

St. John, Apostle and Evangelist

December 27, 1998

Kwanzaa - Commitment Sunday - The Third Day of Christmas

Gen.1:1-5,26-31 Psalm 116:10-17 1 John 1:1-2:22 John 21:20-25

We did not receive any writing from Jesus. On one occasion he wrote something on the ground. That was the time he protected an adulteress from execution. He may have written the sins of the executioners into the sand, or he may have written, "He who is without sin, cast the first stone." We do not know.

But others became the scribes of Jesus, others like John, the Apostle and Evangelist. Whether they were one and the same person, or different authors, we have a Gospel, three Letters, and Revelations under the name of John. Perhaps because John became very old, he wrote or dictated these works in different phases of his life.

The broad reading public which we have today had to be reached in those days by the ways and means of the oral tradition. Few people knew how to read and fewer still knew how to write. John and other scribes of that day did a wonderful thing by writing down the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Writing is one of the ways that makes God's Word live forever.

Try to imagine how momentary, almost instantaneous, and passing a word is. It comes out of my mouth and goes into your ear. We tend to think that if it is not tape recorded, it is gone forever. But that perspective is oblivious to your hearing the word and allowing it to live in you, which presupposes much more than merely recording the word and remembering it. In other words, how does the word get into your heart? What makes you open the door to your heart? What allows you to make room for the Word of God and to let it conceive and bring about the Holy birth in you?

Sometimes written words only go through our minds. In the same way, sometimes written music is played in a very technological way. It goes from the notes written on the sheet to

the ears of the listeners without going through the heart. When words are written down, we know we can always return to them, and then we do not remember them, we do not live with them, and they do not become inscribed into our hearts. In such a way the written page takes the word out of our hearts.

Before words were chiseled onto stones, painted onto papyrus, which was handier, handwritten upon scrolls, and then onto the first books, and later printed and published off the presses, people were the real books, the parchment, the pages. The words were heard and lived in their hearts. But people died, and the writings they had learned by heart died with them. Chiseling the words onto a stone made them accessible to one generation after another. Then words were not recited from memory, but read from manuscripts, for example.

Right now I am reading Elizabeth Eisenstein work, The Printing Press as an Agent of Change. She writes that in some cases a scriptorium preceded the printing press. In it someone would dictate a book to five or more, perhaps as many as twenty, scribes, who would make a hand written copy of the book. The process of making books available was very time consuming and very expensive. Often monasteries and nunneries copied books as their *opus Dei*, their work for God. Committing words to writing gave them eternal life, which characterized their work as divine. Because books were so expensive, many scholars had to copy them by hand to be able to refer to them. Only the very rich could afford them.

Because very few books were available, traditions developed to memorize them and to be able to recite their portions when required by the community. In our German tradition we memorized Psalms, the Christmas prophecies, and the Christmas story to recite for Christmas. Of course, we had to memorize the whole Small Catechism. That may be a vestige of the time when few books

were available, and people depended on the "good parchments" of the commanding memories some people had.

When Johann Gutenberg invented the printing press with moveable type and standardized parts, the printers could publish thousands of books at once. Books could be duplicated by mass production. Because of that important invention, we all have Bibles to read and many more books accessible to us on our shelves than we could possibly read.

The printing press had much to do with the Reformation and the Bible reading Protestants who arose out of Catholicism. Perhaps print is to script what the book was to the scroll. I am not certain when the book was invented and when it replaced the scroll. Interestingly enough, the synagogue keeps the Torah on scrolls, while Christians read a Bible, the Greek word for "book." But this is but a hunch, pure historical conjecture. Historical research may show it to be completely unfounded.

What we do in the midst of the congregation, here in the church, is to read the Bible publically for you to hear it. We could not do it, if John had not written down these words. Even after taking a critical perspective of writing, we have to exclaim: what a good thing he did to write these words down for us! It is as if he gave us a telephone back through two thousand years of time to Jesus when he walked the earth. Reading the Scriptures, you hear the words of Jesus, and when you and I pray for the Holy Spirit, then we hear Jesus' words in the same spirit with which he spoke them.

But what good is the writing, the public reading, if we do not hear them, and we do not let them get into our hearts? If we let them live in us then they can cast the spell of the faith of Jesus over us, so that we live by this faith, and we become part of the story of the Gospel, we continue the story, we live lives that continue the Gospel, the living Good News, the fast-

breaking, eyewitness news about the new thing God is doing with us here at St. John's Lutheran Church.

For the most part, this is a Black congregation. We were taught by Shani Talibah this morning how to celebrate Kwanzaa. It does not replace Christmas, but intends to affirm African culture in affirming the positive values the Seven Principles espouse. The fourth principle is called *Ujamaa* and it refers to cooperative economics. This value is well designed to help the self-development of Black communities in America. The principle encourages Black people "to build and maintain our own stores, shops, and other businesses and to profit from them together."

Let us also realize today, on this Commitment Sunday, that St. John's Lutheran Church, insofar as it is a human institution, is also Black owned and operated. The stronger you make it, the more support you give it, the stronger it can make you, the more support it can give you.

St. John's is very important as the place where God's Word is proclaimed and where God's Word is inscribed upon the people. Writing is not enough, whether chiseled into stone, written on a scroll, or printed and published in a book. The living word of God needs to be spoken and heard by God's people, and become written upon their hearts, imprinted upon their lives.

The living Word of God has to become the script of your life. Memorizing it is only one level of receiving it. It needs to be understood and digested. It needs to get into your heart and provide you with a holey new birth, make you pregnant with new being, make you come to term in Mary, who pondered God's Word in her heart, so that you receive the body of Christ.

The whole creation awaits you. Angels are holding their breath, are ready for you to come out, to crown, to come out with your whole head, your shoulders, your body, your legs, and take your first breath of the Spirit of God. Breathe the air of the

love of God. Grow up to be a child of God, with Christ as your older Brother, Mary, your very Mother, and God, your Holy Father.

Let's experience a real Christmas here. Our church is not barren. It is happily rejoicing with a whole church-full of the children of God, living books, living words of God, living gospels, living the Good News, so that St. John's Lutheran Church becomes a living Gospel inscribed by the finger of God. People who enter these doors will exclaim, "What we have heard, what we have seen right here in the congregation, what we have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life, was revealed right here, and experienced, because God is with us doing a new thing right here and now with you people, the flesh and blood, living Gospel of St. John's.

Often I call the church and joke with John Davis, "Is this St. John?" But we also have St. John at the piano, John Oliver, that is. See how we people the Gospel. And Moses, our president, makes the Old Testament come alive, and we have little Aaron as well, who can shout "Hallelujah" and make people get into the spirit even while he is singing "Santa Clause is Coming to Town."

So as living letters, as living books, let's let the writing of St. John get into our hearts, and let his Gospel come alive even here and even now. Let the Good Story continue with us. The Bible is an open book. We are the new people walking out of its pages into the gates of paradise, because Immanuel! God is with us. Here is the place. Now is the time.

Come, Lord Jesus! Come, dear Christchild! Come use us for the purposes of your love, your grace, your mercy, your justice, and your peace. Amen.