

AColyte

A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things
at Austin College – Holidays 2010

THE FULLNESS OF TIME



AColyte

A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things at Austin College

Rev. John Williams, Ph.D., Editor

900 N. Grand Ave.

Suite 61647

Sherman, TX 75090

903.813.2220

jwilliams@austincollege.edu

Austin College Activators



500th Event

GRACE PRESBYTERY SENIOR HIGH YOUTH CONNECTION

January 28-30, 2011

on the Austin College campus.

Contact jwilliams@austincollege.edu for details.

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

St. Paul, Minnesota
Midland, Texas
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Austin, Texas
and points in between
Advent 2010

*To think of time – of all that retrospection!
To think of to-day, and the ages continued henceforward!*
--Walt Whitman

This is sewious.
--The Wonder Pets

I believe in yesterday.
--Paul McCartney

*He has made known to us the mystery of his will,
according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ,
as a plan for the fullness of time*
--Ephesians 1:9-10

I've been thinking a lot this Fall about the fullness of time.

That's a phrase that shows up twice in the New Testament—in the passage from Ephesians quoted above and in Galatians 4:4 (*But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law*).

Webster's online Dictionary defines "fullness of time" as:
at some point: eventually.

Through the centuries, lots of church folks break out that phrase at this time of year as a way of saying that Jesus was born at exactly the right time.

That's a perfectly legitimate use of "fullness of time" but it's not really what I've meant while thinking about the phrase in the last few months.

I mean something more like this:

Last summer I attended a Collegiate Ministries Summit at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota. It was a conference of Presbyterian Chaplains, Campus Ministers, and college students. I liked being so far north of Texas in July and I saw lots of old and new friends there.

On July 3, we were in a Bible Study discussion led by my friend Keith Harris (some of you might remember Keith as the Keynote speaker at the Grace Presbytery Senior High Youth Connection on our campus last January).

We were talking about the story in John 4 where Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman at a well. Keith was making the point that, without the woman's willingness to share her gifts by getting water for Jesus, this would have been a different, smaller story.

Then he asked us all to say the name of a person who had shared his or her gift in our stories; to name people without whom *our* story would have been a different, smaller story.

I'm a big joiner in those kind of activities and so I spoke up right away, saying the name of the first person that I thought of: "Janet."

"Janet" was Janet Watkins. She was the youth sponsor at my church when I was in high school. She was gracious, dedicated, patient, resilient, and supportive (did I mention resilient?). And without her willingness to share her gifts, my story – like the stories of lots of other kids from St. James Presbyterian in Ft. Worth – would have been different and smaller. It was nice to think of her in that context. She's a good woman.

A few other people at the conference mentioned names and then I heard a familiar voice from a few rows behind me say, "Mary Alice."

I recognized the voice as belonging to **Kurt Esslinger**. Kurt – now **The Reverend** Kurt Esslinger – is a 2002 graduate of Austin College. He is the Director of Hope House, a Presbyterian Campus Ministry at the University of Illinois, Chicago. I've known Kurt since he was in high school in Midland and I knew right away that the "Mary Alice" to whom he was referring was the Rev. Mary Alice Lyman.

When Kurt was a member of the youth group at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Midland, Mary Alice was his Associate Pastor and youth director. Like Janet Watkins, Mary Alice – who is now pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Commerce, TX – was gracious, dedicated, patient, resilient, and supportive. She was clearly a great character without whom Kurt's would have been a different, smaller story.

I liked those moments where a church leader acknowledged blessings received from others.

But none of that has anything to do with the fullness of time.

This part might:

In the late 1970s, Janet Watkins became friends with a high school student from Waco named Mary Alice Gamble (I think they were in a Small Group together at Synod Youth Workshop). Mary Alice came to visit Janet in Ft. Worth and I met her there in 1978.

So I realized that day last summer in Minnesota that the woman who I had named as having shared her gifts as part of my story had introduced me to the woman who Kurt had mentioned as having shared her gifts as part of his story. And that introduction happened *before Kurt was even born!*

In some way, the story that had led to my knowing Janet and meeting Mary Alice was the same grand story – the same stream – that led to Kurt’s meeting Mary Alice, to my meeting him, and to his meeting all the folks he has touched and will touch in his ministry.

Although I didn’t know it at the time, all of those stories were kind of present when I met Mary Alice in 1978. And they were present in 1996 when I met Kurt in West Texas (I think Mary Alice was there, too). Looking back, I know that time was full. There was a lot going on. There might not be a straight line from one of those things to the other, but there’s something that connects them.

So there’s that.

And then there was the moment last month in Albuquerque when I looked up in the middle of an ACtivators event to see two young men – George Hedrick and Alex Watson – smiling and laughing and having a great time right in the middle of all sorts of dancing, and juking, and carrying on at the Santa Fe Presbytery Mid-High Conference. George and Alex were by no means the only ones who were having a great time. But I noticed them because, 25 years ago, I was in seminary with their mothers.

George’s mom – now the Rev. Catherine Robinson – and Alex’s mom – now the Rev. Sallie Sampsell Watson – and I had a lot of fun together in Austin in the mid-80s. And somehow, the stream that brought us all to Austin then was the same stream that had George and Alex and me in the same place at the same time last month.

In a way that I couldn’t have really known then, that time in the mid-80s was full. It was somehow related to a moment 25 years later and hundreds of miles away.

But it’s not just about me and my weird tendency to notice and remember details. It’s about you, too.

The photograph at the beginning of this *AColyte* comes from an ad that Austin College created for a national Presbyterian magazine (Presbyterian Outlook). It’s a nice picture of AC freshmen **Madison McGee** and **Annalise Kean** (even though they are mad at me because I told them that we wouldn’t be taking any photos that day, just scouting locations for a future shoot – that’s what I thought. I didn’t lie, but we got a really good picture).

The text in the ad says:

Annalise Kean and Madison McGee grew up attending Presbyterian youth events led by the Austin College ACTivators. This Fall, they are two of the ACTivators leading those events...

There's a fullness of time thing going on there, too. I think maybe the same stream that led Annalise and Madison to those events when they were younger is also the one that led them to come to AC and develop & share their gifts so that other kids can have experiences like the ones they had.

That time when they went to youth events led by ACTivators was full.

Of course, not every Austin College student grew up going to ACTivators events. But some stream brought you here. The story of how you ended up here now is related to other stories. Looking back, you can probably recognize significance in events that didn't necessarily seem like all that big a deal when they happened.

Sometimes you have to look back to recognize how full time was.

Kind of like a baby being born to an unwed mother way off the grid a couple thousand years ago.

It didn't seem like much then, but we're still talking about it.

Time is full.

Pay attention.

Important, significant, abiding things are happening all around us.

Some of it – lots of it, probably – is trivial.

But you never know.

Keep your eyes open.

Because you're characters in some big stories.

Seriously.

Until next year, I remain,
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,

Wishing you Peace, Joy, and Fullness for the Holidays,

JOHN WILLIAMS
Chaplain

P.S. – Have fun in January. Bring back some stories.

STUFF TO DO
ON CAMPUS IN JANUARY:

SUNDAY NIGHT WORSHIP

WITH COMMUNION

6:00PM SUNDAYS

IN THE SMALL CHAPEL

**FOLLOWED BY DINNER IN THE HOME
OF AN AC FACULTY OR STAFF MEMBER.**



5:30PM TUESDAYS
IN THE MOSELEY ROOM:

(bring your tray and your brain, we'll provide the rest)

B.S. in the W.C.

*(That stands for "Bible Study in the Wright Center"—
get your mind out of the gutter.)*

Looking for something to do during Jan Term?

How about community service?

Jan Serve

Wednesday, January 19th
3:00 p.m. – 5:30 p.m



ARE YOU THINKING ABOUT
MAKING A CAREER
WORKING FOR THE CHURCH?



DO YOU THINK YOU MIGHT BE
CALLED TO MINISTRY?
HAVE YOU TOLD ANYBODY?

Austin College Students Considering Church Vocations

is an informal group of students who are thinking about these things. Their names and addresses are shared with seminary admissions offices (if they so desire) and they occasionally talk to guests on campus about various forms of ministry and other church vocations. If you would like for your name to be included on the list of Austin College Students Considering Church Vocations, please notify John Williams at jwilliams@austincollege.edu.

You don't have to be sure of anything except that you are thinking about maybe making a career in the church.

THEOLOGIAN OF THE MONTH

On Monday December 6, the various Christian student groups at Austin College united for a worship service in Wynne Chapel. Here are the Scripture readings and sermon from that service.

“A Christmas Surprise”

Sermon for the One Worship Service, Austin College, December 6, 2010

Justin D. Klassen,

Visiting Assistant Professor of Religion

Isaiah 35:1-10

1 The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus 2 it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God. 3 Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. 4 Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." 5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; 6 then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; 7 the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. 8 A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. 9 No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. 10 And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Luke 1:46b-55

46 And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. 50 His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. 51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. 52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; 53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away

empty. 54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, 55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Matthew 11:2-11

2 When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples 3 and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" 4 Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 5 the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. 6 And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." 7 As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? 8 What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. 9 What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10 This is the one about whom it is written, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' 11 Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

James 5:7-10

7 Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. 8 You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. 9 Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! 10 As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

The Christmas season is a time of anticipation and surprise. All of us probably have at least vague hopes about the gifts we'll receive, and some additional hopes about the reactions others will have to the gifts we've given. Some people claim never to be surprised by the gifts they receive (my mother comes to mind!), but unless you've actually manipulated the whole process to ensure that your expectations are met, you'll always be at least a little surprised on Christmas day.

Of course, the acceptable range of surprise at Christmas is actually pretty narrow for most of us. We will be happily surprised even if we don't get exactly what we hoped for, provided we do get something from the same store or the same mall or at least something in the same ballpark. But we are probably less willing to embrace other, more fundamental forms of surprise. I recall one holiday season where someone in my extended family who was known for giving expensive store-bought gifts took instead to hand-making all the gifts she gave. And so, much to their surprise, people received gifts that never passed through a mall, and whose charm was not in the extravagant spending they represented but in the evidence they provided of someone's care for someone else. It's not hard to appreciate this as an idea or a thought, but it's a bit more difficult to be surprised in a happy way when you receive the gift that's so very much *not* an iPad. But, you think, that's very nice, and maybe at least I can use this thing to prop up the iPad I will obviously need to save up for myself...

The key players in the Advent readings for this week also experience Christmas through anticipation and surprise. But their surprise seems to be of a totally different order from the kind of surprise that I just mentioned. That's because what the patient ones of the Biblical record wait for in this season is so much more than a particular gift, even one that would exceed expectations. What they wait for is nothing less than the re-introduction to the world of the will of God the creator; they wait for the world to be shown its moorings once again. Of course, there are lots of people even today who wait for something like this—people who are pretty sure the world has lost its direction and who claim to know something about getting it back on track. But even these people, I think, would be surprised by what is expected of the Messiah in scripture. In the text for today from Isaiah, we hear that the kind of expectation the prophets have is pretty outlandish. “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,” Isaiah writes in verse one, “the desert shall rejoice and blossom.” In other words, the prophet seems to say, you know those places from which one expects nothing, no celebration and no life? Those will be places of great rejoicing, places that God will affirm as the locations of life's “right track.” The majesty and glory of the Lord will not arrive in the form of majesty and glory as we usually know those things, but will come as a surprise, with divine favor resting precisely on those places we think should be avoided. So don't avoid what you fear, the prophet seems to say, for “here is your God” (v. 4).

What sorts of places *do* we fear? Well, the Bible often uses the term “wilderness” to represent all the places that terrify us because we have no control over them. But we don't live near wilderness anymore, we might think, so where should we go in order to meet the surprising and restorative power of God in this season of Advent? Our first Gospel reading, from the first chapter of Luke, gives us some direction for thinking about the wilderness of our own lives, because it allows a wild, unsanctioned voice to speak. The passage gives us a voice of celebration, the culminating human response to a whole set of expectations about God's rule in the world that have been addressed and reconfigured. I'll talk about the content of Mary's words of praise in a minute, but first it's important to pay attention to how they arise in Luke's narrative in the first place. The basic appearance of these words sung by a woman already tells us something about the wildness that God introduces to the world with the Messiah.

Before Mary speaks the words we're asked to consider today, the angel Gabriel comes to Zechariah, a priest, to tell him that his wife, Elizabeth, will soon conceive a son. Zechariah is suspicious of whether this is possible or not, and what's interesting is that Gabriel has no time for his skepticism at this point. In fact the angel tells Zechariah that from now until his son's birth, he will be struck dumb. The angel, the herald of God's surprise to the world, already makes that surprise real by telling the one who usually gets to speak, the religious authority, that it's time for him to stop his words and listen. Priests and theologians have lots of words. They puzzle over them and sometimes they gain mastery over them, and they become capable of using them to make sense of their lives and the lives of others. By silencing Zechariah, and letting Elizabeth and Mary speak instead, Gabriel seems to be saying that the words of religion, the words that hold sway in the world because they speak with an official voice, these words don't know the new and sustaining Word. If this Messiah is the one anointed to rule, the one who is expected to set the world back on its track, we should notice that his arrival puts things on track not by justifying official voices, but by making the earth ring with the songs of the voiceless. As Mary utters her language of praise, we should not fail to see the fulfillment of Isaiah 35:6, which says

the tongues of the speechless will sing for joy. Just in the simple act of witnessing Mary sing her surprise, *we* should be surprised, for here the high places are brought low, and the lowly are elevated.

Of course we also shouldn't fail to notice the content of what Mary says. She begins by praising God and rejoicing because God has looked upon her with favor in her "lowliness." What Mary sees, which she may not understand but which she accepts here as a gift, is a Word of God, a truth, that favors the unfavorable. Here she finds that the measure of life itself, the creator's will for the creature, is something that includes *her*. As a woman of modest means, she probably had been assuming, correctly, that she was many steps removed from the full measure of human life. That is, many specific features of her life—her sex and her lack of means being only the first among them—must have appeared as barriers to her ultimate fulfillment. But in the announcement of the angel Gabriel that she would be the bearer of God's truth to the world, she experienced the removal of all those barriers. It's not that Gabriel says that God has looked on her with enough favor that he's decided to transform her into something more worthy of bearing God's truth...instead, God's truth means that *she* is favored, without needing to become someone else. This is the surprise of Christmas, for Mary—it gives the gift of a new assessment of what counts in life. If Mary herself is the recipient of God's unreserved favor, without meeting any of the usual conditions—conditions like being a king or a priest, or at least a man—then surely this means that all the conventions are wrong. Surely this means, as Mary puts it, that God "has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts" (v. 51).

Mary is not talking about a direct reversal of the way things are, where the unexpected ones now get to wield political power. Instead, she's talking about the gift of a new vision, a new way of looking at power. Now it is the low, surprising places in which God must be sought. The newness is not that the lowly get to be in charge for once, but that the lowly are seen to be exalted even though they are *not* in charge in the conventional sense.

And there are some pretty specific ethical requirements that arise from this new vision, for Mary. If you want to see God, and to be near to what is true power in this world, you must abide where the hungry are fed, filled up with good things (v. 53). If you want to see the world where God is getting it back on track, if *you* want to get back on track in an essential sense, then seek not the seat of power from which the weak are all but invisible. Instead, abide with the weak, with the unrecognizable, for in choosing one such as Mary to bear the truth of the world, God is telling us that the supposedly unrecognizable are in fact clearly seen.

This contrasts with where we usually think God abides—with the victor. When we look at history and see in it, as we usually do, a story of the many victories of strength over weakness, the story of God "siding with" the powerful, we are not seeing the whole story, according to Mary. On the scale of history, Mary herself accomplished very little. She did not become powerful in any conventional sense during her lifetime. Her son was killed unjustly and she could do nothing to stop it from happening. If we measure her life against the common scales of fulfillment and historical greatness, she does not look very remarkable. Yet this is precisely why she marvels at God's favor resting upon her. When she celebrates that "surely all generations" will call her blessed, she does not mean, "finally, I am getting what I deserve," but instead, "what joy, that for God, no one is unremarkable!" And so if we do see Mary, if we are still a generation

that calls her “blessed,” she would be happy if we could also remember that we only really see her if our eyes are open to *all the unremarkable persons in our lives*, whose weaknesses present no barrier to God’s affirmation of his creatures.

Later in the story of this new configuration of the world, the world seen anew through the Messiah who elevates the lowly, John the Baptist appears to have a question about how to identify this new truth. He is in prison and sends messengers to ask Jesus if he is indeed the one they’ve been waiting for. So the messengers come with their, “hey Jesus, John the Baptist wants to know if we can put this matter to rest, if our expectation is met in you.” And what’s fascinating to me about Jesus’ answer is that it’s not very direct. He does not say, “yes, tell him the waiting is over, that I am the awaited ‘answer’ to your theological puzzle.” In fact he says, “tell him what you hear and see.” In other words, don’t stop seeing and listening. Don’t think that the coming of God’s truth to the world arms you with a knock-down argument against your enemies. Don’t think you can stop paying attention. Instead, if you continue to make the weak and the poor the objects of your concern, then you will find that that is where I am—God’s very truth abides in your own seeing and hearing of those who don’t count. If you’re looking for a definitive answer to an abstract religious question, you’re missing the point. If your eyes and ears are open to the unremarkable, then you get it; you’re attuned to it.

And then he adds something that seems strange: “blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.” What a bizarre thing to add, we might think...why would anyone be offended at Jesus? Well there are lots of possible answers to this question, but in our case, we would perhaps be offended because there’s a big difference between a religious answer, a theological truth-claim, and a *person*. Jesus seems to imply that it’s at least possibly offensive to hear that if you want to be in the truth, there’s no philosophical pre-requisite to be met; instead, you simply need to be willing to be a person, a person who recognizes others, even the weak and the poor. That is the new thing to celebrate, and there is no time to lose. Open your eyes and be surprised! See Mary, the unremarkable person unreservedly affirmed by God! And now go and affirm others like her.

Just in case someone doesn’t get this, Jesus then asks his listeners (vv. 7-10) what they think justifies John’s authority. In other words, he says, did you believe John’s message about the coming of the Messiah because John’s life met the usual conditions of authority? Did John have the royal seal of approval? Did he display the image of power you’re used to seeing? The answer to these questions is, of course, no...John is a wild man, literally. He is one with the wilderness. And this, Jesus says, is what makes him an appropriate herald of the new gift of God to the world—not his direct manifestation of power, but his willingness to abide and to speak for the uncertainty of the wilderness. And then Jesus makes sure to add, at verse 11, that if you think *that’s crazy*, if you think it’s crazy that an unremarkable man of the wilderness could be an authoritative witness to the creator’s will for the creature, well then the kingdom I’m bringing is going to knock your socks off. In other words, being able to recognize John is good, but it’s just the start. If you see him, your eyes are open, but just barely. If you continue to see and hear God’s affirmation of worth in the lowly, then people you’ve never even dreamed of are going to show up on your radar. Your eyes are going to *see* them. This is the gift of Christmas that Jesus brings—the gift of being unable to ignore the need in others. It’s the gift of a world in which no one is insignificant, in which no one is superfluous. It’s the gift of a world made bigger, a huge surprise, albeit one that’s not always easy to receive.

To end here I'll tell you one more story of a Christmas surprise I once experienced. More than the surprise of not getting exactly what I wanted, or receiving something homemade, this was a surprise in which significant gift-buying members of my wife's extended family took the money that they normally would have spent on gifts and purchased goats and other livestock for some needy families in Uganda. This was certainly a surprise, at first; the immediate reaction was one of offense, as the thought passed through many of our minds that, while that's nice and all, "I wasn't even consulted!" I mean, that's not just a surprising gift; it's no gift at all. You've taken "my" gift and bestowed it on someone else. Later, however, we had to recognize that really we had been given the gift of having a stake in a new relationship. The scope of our ethical concern got a little bigger, other persons became a bit less abstract, a little less ignorable.

And in the end I hope all of us here are preparing for such a surprise in this Advent season, especially us for whom the daunting tasks of writing or grading exams can make our worlds of self-concern more than a little stifling. Would that we all might become wild women and men this Christmas, persons who sing like Mary because they know they are affirmed by God even though they meet no conditions, and people who can't keep that affirmation to themselves, but receive with it a bigger world, in which all the other unremarkable people may be seen and heard, too. Amen.