,' what he should have cried for was 'warmth, warmth, more warmth.' Human beings do not die of the darkness; they die of the cold."

From the point of view of our Christian faith and the Christmas story, both men were right: we need both light and warmth. In fact, we have a built-in urge or hunger for both. There is something in the makeup of each one of us that craves more knowledge and, in that sense, more light. From the time we are born we learn instinctively: we imitate, we search, we try to understand.

As we grow older, we also run into things that are difficult to understand, and at times we exercise our freedom to not understand, to remain in ignorance, to walk around in darkness, or we think we understand, but don't.

In the same way that we need light, we also need warmth. By warmth, I mean that we need very much to feel that we are cherished and valued; that we belong somewhere; that we are connected with others and with God. We need the feeling, in other words, that what happens to us does make a difference to at least some other human beings and to the universe itself. Is there anything more terrifying really than to feel totally abandoned or isolated or alone — to have the feeling that no one anywhere cares, that if we disappeared tomorrow or died, no one would even take notice, or miss us, or mourn our loss.

Leslie Weatherhead, a London minister who was also an air raid warden during the second world was in London, tells the story of finding a little boy one night after a heavy bombing. The boy was about nine years old and was sobbing his heart out. Weatherhead went up to him and asked, "Where is your father?" and the boy answered, "He's in the service overseas." "What about your mother?" Weatherhead asked. "She was killed last week during an air raid." "Where are your brothers and sisters or aunts and uncles?" "I don't know," answered the boy. "We got separated." With that, Weatherhead knelt before the lad and put both hands on his shoulders

and asked, “Who are you?” At which the little boy began to sob more compulsively and then said, “Mister, I ain’t nobody’s nothing.”

Weatherhead said that he never forgot those words. To feel yourself orphaned, alone, disconnected, where no one cares - what could be worse? We human beings soon die from this kind of coldness. To survive and be fulfilled does call for warmth as well as light.

It’s no wonder that religious rituals from the very first have usually employed fire, for it puts forth both warmth and light.

Whenever human beings have attempted to relate to the Divine Mystery we call God, they usually built a fire and made an altar. Maybe that’s why we like candlelight so much. We can watch the flame burn and experience both light and warmth. The flame illumines the darkness and drives away the cold.

If what we need as human beings is both light and warmth, how does the event of Christmas relate to these needs?

The Gospel of John put it this way: “The true light that enlightens everyone was coming into the world. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. The love of God became a human being and lived among us.”

Christmas says: the light and warmth we all need is here! God gives it to all of us as a gift. In fact, both light and warmth are built into each one of us because we are made in the image of God. We human beings are made by God and for God and for each other. Our problem is that we often deny or repress the light and warmth which are a part of us. We forget that we are connected to each other and to God.

Light and warmth! The opposites are darkness and coldness! Darkness is often a metaphor or symbol for tragedy, evil, or trouble. We talk about the “powers of darkness.” So also, coldness is the symbol or metaphor for aloneness or separateness. We talk about someone giving us the “cold shoulder” or a “cold reception.”

And so, the story of Christmas says, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out.” There is light and warmth in the world and everywhere because it is a part of God and a part of us. The warmth and light of God’s love is God’s gift to all of us. All we have to do is accept it and live it.

And today the world needs so much to have us spread that light and warmth. There is still a lot of darkness and coldness in the world and in personal lives. Lebanon, Central America, South America, Afghanistan — the list goes on and on. Instead of our practicing our connectedness, we continue to emphasize our separateness.

But the Christmas story is about light and warmth. The light and warmth of God’s love showing itself forth in our world in a fresh way. That’s the astonishing face - that no matter how dark or cold the world is, no matter how much darkness or coldness there is in your personal life, the light and warmth of Christmas still shines and glows. This light and warmth does not avoid darkness and cold, it overcomes them and always will.

Tonight, experience again the light and warmth of God’s love in a human being and then spread that light and warmth especially to those who are in the dark and who are cold and

especially to those you consider your enemies. Then you will truly experience this love of God. “For as you did it unto one of the least of these my brothers and sisters,” said Jesus, “you did it unto me.”