A phrase, a kind of mantra, has been running through my head ever since I first sat down with this evening’s propers:

“We who have known the mystery of that Light on earth.” It’s in the collect, and it’s an audacious claim made in an almost offhand manner, on the way to the conclusion of that prayer, “that we may enjoy him”—that Light, Jesus—“perfectly in heaven.”

I don’t know anything about heaven, really, except that . . . no . . . I don’t know anything about heaven. I know about some people’s conjectures about heaven, some people’s hopes for heaven, but there’s precious little said about heaven, even in our holy scripture.

In First Corinthians Paul says our heavenly bodies will be no more like our earthly bodies than a stalk of wheat looks like the bare seed, or by extension, than an oak tree looks like an acorn. If our resurrection bodies are to be that different from our present ones, how different is heaven likely to be from what we can imagine?

So, I say again, I don’t know anything about heaven, and I don’t spend much time wondering about it. I figure it that’s for all of eternity I’ll have plenty of time to ponder it then.

For now, I’m here. On this planet. On this earth we call home.

How, then, have I/we come to know the mystery of that Light of Christ here? I suppose part of the meaning of the collect relies on a central tenet of our faith, that Jesus, God Incarnated, was born in our midst. Born—maybe not conceived, but *born*—like any baby, anywhere. Like any one of us. And the circumstances, well the surroundings, of his birth sound far less auspicious and birth-friendly than the places where most of us were born. The Gospel for today certainly grounds Jesus on earth, in very earthy circumstances: a straightforward of a birth that tells us, “This is the way God came to intervene in the lives of human beings, at this moment in human history.”

But still—and I hope this doesn’t come as a shock to you—I haven’t met Jesus face-to-face. Yet I can pray this collect with confidence—“we who have known the mystery of that Light on earth.”

Earth is where I have come to know everything I know. The little I *do* know, that is.

How does this fit together? We know what we are told about Jesus’ birth, and we have stories about his impact on the lives of those about him when he was a young man. He changed them—not only those who were the object of some miraculous action, nor even those people plus the ones they told about their miraculous healings. He changed those to whom he said nothing more than, “Your sins are forgiven,” or “You who are without sin cast the first stone.” And he changed the lives, I feel confident in saying, who don’t even show up in the written accounts in scripture.

All that was way ahead of my time—our time. Yet we still pray as those who “have known the mystery of that Light on earth.” How?

Speaking for myself, I have known that mystery in you—you who are sitting here, you who are sitting at home. You feed the multitudes, one meal at a time at the Community Kitchen, or one bag of groceries at a time through LA Care. You might not run around telling people their sins are forgiven (that could be a little creepy and presumptuous, as a matter of fact), but you demonstrate that by welcoming people into our midst here, by speaking a kind word to a stranger at HEB, by sending a card or text or email or making a phone call to someone who’s lonely.

I know, I know, and I’ve said it myself: one doesn’t have to be a Christian, or a religious person at all, to do that, and some of the many kindnesses I’ve been shown in my life have come from people who profess no believe at all. And I love them for those acts of kindness, and I wholeheartedly believe that God does, too.

But we who claim to have known the Light of Christ on earth have a kind of orientation to the mystery which began in that time long before we were born, in those folks influenced directly by Christ’s physical presence and passed down, generation by generation, right down to our own day. We have sharpened our powers of observation, trained our eyes to see Christ at work in the world around us, by reading and study of scripture, by coming together week after week in this very self-conscious, self-aware setting, expecting to learn more about how God in Christ continues that mysterious work in the world. We have broken bread together at coffee hour and broken this sacred bread together in the Eucharist, taking the Body of Christ within us, who are also the Body of Christ on earth.

The angel told the shepherds, “Don’t be afraid! This is good news for you and for everyone. And Paul wrote to Titus: “This isn’t because you—*we*—have finally gotten it right and deserved this good thing that happened. It’s because God sees beyond our faults, into our hearts, loving us as the perfect parent loves their children. It’s not because we’ve been so *good*, but because God is so merciful. Before all that Isaiah proclaimed that the bearer of this good news, the *embodiment* of this good news, is coming down the mountain to greet us, to save us. And it has happened, just when we thought we were beyond saving.

And we? We bask in the light of this holy night, knowing “the mystery of that Light on earth.” + + +