SUNDAY, DECEMBER 23, 1984

"A DIFFERENT KIND OF CHRISTMAS LETTER"

A CHRISTMAS SERMON IN THE FORM OF A LETTER TO MARY AND JOSEPH WRITTEN BY MARY'S FATHER, NATHAN, (JESUS' GRANDFATHER)

LUKE 2:1-7

DEAR MARY AND JOSEPH:

YOUR MOTHER AND I WERE DELIGHTED AND EXCITED TO GET THE NEWS OF THE BIRTH OF YOUR BABY AND OUR FIRST GRANDCHILD. WE ONLY WISH WE COULD'VE BEEN WITH YOU WHEN THE CHILD WAS BORN. BETHLEHEM IS SO FAR AWAY. AND WE HEARD THAT YOU COULD NOT FIND ROOM IN THE INN SO THAT THE BABY WAS BORN IN A STABLE AND HAD A MANGER FOR HIS CRIB. WE'RE ANXIOUS TO TALK WITH YOU PERSONALLY SO WE CAN HEAR ALL ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED. NO MATTER WHAT THE CIRCUMSTANCES, THE BIRTH OF A COUPLE'S FIRST CHILD IS SOMETHING MOST PARENTS NEVER FORGET.

NATURALLY, WE WANT TO SEE THE BABY AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. PERHAPS WHEN YOU BRING HIM TO JERUSALEM TO THE TEMPLE FOR THE RITE OF PURIFICATION AND THANKSGIVING ACCORDING TO THE LAW OF MOSES, WE CAN BE PRESENT.

THAT'S ALWAYS A VERY SPECIAL OCCASION.

SINCE THIS IS YOUR FIRST CHILD AND OUR FIRST GRANDCHILD, I HOPE YOU WON'T MIND IF I INCLUDE IN THIS LETTER SOME IDEAS THAT YOUR MOTHER AND I HAVE REGARDING CHILDREN, AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARENTS AND CHILDREN AS THEY GROW AND MATURE.

1. FIRST OF ALL, REMEMBER THAT ALTHOUGH YOUR CHILD WAS BORN INTO YOUR FAMILY, THIS CHILD IS ALSO A PART OF THE LARGER HUMAN FAMILY. HE IS NOT ONLY A PART OF EACH OF YOU, BUT HE IS RELATED TO ALL OF CREATION. IN ONE SENSE THE CHILD IS YOURS, BUT ALSO MORE THAN YOURS. THUS, ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT GIFTS WE PARENTS AND OTHERS CAN GIVE OUR CHILDREN AS THEY BEGIN TO GROW AND MATURE IS A DEEP SENSE OF THEIR CONNECTEDNESS, OF THEIR RELATEDNESS TO ALL OTHER THINGS AND LIVING BEINGS IN GOD'S CREATION. THE SELF IS ONLY THE SELF IN THAT IT HAS A WORLD, A STRUCTURE IN WHICH IT IS A PART. EACH INDIVIDUAL IS UNIQUE, YET COULD NOT LIVE WITHOUT ITS CONNECTIONS TO THE UNIVERSE. WE ARE A COMMUNITY OF PERSONS AND A WORLD OF THINGS. WE ARE WHAT WE ARE BECAUSE BIRDS EXIST, PLANTS GROW, BEES POLLINATE, WINDS BLOW, TIDES CHANGE, RAINS FALL AND ACCIDENTS HAPPEN. NOTHING OCCURS IN THE WORLD THAT IN SOME WAY DOES NOT AFFECT US ALL. EVEN THE MOST INSIGNIFICANT ACT WE PERFORM WILL HAVE SOME EFFECT UPON

THE WORLD. NO PERSON IS AN ISLAND. THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A "SELF-MADE MAN OR WOMAN."

NOT ONLY ARE WE CONNECTED TO EVERYTHING THAT IS IN THIS CREATION, BUT WE ARE ALSO INEXTRICABLY CONNECTED TO GOD. GOD'S LOVE SURROUNDS US AND UPHOLDS US WHETHER WE ARE AWARE OF IT OR ADMIT IT. GOD'S SPIRIT DWELLS WITHIN EACH ONE OF US WHETHER WE ARE AWARE OF IT OR PAY ATTENTION TO IT-- IT IS THERE! THE FACT IS WE CANNOT ESCAPE GOD. THE PSALMIST WROTE LONG AGO, "O LORD, THOU HAS SEARCHED ME AND KNOWN ME! THOU KNOWEST WHEN I SIT DOWN AND WHEN I RISE UP; THOU DISCERNEST MY THOUGHTS FROM AFAR. THOU SEARCHEST OUT MY PATH AND MY LYING DOWN AND ART AQUAINTED WITH ALL MY WAYS . . . . WHITHER SHALL I GO FROM THY SPIRIT? OR WHITHER SHALL I FLEE FROM THY PRESENCE? IF I ASCEND TO HEAVEN, THOU ART THERE! IF I MAKE MY BED IN HELL, THOU ART THERE . . . . FOR THOU DIDST FORM MY WINWARD PARTS, THOU DIDST KNIT ME TOGETHER IN MY MOTHER'S WOMB."

ONCE WE COME TO KNOW AND APPRECIATE OUR INTERDEPENDENCE WITH ALL OF CREATION AND WITH GOD, THEN WE HAVE A NEW AND DEEP RESPECT FOR CREATION AND FOR ALL LIVING BEINGS, AND EVEN MORE IMPORTANT A DEEP RESPECT FOR GOD OUR ULTIMATE CREATOR.

WE ARE EACH A SINGULAR PERSON BUT WE ARE EACH A UNIVERSAL PERSON AS WELL. BOTH ARE EQUALLY IMPORTANT. WE ARE BORN PROVINCIAL, EGOCENTRIC, LIMITED. THE MORE WE BECOME, THE MORE UNIVERSAL THE PERSON WE ARE. WE FINALLY COME TO REALIZE THAT MOST HUMAN CONFLICTS ARISE THROUGH OUR PROVINCIALISM, OUR CONCERN FOR OUR PERSONAL PROBLEMS, OUR SELFISH INTEREST AND OUR OWN CONFLICTS.

MOST OF US DEFINE A GOOD DAY AS ONE IN WHICH EVERYTHING HAS GONE OUR WAY. WE SEE A GOOD LIFE AS ONE IN WHICH OUR PERSONAL DREAMS HAVE BEEN REALIZED. IT IS NOT OUR CONCERN IF THOUSANDS GO TO BED EACH NIGHT HUNGRY AND IN DESPAIR, AS LONG AS THEY KEEP OUT OF SIGHT AND LEAVE US ALONE. IT DOESN'T MATTER TO US IF THE WORLD'S CHILDREN ARE BEING BATTERED OR NOT BEING EDUCATED PROPERLY. IF OUR CHILDREN GROW AND DO WELL, WE TEND TO FEEL THAT WE HAVE NO RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE OTHERS. IT IS ONLY WHEN WE ARE MUGGED BY THE HUNGRY CHILDREN, OR BRUTALIZED OR TERRORIZED IN OUR HOME THAT WE REALIZE THE CONNECTIVENESS OF ALL THINGS. THERE IS NO PLACE TO HIDE. NO ONE IS GUILTY. WE ARE ALL INNOCENTS IN AN EVER CHANGING STREAM FOR WHICH EACH ONE OF US IS RESPONSIBLE.

A BUSH GROWS. THE BLOWING WIND, GLIDING BIRDS AND BUSY INSECTS GATHER THE POLLEN

TO SOW IT AGAIN MILES FROM THE ORIGINAL FLOWERING PLANT. WE PASS, UNSUSPECTING, ON A MORNING'S WALK. WE, TOO, GATHER THE POLLEN ON OUR CLOTHES AND UNSUSPECTINGLY CARRY THE PLANT TO SPREAD ITS LIFE BEAUTY TO NEW UNCHARTED AREAS. IN SOME WAY, HOWEVER, SMALL AND SECRET, WE ARE ALL DEPENDENT ONE UPON THE OTHER. GIVE YOUR CHILD THE GIFT OF THIS AWARENESS. FULLY FUNCTIONING PEOPLE RECOGNIZE THIS POWER AND KNOW THAT IT STEMS FROM GOD WHO CREATED ALL THE WORLD GOOD. A WORD, AN ACT, AN EXPRESSED FEELING CAN REVERBERATE IN WIDE CIRCLES, TOUCHING UNSUSPECTING PEOPLE. OUR MOOD AT THE START OF A DAY CAN AFFECT ALL THOSE WITH WHOM WE WILL COME INTO CONTACT.

2. SECONDLY, EVEN THOUGH YOUR CHILD AND OUR GRANDCHILD IS CONNECTED NOT ONLY TO US, BUT TO ALL OF CREATION, YOU AS HIS PARENTS AND WE AS HIS LARGER FAMILY HAVE ANOTHER VERY SPECIAL RESPONSIBILITY AS WE GIVE THE CHILD ANOTHER VERY PRECIOUS GIFT-- THE GIFT OF LOVE.

LOVE IS ONE OF THE MOST USED YET MOST MISUNDERSTOOD WORDS AMONG HUMAN BEINGS. TRUE LOVE IS UNCONDITIONAL--IT IS FREELY GIVEN TO ANOTHER WITH NOTHING EXPECTED IN RETURN. LOVE CANNOT BY ITS NATURE BE EARNED. YET MANY PARENTS AND OTHERS MAINTAIN THEY ARE LOVING THEIR CHILDEN, BUT AT THE SAME

TIME LET THEIR CHILDREN KNOW IN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER THAT THIS SO-CALLED "LOVE" CAN BE WITHDRAWN IF THEY (THE CHILDREN) ARE NOT GOOD OR DO NOT MEET THE EXPECTATIONS OF THE PARENTS. SO THE PARENTS ARE SAYING -- WE LOVE YOU, BUT!

LET YOUR CHILD KNOW THAT YOU LOVE HIM NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS OR WHAT HE DOES. YOU LOVE HIM SIMPLY BECAUSE HE EXISTS. THERE ARE NO OTHER CONDITIONS TO MEET.

THE WAY IN WHICH YOU LOVE YOUR CHILD IN HIS EARLY YEARS WILL INFLUENCE HIM IN ALL OTHER RELATIONSHIPS. HE WILL LOVE OTHERS IN THE WAY IN WHICH HE HAS BEEN LOVED. MORE THAN THAT, HE WILL COME TO UNDERSTAND THE LOVE OF GOD FROM THE WAY YOU LOVE HIM.

THE LOVE OF PARENTS FOR A CHILD CAN BE A VERY DELICATE BALANCING ACTIVITY. AS PARENTS WE MUST BEWARE LEST OUR LOVE BECOME TOO POSSESSIVE, TOO RESTRICTIVE. THE HUMAN INFANT AND CHILD ARE MORE HELPLESS AND DEPENDENT FOR A MUCH LONGER PERIOD OF TIME THAN ANY OTHER LIVING THING. CHILDREN AND INFANTS ARE, OUT OF NECESSITY, "NATURAL SLAVES." THEIR IDENTITY IN THE WORLD IS BEING CREATED BY OUTSIDE FORCES. THEY HAVE LITTLE CHOICE AND BECAUSE OF THEIR DEPENDENT STATE, RECEIVE ALL KINDS OF SIGNALS FROM THOSE PEOPLE AND THINGS IN THEIR IMMEDIATE

LIFE SPACE.

PARENTS AND OTHERS AROUND THE INFANT AND GROWING CHILD GIVE THE CHILD A LANGUAGE, OTHER SYMBOLS AND SYSTEMS WHICH WILL HELP THE CHILD GIVE SOME STRUCTURE TO AN OTHERWISE CHAOTIC ENVIRONMENT. EACH SYMBOL CHILDREN RECEIVE WILL NOT BE THEIR OWN, BUT WILL HAVE BEEN PREVIOUSLY INTERPRETED, IDENTIFIED AND SECURELY FASTENED TO THE WORLD AS PERCEIVED BY OTHER HUMAN BEINGS. WE, IN A SENSE WRITE A DICTIONARY FOR OUR CHILDREN AND DEFINE THE TERMS. WE SUGGEST HOW OUR CHILDREN SHOULD THINK, AND FEEL ABOUT THE WORLD. IN SPITE OF OURSELVES, WE WILL USUALLY TEACH, IN THIS WAY, OUR OWN ATTITUDES ABOUT LIFE, FEARS, PREJUDICES, ANXIETIES AND FRUSTRATIONS, ALONG WITH JOYS, HOPES AND TRUST.

GRADUALLY THE CHILD WILL BEGIN TO MAKE DECISIONS ON HIS OWN AND SOME OF THESE WILL BE THE EXACT OPPOSITE OF WHAT WE THINK THE DECISION SHOULD BE. IN MANY OF THESE DECISIONS, THE CHILD IS SEARCHING FOR HIS OWN IDENTITY. OUR LOVE MUST BE SUCH THAT WE PERMIT THE CHILD TO MAKE MISTAKES IF HE IS TO TRULY LEARN LIFE'S LESSONS. THE MOST DAMAGING COURSE OF ACTION IS ATTEMPTING TO KEEP CHILDREN FROM EXPERIENCE, OR PROTECT THEM FROM PAIN. THE PARENT'S ROLE IS PRIMARILY TO STAND BY WITH A GOODLY SUPPLY OF BANDAIDS.

AND THEN WE HAVE TO REALIZE THAT AS THE CHILD GROWS UP, HE MAY BECOME SOMETHING QUITE DIFFERENT FROM WHAT WE AS PARENTS EXPECTED HIM TO BE. IF OUR LOVE IS TRUE LOVE, THEN WE LET THIS HAPPEN AND STILL CONTINUE TO LOVE.

A POET PUT IT THIS WAY:

"YOUR CHILDREN ARE NOT YOUR CHILDREN. THEY ARE THE SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF LIFE'S LONGING FOR ITSELF. THEY COME THROUGH YOU, BUT NOT FROM YOU. AND THOUGH THEY ARE WITH YOU, YET THEY BELONG NOT TO YOU. YOU MAY GIVE THEM YOUR LOVE, BUT NOT YOUR THOUGHTS, FOR THEY HAVE THEIR OWN THOUGHTS. YOU MAY HOUSE THEIR BODIES, BUT NOT THEIR SOULS. FOR THEIR SOULS DWELL IN THE HOUSE OF TOMORROW, WHICH YOU CANNOT VISIT, EVEN IN YOUR DREAMS. YOU MAY STRIVE TO BE LIKE THEM, BUT SEEK NOT TO MAKE THEM LIKE YOU. FOR LIFE GOES NOT BACKWARD NOR TARRIES WITH YESTERDAY."

3. THIRDLY, GIVE YOUR CHILD AN APPRECIATION AND AWARENESS OF THE SPIRITUAL SIDE OF LIFE AS WELL AS THE MATERIAL. THEY ARE INEXTRICABLY CONNECTED TO EACH OTHER. MATURE HUMAN BEINGS HAVE A DEEP SENSE OF SPIRITUALITY. THEY KNOW THAT THEIR EXISTENCE AND THE WORLD IN WHICH THEY LIVE CANNOT BE EXPLAINED OR

UNDERSTOOD THROUGH HUMAN EXPERIENCE ALONE. THEY KNOW THERE IS "MORE" TO LIFE THAN WE CAN SEE, TOUCH, TASTE, HEAR, OR SMELL. THEY ARE AWARE OF MYSTERY, DEEP MYSTERY.

SOME OF US ARE UNABLE TO LIVE WITHOUT ANSWERS. THE VOID IS TOO TOTALLY FRIGHTENING, TOO DEVASTATING. SO WE MUST CREATE ANSWERS FOR OURSELVES. SOME OF US CHOOSE TO LIVE WITHOUT ANSWERS. WE FIND THEM UNNECESSARY. WE LIVE OUT OUR LIVES WITHOUT ASKING DEEP QUESTIONS, AND LIVE INTO ANSWERS. BOTH WAYS REQUIRE THE CREATING OF A BELIEF SYSTEM FOR WHICH THERE IS NO VALIDATION. EITHER CHOICE EMBODIES A LIVING SENSE OF SPIRITUALITY.

SPIRITUALLY, FAITH AND MYSTERY ARE INHERENT IN EVERY ASPECT OF LIFE. TO BE IN TOUCH WITH NATURE, TO FEEL DEEPLY ITS MOODS, IS TO BE CAUGHT UP IN THE SPIRITUALITY AND DIVINITY OF ALL THINGS. IT IS ALSO TO HAVE A DEEP REVERENCE FOR LIFE, AND FOR GOD'S CREATION, AND FOR EVERY LIVING BEING.

4. YOU HAVE GIVEN YOUR CHILD LIFE, YOU ALSO WILL BE GIVING YOUR CHILD LOVE, IN ADDITION TO GIVING YOUR CHILD A SENSE OF THE CONNECTEDNESS OF ALL THINGS AND THE SPIRITUALITY WHICH IS A PART AND IN ALL CREATION. ONE MORE GIFT NEEDS TO BE ADDED. GIVE YOUR CHILD LAUGHTER.

AS BABIES, WE ENTER A BROKEN AND TORN AND SINFUL WORLD--THAT IS FOR SURE! BUT WE DO NOT ENTER AS BLOTCHES ON EXISTENCE, AS SINFUL CREATURES; WE BURST INTO THE WORLD AS "ORIGINAL BLESSINGS." PARENTS LIKE THE TWO OF YOU WHO HAVE JOYFULLY BROUGHT A CHILD INTO THE WORLD KNOW THIS. A GRANDPARENT WHO WAS PRESENT AT THE DELIVERY OF HIS FIRST GRANDCHILD AND THE FIRST PERSON TO HOLD THE BABY SAID THE EXPERIENCE WAS UNRIVAVALED IN HIS LIFE FOR BEING THE MOST AWESOME, NUMENOUS MOMENT OF HIS LIFE.

LAUGHTER IS ONE WAY OF EXPRESSING THE JOY WE FIND IN LIFE--THE BLESSING. HONEST LAUGHTER COMES FROM HAVING FUN, FROM ENJOYMENT OF LIFE WITH OTHERS. LAUGHTER SPRINGS FROM RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS. HOW EXCITED AS PARENTS WE ARE WHEN THE BABY SMILES FOR THE FIRST TIME. INSTINCTIVELY WE KNOW THAT A SMILE IS A SIGN OF JOY.

IF YOUR CHILD LEARNS TO LAUGH WITH YOU AND YOU LEARN TO LAUGH WITH HIM--THEN YOU WILL KNOW NO DEEPER JOY. I BELIEVE THAT LAUGHTER, FUN, JOY, AND FESTIVITY ARE BUILT INTO CREATION. THEY ARE A PART OF GOD. THEY ARE THE ENEMY OF SATAN.

I HOPE YOUR SON AND OUR GRANDSON WILL BECOME AN INDIVIDUAL WHO HAS A GOOD SENSE OF HUMOR

AND ENJOYS LAUGHING AND TELLING STORIES,
ONE WHO ENJOYS BEING WITH PEOPLE.

IT WILL BE INTERESTING TO WATCH HIM GROW UP. I WONDER WHAT HE WILL DO WITH HIS LIFE. WE LIKE THE NAME YOU HAVE CHOSEN FOR HIM--JESUS.

YOUR LOVING FATHER AND FATHER-IN-LAW,