Christmas Eve 2003

THE INNER MEANING OF CHRISTMAS

Religious holidays like Christmas have traditions that carry inner meanings. You are aware of many of these that have grown up around your Christmas celebrations. I love them all. It's a time when families want to be together. Individuals travel long distances to be with each other. You want to be "home" for Christmas, and "home" has many definitions. People give gifts to each other. Parties are held. Houses and buildings are decorated with beautiful displays and many lights. Children especially are filled with expectation. Santas are seen everywhere. Candles are often preferred in place of bright lights.

These traditions are connected to the religious aspects of Christmas. They are revealed in the beautiful stories surrounding the event, and our lives would be considerably poorer without them — the shepherds in the field, the star in the east, the wise men, the manger. The birth of a baby in Bethlehem is the center-point of adoration. These stories, too, are filled with inner meanings, as you will see.

Because of these inner meanings, it is not surprising that this holiday has a mysterious attraction for all kinds of people, even those who do not consider themselves religious. Many of them participate in various Christmas celebrations, secular and religious. People who do not regularly attend worship often feel the desire to be in a worship service on Christmas.

I am convinced that most people, religious or not, intuitively sense that there are inner meanings of utmost importance in the Christmas stories and traditions. They convey a truth about the nature of creation, human beings, and the sacred and holy in the midst of life. These inner truths are contained in the symbols and stories. St. Paul said, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels." The earthen vessels are very important. You need them to experience the treasure. They carry the treasures forward and keep them from being lost.

In fact, I believe that if this holiday didn't exist, another observance carrying the same eternal truths would have filled the void. I'm often amused by the slogan, "Put Christ back into Christmas." I'm amused because I believe there's no way you can keep Christ out of Christmas. It's something you can't control. It's similar to that statement some politicians like to make: "The Supreme Court has banned God from the public schools." No human institution or individual can keep God out of anything. It's amazing how arrogant and egotistical human beings can be.

What, then, are some of these central eternal truths that are embedded in Christmas? They all center around the metaphor of "light." Because the early Christians did not know the actual date when Jesus was born, but knew the inner meaning of the event, the leaders of the church wisely decided to co-opt the many cultural festivals of light and darkness that took place around the Winter Solstice. What better time, they thought, than to have the light of the world appear at the darkest time of the year?

That's why it is significant that John's gospel describes the birth of Jesus as the coming of the light of God into the world. It is a light so enduring that the world, with all of its darkness, cannot and will not overcome it.

It's easy to forget how important the metaphors of light and darkness were for human beings several centuries ago. Today, you can push back the darkness with powerful artificial lights. You can travel in darkness far from home by turning on the headlights of your automobile or by utilizing the lights marking the runways of modern airports. You live in cities with electrified streets and neon signboards. You can flick a switch and the rooms in your home are filled with light.

However, not too many years ago, all human beings lived primarily around the cycles of light and darkness. You could only work from sunup to sundown. Stories and festivals were created around the changes of the season, all of which are marked by changes in light from the sun and the moon. The relatively recent human ability to light up the night was a gigantic step in the quest to defeat the always-threatening darkness. Before that, the vast majority of human beings lived in the presence of unconquered and unrelieved darkness.

You can understand why light is a very significant metaphor in religion. In the earliest birth story of Jesus, found in the gospel of Matthew, the primary symbol of light is a star — bright, radiant, and beautiful — that illumined the darkness of night. The star is said to have the power to guide the Magi through that darkness to the light of all people revealed in the baby born in Bethlehem.

In Luke's gospel, the symbol of light is a host of resplendent angels who break through the midnight sky with heavenly brightness. The shepherds, who were at first afraid of this bright light, discover that with the light, the angels announce the birth of the "true light," which is now available to everyone.

The Christmas story in the gospel of John is described totally with the metaphors of light and darkness. His Christmas story is a retelling of the creation story where God creates the heavens and the earth by bringing light into the darkness. Before that, everything was in darkness. Creation begins in darkness. Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. God did not eliminate the darkness but created light as a contrast to darkness. Our lives consist of both light and darkness. One is not evil and the other good. Both are an important part of life. You cannot know one without the other.

The prophet Isaiah picked up the same theme. He wrote: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light." Then the gospel of John repeats the theme by saying: "The true light that enlightens everyone was coming into the world." Yet at the same time, he reminds you that this light was in the world and in you from the beginning of creation. Now you can understand why Jesus said to his followers, "You are the light of the world." John adds, and now I'm paraphrasing, "This light became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth."

This light of God has been here all the time. It was present in the creation. It is in every human being because you have been created in God's image. You can get a whole new understanding of this light which is already in you through the birth, life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This is the true inner meaning of Christmas. The light of God is already in you and is at the same time always entering the world and your life in new and surprising ways. This light can never be extinguished.

How is this light best described? It's more like the light of a candle than a searchlight. Think about it. When you light a candle, the gentle flame invites others to gather around it with you. When you turn on a searchlight, you stand behind it and aim it at someone you are chasing or

want to expose. Some preachers I know preach as if their words are a searchlight aimed at the back alleys of sin, just for the joy of watching sinners run.

Candles, on the other hand, are not aimed at anyone. They don't travel in one direction, but gently push back the darkness in the room in all directions. They don't eliminate the darkness but light up the space around them.

My wish for you this Christmas is that each one of you will rediscover the light of God within you and will find some way to let the light of the love of God shine through you. I hope you will light more candles and aim fewer searchlights. God's light will shine in the world anyway, in spite of you and me, because it comes from God. But God is also counting on you to let your light shine. Amen.