Christmas Eve, 1984
BE NOT AFRAID

There are two statements in the Christmas stories which sum up the essential meaning of the Christmas event. One is in the Gospel according to Luke — it is the message of the angel to the shepherds — "Be not afraid, for behold I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people, for to you is born this day Christ the Savior." The second statement is from the Gospel of John and it sums up the meaning of the Christmas event by saying — "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it."

Let's look at each statement separately and then we'll see how they fit together.

1. "Be not afraid!" All of us have been afraid at one time or another. Fear in one form or another is a universal human condition. Some fears are harmful, others are helpful. To be afraid of fire can be very helpful, but if we are so afraid that we cannot even strike a match, the fear can become harmful.

All fear boils down finally to the fear of loss. There is not a fear you can think of that is not in the final analysis fear of loss. If you fear pain, what you really fear is the loss of comfort. If you fear death, what you fear is the loss of life. If you fear change, what you really fear is the loss of the comfortable status quo.

One of the most basic fears of all is the fear of the loss of all connection — connection with others and connection with God. It's the fear of being utterly alone in the world. It's the fear of worthlessness — the fear of being of no value to oneself or anyone else. It's the fear of being unwanted and unloved.

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 you disappeared tomorrow or died, no one would even take notice, or miss you or mourn your loss? One of the most pathetic statements I ever heard from a human being was when a young woman said, "Mister, I ain't nobody's nothin'."

To you, the message of Christmas is "Be not afraid!" You are somebody's something! You are connected to God! God loves you! God cares for you! The love of God became a human being and lived among us. To you is born this day, Christ the Savior.

Now let's look at the second summation of the message of Christmas.

2. "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it!"

Who among us has not felt the darkness of despair, whether it be from the world situation, or from a personal problem? Many farmers in Nebraska and in other midwestern states are experiencing a sense of darkness as they fear losing their farms and their life's savings.

There is a lot of darkness around us: famine, terrorism, the loss of a job, the loss of a loved one, illness, family breakups, the list goes on and on.

Yet the Christmas story assures us — "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it." No wonder Jesus is called the "Light of the World."

Sometimes that light does seem frail and flickering, like the flame of a small candle in a sea of darkness. Maybe that's why we are so attracted by candlelight, and the other small lights of Christmas. They remind us of the "Light of the World," that can never be put out.

Now let's see how these two messages of Christmas come together — "Be not afraid," and "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it."

These two messages are actually one and the same; the light of the world, born at Bethlehem overcomes all fear and all darkness. Furthermore, this light has a quality to it that no other light in the world has — if you and I take the light and spread it to others, we will have more light ourselves. The more light we give away, the more we have.

Not only is Jesus the light of the world, but he has said to us — "You are the light of the world." And there's nothing we have to do to get this light. We don't have to be number one, we don't have to out-achieve everybody else to earn light. Jesus simply says to us — "You are the light." And he adds — "Let your light shine," and it will do miracles.

Leo Buscaglia tells the story about a young man in one of his classes, where one of the requirements was that each student do something in the community for somebody else, free of salary and mostly under self-supervision. This young man named "Joe" could not imagine what there was for him to do in the local community. What need could it have of him?

After some discussion, Buscaglia took him to a local convalescent home. A brief tour answered the question of need. Old people, looking half crazed with boredom and uselessness stared about the rooms in apathy. Some wandered in loose, soiled white pajamas or gowns, from one place to another, as if looking for a space that was not empty.

Joe started with a one-day-a-week visit to the bedside of an old woman whose family had all but abandoned her to age and death. His presence attracted others, equally lonely, to chat with this strong healthy young man. His day began to be referred to as "Joe's Day."

Joe's apprehension over having no skills (no light to shine) soon vanished. It became apparent that it was enough to be present and be himself. The old woman began to dress for his visit. She had her once stringy hair done and tinted an ever-so-pale blue. The men on the ward, too, began to put on shirts and trousers and enter into the animated activities and conversations.

"Joe's Day" was voluntarily extended to three days a week. The change in the home, from such a seemingly small thing, was beautifully obvious. The joyful culmination was watching Joe, like a Pied Piper, leading a procession of halting, but happy senior citizens through the campus, heading for a basketball game, a play or a concert.

All experiences of letting one's light shine are not as dramatic as this. But each one of us can be a light. And each time we let our light shine, it grows brighter within us as well and takes away any fear we might have.

Tonight, experience here again on this Christmas Eve 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. Then you will truly experience the love of God being born again and again within you. "For as you did it unto one of the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me."