Book 21

CHRISTMAS EVE
Monday, December 24, 1990

"A TIME FOR HOPE"

Have you noticed that there are more Christmas lights on the outside of homes this year? I've not done a scientific survey or taken a poll as to why this might be--but my hunch is that these lights have been strung on houses and trees not only for decoration, but as signs of hope. Although some people who have decorated the outside of their homes with hundreds of lights do not think of themselves as being religious, putting up lights is a way of expressing their deep hope that even though there is darkness in the world--the light still shines through it.

It is no accident that when the stories of Jesus' birth took form in the early church, they stressed the fact that it was night when he was born. The world was in darkness.

Not only was it night, but other scholars remind us that Jesus was born in one of the dark corners of the world. There were plenty of bright spots in the world then as there are now. Rome was brilliant and powerful. It had a society that was sophisticated and educated, intelligent and attractive. Alexandria to the south was a city of culture and behind it was the ancient grandeur of Egypt and the pyramids. Corinth and Athens were still living in the afterglow of their glory, and there were people all around the Roman Empire who were living what we might call a gilt-edge existence, successful, happy, talented and influential.

But God chose one of the dark corners of the world in which to be born. Moreover, Mary and Joseph were plain, ordinary people. They were distinguished by nothing but their piety. They were little people, the kind that are pushed around in the world. They knew about darkness.

In our own time, darkness is often a symbol for trouble, tragedy, evil. We talk about the 'powers of darkness.' But precisely at this point, the Gospel of John reminds us--"the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has never put it out."

The writer of John's Gospel makes this proclamation with both amazement and gratitude. Sometimes the world is so dark and yet the writer of the Gospel stands in awe before the fact that after nearly a century, in spite of opposition and persecution, the light of God's love is still shining.

Even more so can we stand in awe, amazement and gratitude for now after nearly 2,000 years, the light still shines forth and the darkness has not put it out.

Like the writer of John's Gospel, we know something about darkness in the world and in our personal lives. Perhaps there is no crisis

at the moment in your personal life, but I can imagine that there are very few people here who somewhere, hidden behind the proud facades of their lives, have not had dark places, or experienced dark moments.

In fact, some people are obsessed with darkness. There are those who are sure that darkness has more power than light. There are those who firmly believe that the world is going to pieces. There is no hope. We are doomed. Evil has the upper hand.

And there is a lot of darkness around us. The Persian Gulf situation is on our minds every day. Hostages are still held in many parts of the world. Torture continues to be used by some political regimes. Many of our cities are unsafe in the darkness. Racism still lives among us. There is still a lot of darkness in the world.

Few there are among us who have not experienced personal darkness. Some have known the darkness

of mental depression. Others experience the darkness of grief. Still others know the darkness of separation, divorce and loneliness. There is the pain of illness and the darkness of wrong choices and bad decisions.

To all of you I proclaim that if the events of Christmas do not mean anything in the dark places of our lives and the dark places of the world, then Christmas doesn't mean anything at all. And when you discover what Christmas means in the darkness then you will know what Christmas truly means everywhere.

First of all, Christmas reminds us that God is in the darkness as well as in the light. God is in the darkness of a broken heart. God is present with you in the darkness of pain and suffering. In whatever darkness may be swallowing you up at this very moment, God is present. You may not recognize God any more than the people did when God was born in the darkness of the stable, but God is there

and the people whose eyes have been opened know that God is there. In other words, there is no situation so bleak that there is not the possibility of life stirring in it.

The writers of the Psalms knew this before Jesus was born. The Psalmist wrote: "The darkness is no darkness with thee, but the night is as clear as the day; the darkness and the light to thee are both alike."

Secondly, the light of God which we experience in the birth, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus does not do away with all darkness, but shines through it. It isn't like the light you turn on in a room when you go in at night; the second you flip the switch the light goes on, the dark in that room is gone. It's more like a search light, or a spot light that sends a beam of light through the darkness, or light the flame of a candle in a dark room--you can see the light, but there is still darkness around it.

For example, Jesus did not destroy the darkness of the Roman Rule, nor did he lift a hand to push it aside, but he cut a path of light through the darkness of that rule which was the path of the love of God stronger than any worldly power. Jesus didn't completely eliminate pain, or disease or death. In spite of all the people he healed and the power he released to renew life, he would have been the last to claim that he had eliminated all things that make us suffer. He didn't eliminate them but gave us the power to live through them. The light always shines through the darkness.

And the third thing about this light is the most remarkable of all. The light is still shining. It flickers every once in a while, and sometimes we wonder if at certain periods of history it may not go out, but it never has. That's the astonishing fact--that no matter how dark the world is, no matter how much darkness there is in your personal life, the light still shines and nothing can ever put it out.

That's why above all, Christmas is a time for hope.

The light of the power and love of God shines independently of us, but we can also let that light shine through us and the more it shines through us the more it spreads in the world. And the amazing fact is this that the more we let the light shine through us, the more we experience the deeper joys of this season and of life itself. "You are the light of the world," said Jesus to his followers, and that means all of us. "Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to God." Amen.