Christmas Eve 1999
A PERSONAL GIFT

I'm sure you've noticed as I have that there are more Christmas lights on the outside of homes this year than ever before, or at least it appears that way to me. 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 symbols of joy and hope. Although some people who have decorated their homes with hundreds or even thousands of lights may not think of themselves as being very religious, I believe that deep within themselves they are more religious than they realize. Putting up lights is a way of expressing their fervent hope that even though there is darkness in the world, the light still shines through it. In other words, there's something about the Christmas story which touches all of us, and it's related to our putting up all kinds of lights.

It's 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 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 where he could've been born. Rome was brilliant and powerful. 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 not distinguished except in their faith and trust in God. They were not influential people but rather the kind that get pushed around in the world. They knew about darkness.

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

The Christmas story in John's gospel is a kind of retelling of the story of creation. In the creation story in the Bible, creation begins in darkness. The creation when complete is both light and darkness. We need both. Darkness can be 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 that 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 necessarily evil, and the other good. Both are an important part of life. We need the change of light and darkness. We also need one to experience the other. The tiny flame of a candle in bright sunlight has little effect. But in total darkness, the tiny flame of a candle is beautiful to behold. And no matter how dense the darkness, it cannot by itself overcome the tiny flame.

In the Bible stories and in our human experience, light, in addition to being the opposite of darkness, is a metaphor for gaining knowledge, for learning, for growing, for getting

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.

That’s why the birth of Jesus in the Gospel of John is described in terms of light. “The true light that enlightens everyone was coming into the world.” But even more important, this light is a very personal light. The Christmas story tells us the light that is God became a human being and lived among us.

When Jesus began his own teaching, not only did he describe himself in terms of light, but even more amazing, he said to all of us, “You are the light of the world.” Note especially that he did not say, “You’ve got to be number one in order to get light or be light,” or “You must out-achieve everybody else in order to earn light.” He said simply, “You are light.” Then he added, “Let your light shine so that others may see your good works and give glory to God.”

God’s personal gift is light in the darkness, and that means that you are the light of the world as well. But before you can give the gift of light to others, you need to acknowledge that you are the light, and that’s not as easy as it sounds. Why do I say this?

I meet people every day who have a basic sense of insecurity about themselves. They are like Charlie Brown in the Peanuts comic strip by Charles Schulz. In fact, one person said it this way, “Again and again in the figure of Charlie Brown, I see a depiction of my own childhood.” He went on to say, “I particularly remember one episode in which Charlie was lamenting to his friend Linus about his chronic, lifelong sense of insecurity. ‘It goes all the way back to the beginning, the moment I was born and stepped on the stage of history, they took one look at me and said, not right for the part.'”

This man went on to say, “I remember that again and again in my early days I was told: ‘If you are ever going to amount to anything, you have to make something of yourself.'”

Children are often excellent observers but poor interpreters. They hardly miss a thing when it comes to taking it all in, but drawing the correct conclusions is another thing. In my friend’s case, he took these words as an assessment of his condition rather than as a challenge to his potential. But then one day, he read again this statement of Jesus, “You are the light of the world,” and he heard it as he had not heard it before. He said, “For the first time in my life, I felt a sense of grace. All of a sudden it dawned on me that I had been mistaken from that earliest moment of self-definition. The truth was — I did have worth in me from the beginning. And it was worth that resulted not from what I had to make of myself, but rather from what God had made of me when he called me out of nothing into being.”

It’s all part of God’s personal gift as seen in Christmas. Because Jesus is the light of the world, each one of us is also the light of the world. But sometimes we put this light under a cover and do not let it shine.

A man who was married to a very loving wife for 37 years came home from work to find that his wife had suffered a massive stroke that day. She was rushed to the hospital, but in spite of the best medical care, she died a few hours later. After the funeral, the husband, in shock and grief, told his best friend, “Do you know what the worst thing of all is about her death? I loved her more than anything in this whole world, and I never told her or showed her how deep and abiding my love for her was.”

Christmas is above all God's self-disclosure. It is God's telling us, in the most personal way possible, of God's love for us and for the whole creation. And we are to be the light of the world by expressing ourselves in the same way.

When I was growing up, I remember especially that at Christmas time, my mother would make homemade doughnuts. The last act was to take the sizzling doughnuts from the cooker, drop them into a pan of sugar and turn them over and over, or put them in a paper bag with sugar in it and shake them. Thinking back to the Christmas doughnuts, I remember that you can't touch a sugared doughnut without getting some sugar on your fingers. And it also leaves a trail of sweetness wherever it goes.

In remembering this, it occurs to me that it would be a better world if somehow we could be like sugared doughnuts — leaving a trail of flavorful joy and fragrance behind us. Wouldn't it be great if everyone who had contact with us felt a little happier because their lives had touched ours? What a beautiful personal gift this would be to bring to a world where there is still much bitterness, animosity, and selfishness.

When some people walk into a room, they seem to light a candle. There are others who, when they walk into a room, want to blow it out, or try.

Pope John XXIII said, "I don't agree with the prophets of doom. They always talk as if the present, compared with the past, is getting worse. I see humankind entering a new era, and I see in this a divine plan. This plan, in the course of time and in and through what we human beings do, pursues its own purposes, its own goals, and they are far, far beyond our human expectations."

I believe Pope John was a realist. His faith in the future and his joy in the present had their roots in the story of Christmas and God's personal gift to us. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." The greatest foe of Christianity is not agnosticism or atheism, or secularism, but men and women who, having experienced the "light of the world," do not let it shine through them enough so that they are the joyful, radiant, and attractive people they were intended to be.

While it is true that the light of the power and love of God shines independently of us, it becomes even more powerful when we 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 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. "Let your light so shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to God." Amen.