Christmas Eve 2004
HOW SILENTLY, HOW SILENTLY

One of my favorite Christmas carols is O Little Town of Bethlehem. I especially like the third verse:

"How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven.
No one discerns God's coming, but in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in."

These words make the extraordinary statement that the Divine Reality, most often named God, can be found and experienced in and among human beings and throughout creation. As a human being, you participate in the "incarnation of the Divine." The Gospel of John uses different words to make the same claim: "The Word became flesh and lives among us, full of grace and truth." A good paraphrase is: "The loving energy of God became a human being and lives among us and also in you and me." As one writer put it, "You are wired for God."

I believe that many people intuitively sense this love of God in and among them, and that is why the Christmas season attracts them, whether they think of themselves as religious or not.

This truth, which the Christmas story carries, is embedded in many of the Christmas traditions. It's why families want to be together. Individuals travel to be "home" for Christmas, and "home" has many meanings. It is more than a geographical location. That's why people who do not attend worship services at other times of the year want to be in a worship service on Christmas. It's connected with being at home for Christmas. People give gifts to each other. Parties are held. Houses and buildings are decorated with beautiful displays and many lights. Candles are preferred over bright, glaring lights.

These Christmas traditions, even those you might consider secular, carry important truths about the nature of creation, about how human beings are created in the image of God, and about the sacredness of life. As the Apostle Paul put it, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels." Christmas traditions and stories are necessary containers to carry the treasures.

I've said it many times before, but it bears repeating: I'm amused by the comment, "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. You could become so distracted that you are not aware of Christ in Christmas. Or you might try to avoid Christ in Christmas, but you cannot keep Christ out of Christmas. It's another way of saying you cannot keep the loving energy of God from shining through. The light of God is in Christmas whether you recognize it or not.

"How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given!" That's why the central metaphor for the inner truth of Christmas has always centered around the concept of light. Light is silent. A burning candle does not make any noticeable sound. An electric light bulb is silent as it gives light. You might hear the flick of the switch, but the light itself is silent. You can hear the crackle of burning logs in a fireplace, campfire, or bonfire, but the light it produces is silent. Consider also how silently the light of the morning begins to appear, as well as the way the light silently disappears as the sun sets.

Because the early church had no idea exactly 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 were associated with the Winter Solstice. What better time of year, they reasoned, than to have the light of the world appear at the darkest time of the year?

The writer of the Gospel of John also had this in mind as he describes the birth of Jesus as the coming of the light of God into the world. It is a light that darkness cannot and will not overcome.

It's easy to forget how important the metaphors of light and darkness were for human beings several thousand years ago because today, you can hold 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 lighted streets and 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 organized their lives and their work according to the light — from sunup to sundown. An old hymn has the title, Work, for the Night is Coming. Years ago, festivals and stories were created around the changes of the season, all of which are marked by changes in light from the sun and moon. The relatively recent human ability to first capture fire and later ignite it was a giant step in the quest to defeat the always threatening darkness.

You can appreciate why light is a very significant metaphor in religion. In the earliest 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 the night. The star is said to have had the power to guide the Magi through the night to the baby born in Bethlehem.

In Luke's account of Jesus' birth, the light symbol 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" that is now available to everyone.

The Christmas story in the Gospel of John is described totally with the images 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 God spoke, "Let there be light," there was only darkness. Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. In the story, God did not eliminate the darkness but created light as a contrast to darkness. Life is filled with both light and darkness. One is not evil and the other good. Both are integral to life. All life begins in darkness — with seeds in the darkness of the ground, with the fetus in the darkness of the womb.

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 that theme by saying, "The true light that enlightens everyone was coming into the world." 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."

This light of God has been here all the time. It was present in creation. It is in every human being because you have been created in God's image. This is the truth the Christmas story

wants you to know. The light of God is already in you from the time of your birth, and it is continually entering the world and your life in new and surprising ways. You are not always aware of this because light enters silently, without fanfare.

What is this light like, as the third verse of O Little Town of Bethlehem described? It's more like the light of a candle than a searchlight. When you light a candle, the gentle, silent flame invites others to gather around it with you. When you turn on a searchlight, you stand behind it and aim it at something or someone you are chasing and want to expose. Some preachers I know preach as if their words are a searchlight aimed at the back alleys of sin for the joy of watching sinners run from it.

Candles, on the other hand, are not aimed at anyone. The light from the flame doesn't travel in one direction but takes out the darkness of the room in all directions. Now you know why candles instead of searchlights are preferred at Christmas. When people come together in joy or sorrow, they frequently hold a candlelight vigil.

"How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given." My dream for you this Christmas is that each one of you will rediscover the light of God within you and that you will find some way to let the light of the love of God shine through you.

Remember, Jesus said, "You are the light of the world." I hope you will light more candles and aim fewer spotlights. God's light will shine in the world anyway in spite of you and me, but God is also counting on you to let your light shine. If you remember nothing else this Christmas Eve, remember this — the light of the loving energy of God is within you. Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine. Amen.