Christmas Eve 1998
LIGHT AND WARMTH

A common fear for human beings, especially when very young, is being afraid of the dark. Children say it all the time, “Mommy, Daddy, please leave the light on, I’m afraid of the dark.”

Why is this? Maybe it’s because darkness reminds us of the nothingness that existed before creation. The first creation story in the book of Genesis begins this way: “In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep ... then God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light. And God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness.”

Creation begins in darkness. The creation, when complete, consists of both light and darkness. Darkness is good in that darkness, sleep, and rest go together. Darkness can be a place of growth, change, and transformation. Consider how a seed, planted in the dark soil, springs forth into life, or how a baby is born into the world after nine months in the darkness of the mother’s womb. We all need both darkness and light. Life begins in darkness.

In the creation story, God did not eliminate darkness, but created light as a contrast to the darkness. Our lives consist of both light and darkness. One is not evil and the other good. Both are an important part of life. We need the rhythm of light and darkness.

Artists and painters know the importance of contrast, of shadows, in creating a work of art. The artist does not draw the light; the artist draws the shadows. We only know what light is because of darkness. Conversely, we only know what darkness is because of light.

The Christmas story is about light and darkness. The gospel of John describes the birth of the Savior as, “The true light which enlightens everyone was coming into the world,” yet at the same time reminds us that this light was in the world from the beginning of creation. This version of the Christmas story also says, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

Later on, Jesus told His followers, “You are the light of the world.”

In the Bible stories and in our human experience, light, in addition to being the opposite of darkness, is a metaphor for gaining knowledge, learning, growing, and gaining understanding. We sometimes say about a teacher, “She cast more light on the subject.” There is something built into each one of us that craves more knowledge and, in that sense, more light. Watch any young child, and you can see that he or she instinctively wants to discover and learn.

As we grow older, we run into things that are difficult to understand, and we sometimes exercise our freedom to not understand or learn more. When computers first began to be used extensively, I resisted learning to use one for a time. It seemed too difficult. I was afraid of new light. For a while, I chose to walk in darkness.

In the same way, some of us resist new ideas, new theories, or even new knowledge about God. We prefer to stick with the old. We choose to stay in darkness. It almost seems that some people are as much afraid of more light as others are of darkness.

We human beings also need warmth. Light and warmth go together. Not only do we need physical warmth, but we also need the warmth of being cherished and valued, the knowledge that we belong somewhere, that we are connected with others and with God. The cold of winter is a reminder of "creaturehood." Once more, we see ourselves as tiny, huddling creatures dependent on each other and on God, who created the awesome universe.

Is there anything more terrifying, really, than to feel totally abandoned, 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 care?

Leslie Weatherhead, a London minister who was also an air raid warden during the Second World War 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 asked him, "Where is your father?" The boy answered, "He's in the service overseas." "What about your mother?" "She was killed last week during an air raid." "Where are your brothers and sisters, or aunts or uncles?" "I don't know," answered the boy. "We got separated." And with that, Weatherhead knelt before the lad, put both hands on his shoulders, and asked, "Who are you?" At which the little boy began to sob more uncontrollably and said, "Mister, I ain't nobody's nothing."

Weatherhead said 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 and loneliness.

It's no wonder that religious rituals from the very beginning have usually employed fire, because it puts forth both warmth and light.

Whenever human beings have attempted to relate to the Divine Mystery we call God, we have 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, even though very small, illumines the darkness and drives away the cold. We appreciate the candle the most when we see its little flame in total darkness. As someone said, "It is only when it is the darkest that we can see the stars."

That's why the Christmas story in the gospel of John is described in terms of light and warmth. "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 are here. God gives them to all of us as a gift. In fact, both light and warmth are built into all of us because we are made in the image of God. We human beings are made by and for God and for each other.

The Christmas story is a continuation of the creation story in Genesis, the first book in the Bible. Christmas tells us that God is always bringing more light into the world. The purpose of the light is not to extinguish the darkness, because we all need both darkness and light. The purpose of the light is to guide us through the darkness.

The Christmas story proclaims that even though the circumstances of life will not always be favorable, the promise is that God will always more than match the circumstances of life with the strength to meet them. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never overcome it."

The question we need to ask ourselves is: What does Christmas mean in the dark places of my life? Perhaps there is no crisis at the moment, but I imagine that there are very few people here who, somewhere hidden behind the proud facades of their lives, don't have dark places — the things hidden behind their pretenses, the things they are ashamed of, the disappointments that sting like thorns, the failures and mistakes which haunt us, the grief because someone who was loved is no longer with us. Christmas tells us that God is in the darkness as well as in the light. I don't know if your experience matches mine, but sometimes it has seemed to me that God is more present in the darkness than in the light — not actually, of course, but we are more aware of God's presence because the darkness shuts out the distractions.

And remember this above all else — no matter how deep the darkness, the light of God's love still shines through. It flickers every now and then, but the darkness can never completely overcome it.

It is a light, of course, that shines independently of us, but it's also true that by and large, if it is to shine in the world today, it is going to shine through us. My Christmas wish is this — that each one of us will find some way to let the light shine through us. It will shine anyway, in spite of you and me, because it comes from God. But God is counting on us to keep the light that pierces the darkness shining. Amen.