

It is an exhilarating experience to go far back in history

to find the best sources, the written "gems" of a particular era.

In the "Ancient Christian Commentaries" of the Early Church Fathers,

the devout disciples of Christ lived together in community

and pondered daily in their hearts the meaning of the Gospel stories. They

knew each other, ate with each other,

conferred with each other, and deliberated with each other,

as they faithfully shaped the truth of the Gospels.

For me, some have been a revelation -- knowledge that gives the ability to see

another glimpse of the beautiful Face of God.

Here are a few of those glimpses: The church fathers collectively agreed that

the first purpose of John's gospel was to provide an accurate historical account.

When John's fellow disciples and bishops entreated him

to write a gospel, he said,

"Fast now with me for the space of three days,

and let us recount to each other whatever may be revealed to us"

At this time, the Apostle Andrew was still living,

and his revelation was that John should narrate his Gospel in his own name-- all things that were discussed as they collectively called them to mind.

We might call this process team-writing today,

but the goal was to discuss the Word and test the meaning of each passage with one another. John apparently welcomed the insights of his friends.

Papias, (~60-130 A.D.)

Early in the 1st C., it was noted by Papias that the writers of the other gospels, such as Mark, wrote accurately, "though not in order, of the things either said or done by Christ."

John was considered an "eye-witness" and

"historian among the four gospel writers,"

yet John was inspired by the Spirit to also compose a spiritual gospel."

(Clement of Alexandria (150- ~215 A.D.)

Origen (late Second Century)

It was John's emphasis on the divinity of Christ that prompted Origen to call the 4th gospel the "first fruits of all the Apostolic gospel accounts,

for none of these other gospels plainly declared Christ's divinity as John does."

The divinity of Jesus was of paramount importance, when the Church was struggling with heretical controversies. Thus, John's Gospel played a large part in the drafting of the Nicene Creed in the 4th Century. You might want to compare the first 18 verses of John, Chapter One, with the Creed on page 34 of the hymnal sometime.

John's Gospel proclaims Good News for us all:

"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.
From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace."

John describes the Incarnation in terms that are unsophisticated --
a simple statement to describe Christianity as it is in real life -- fleshly,
earth-bound, yet spiritual, because we are on holy ground
that reveals the breath and speech of God.

"The Message" translation describes the Incarnation this way:
"The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.
We saw the glory with our own eyes, and one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son,
generous inside and out, true from the start to finish."/

You and I grew up on holy ground without even knowing it.

We can remember our childhoods,
how relatively free and unadorned our lives were,
playing outside all day until dinner,
then resuming after dinner with games such as Kick the Can and Hide and Seek into
the dark nights of Summer; going barefoot, making mud pies in the sun,

picking peaches, apples, and apricots so Mom could make a pie,
and popping the "first fruits" into our mouths--
those perfectly ripe and mouthwatering fruits,
before they made it into the basket;
riding bikes to the neighborhood store to buy an ice cream
or a dinner ingredient for our mother, swimming in the river,
taking a picnic lunch. . . and all that time, God was there, with us. /

"The Message" translates:

"We all live off his generous bounty, gift after gift after gift.

We inherited the basics of the Law from Moses,
and then this exuberant giving and receiving.

This endless knowing and understanding --

that has come through Jesus, the Messiah.

No one has ever seen God, not so much as a glimpse.

This one-of-a-kind God-Expression, who exists at the very heart of the Father, has made him plain as day." /

And through all this giving and receiving, knowing and understanding, and with these gifts, we learn how to live with one another.

God creates community in us as we share our experiences and faith-filled lives as naturally as water off a duck's back --

with mutual acceptance and a kind of foreknowledge that has gathered in and through us to understand each other, just as John, Andrew, the bishops, and the Early Church Fathers did two thousand years ago.

Incarnation means that all ground is holy ground

because God not only made the earth, but also walked on it, ate, and slept, and worked, and died on it. Christ has made God known to his disciples by sharing his experiences and life with them.

We can see the Face of God through the Life of Jesus.

If we are saved anywhere, we are saved here, on this holy ground.

And what is saved is not some vaporized remnant of our bodies and our earth, but our bodies and our earth themselves, intact and thriving.

This church is the essence and beauty of the Christian life-
our working and living together in thought, word, and deed,
to know and see the face of God in all its hope and glory.

In these days, when our future is unknown,
it is important to maintain our connections with each other,
to catch and keep our vision strong,
to present the face of Jesus Christ in unity with one another,
to keep close in brotherhood and sisterhood,
to enjoy our likenesses,
and work out any differences with good humor,
with our eyes always on the welfare of each other-
to grow and thrive in Christ's name./

We come to the Table today,

secure in the knowledge that our world was made just for us,

a generous and incomparable gift of God to his beloved children.

In this New Year, let's try to keep life simple:

conversations and life unadorned at the dinner table --

with a simple meal and face-to-face, faith-to-faith,

caring -to-caring experiences,

with honest confiding and receptive listening --

and we will capture the bliss of knowing our neighborhood where God dwells.

In this New Year, let us remember the treasured experiences of our past
and work to recreate similar experiences in our present lives,
not as a refusal to move forward to new experiences that can enlighten us,
but to honor the good things of our past and build on them -
to realize that these treasured memories,
and "all other things came into being through him,
and without him not one thing came into being.

What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people."

May the New Year bring to all of us an unmistakable,
palpable feeling of the Presence of God-with-us.

He awaits our invitation.

Amen.

COMMUNION HYMN #827 "O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright"