Sunday, December 3, 1989
OUR SEARCH IS ANSWERED
Luke 1:26-33

All of the world's religions have one thing in common: they aim to find, know, and relate to God. To read the history of religions is to read the story of human beings trying to penetrate the deepest mysteries of creation and to be in contact with the source of all creation.

Our lives are shadowed by eternal longings and hungers. There is a mystery to life and death that continually haunts us. We sense that there is more to creation and to ourselves than meets the eye, and that our dignity as human beings lies in recognizing within us an irrepressible longing for eternal things.

To put it another way, from the beginning of human history, human beings have intuitively sought God. We human creatures have a kind of built-in desire to be in a relationship with God and with one another. The Psalmist wrote: "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?"

The well-known Advent hymn puts the longing for God in these words: "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." The word "Emmanuel" literally means "God with us."

When I say that all people long for some kind of relationship with God, or that all people seek to know God, this does not mean that all people put that desire into those words. And not all people are ready to receive God on God's terms. People clothe their religious search in different kinds of garments. Some say they want to be assured that the universe is friendly, or that there is some purpose to life, some ultimate meaning, some sense to living in this world.

Others describe this built-in thirst for God by saying that they are searching for truth. The fact is that all people attempt in one way or another to make some sense out of life, to find some meaning in life. I emphasize again that not all people use religious language or the word "God" to describe this desire or search, yet I believe deep down what we are all searching for is to know we are somehow connected with God. Thus it is that in a thousand ways throughout history, and even now, people have pleaded, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel."

This Advent season, which leads up to Christmas, has one central overall message. Advent and Christmas proclaim: our longing and search for God has been satisfied. The Bible puts it this way: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for God has visited and redeemed us." In the Gospel of John, the words are different, but the meaning is the same: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

Luke's Gospel puts it more concretely: "And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn." And then later, the announcement 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 in the City of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

These are all ways of saying that God has come to us and that God is with us. Advent and Christmas say that our search has been answered. God is right here in the middle of life, among us, in each one of us, loving us, healing us, and even dying for us. We have together and individually been given the gift of God in a surprising way. All we have to do is receive it.

But there are those among us who have difficulty in receiving this gift and other gifts as well.

Have you ever had the experience of receiving, out of the blue, a gift from someone you really didn't know that well? It was a very nice gift, something you didn't know you wanted and certainly didn't ask for, and maybe it is a gift the value of which you do not recognize. But there it is, a good gift from someone you had not thought of as a good friend.

What is the first thing you did in response? Maybe you tried to come up with a gift to give in return. Why? Because you didn't want to feel guilty. You didn't want to be indebted. The gift seemed to lay a claim upon you, especially since it came from someone you didn't think knew you very well. Maybe you even thought that by giving you the gift, the person who gave it gained some kind of power over you unless you gave something back in return.

It may well be, as Jesus said, that it is more blessed to give than to receive, but it can be more difficult to receive. Watch how people blush when given a compliment. Some people have difficulty in even hearing a compliment.

Another kind of example: A mother may say to her teenage son who has received an expensive Christmas gift from a young woman he has dated only twice: "Now you take that expensive sweater right back and tell her that your parents won't allow you to accept it. Every gift comes with a claim, and you're not ready for her claim upon you."

Consider what we do during the annual Christmas season. We call it the season of giving. We like to think of ourselves as basically generous and giving people. That's one reason why almost everyone, religious or not, loves Christmas. It is a season to celebrate our alleged generosity. The newspaper keeps us posted on how many needy families have been adopted and how many hungry people have been fed.

The Salvation Army kettles enable us to be generous while buying groceries for ourselves or gifts for our families.

Christmas, we like to say, brings out the best in us. Everyone gives on Christmas, even the stingiest among us. Charles Dickens' story of Scrooge's transformation has perhaps done more to form our notions of Christmas than Luke's story of the baby in a manger. Whereas Luke tells of God's gift to us, Dickens tells us how we can give to others.

Isn't it true that we like to think of ourselves more as givers than receivers, especially at this time of year? And perhaps we are better givers than receivers. Lest you misunderstand, I'm not putting down giving or the generous impulses that Christmas generates. Yet the Advent and Christmas story is not so much about how blessed it is to be givers, but about how essential it is to see ourselves as receivers.

I think, however, we prefer to see ourselves as givers because in that way we can see ourselves as powerful, competent, self-sufficient, capable people whose goodness motivates us to employ some of our power, competence, and gifts to benefit the less fortunate. And that's okay to a point, but Advent and Christmas are about more than that.

The gospel stories of Advent and Christmas go to great lengths to demonstrate that we — with our power, generosity, competence, and capabilities — had little to do with God's coming to us in Jesus. God is the giver, and we are asked to be simply and openly, receivers.

So it is that Advent and Christmas teach us to be receivers. Indeed, the fact is that in this world we are receivers long before we are givers. We are to see our lives as gifts. That's difficult because we would rather see ourselves as givers. As givers, we are in control, and we want power — to stand on our own, take charge, set things straight. We don't like to see ourselves as dependent, needy, and empty-handed.

A minister who works primarily with students at a university said that he believes that a major reason why many children come to despise their parents is that they don't like to see themselves as receivers. It's humbling to see one's life, talents, capabilities, values, weaknesses, and strengths as gifts from one's parents. We would rather think of ourselves as self-made women and men, standing on our own feet, striding bravely into a new world of our creation. As one young man said, "It's humbling to look into a mirror at 21 and admit, 'My goodness, I look just like my old man.'"

Thus, it's not as easy as we think to be on the receiving end of love, God's or anyone else's. It requires that we see our lives and indeed the whole creation, not as our possessions, but as gifts. "Nothing is more repugnant to capable, reasonable people than grace," wrote John Wesley a long time ago.

And even though we love Christmas, we're not always so sure about the relevance and usefulness of God's gift to us in a baby. Rabbi Kushner tells the story of a man who got a telegram telling him that a relative had died and left him some valuable property. He was to contact the Rabbi for details. Excited, he went to the Rabbi, only to be told that the relative was Moses and the valuable property was the Jewish religious tradition. The man went away disappointed that the gift was religious wisdom and not downtown real estate.

This is often the way God loves us: with gifts we thought we didn't need, which transform us into people we don't necessarily want to be.

So it is that during Advent and Christmas, especially when there is so much emphasis on the giving of gifts, we also remember and celebrate the fact that God answers our eternal search with a surprising and unexpected gift. And all we have to do is receive it with joy and thanksgiving. Amen.