

AColyte

Advent 2014

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



*O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?
Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save?
Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble?
Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.
So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails.
The wicked surround the righteous—
therefore judgment comes forth perverted.
--Habbakuk 1:2-4*

Merry Christmas?

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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

America
The Christmas Season

I need a little shot of redemption.
--Paul Simon,
"You Can Call Me Al"

*Even Jesus couldn't save me,
Though I know he did his best*
--Steve Earle,
"Ellis Unit One"

Bob Marley has been messing with me.

He just won't leave me alone.

I keep wanting to write a nice little piece about the hope of the Advent season...
about how the good news of the coming of Jesus is still relevant and hopeful...
about why Christians like me still need to hear and tell that story every year
as if it were the first time we've ever heard it.

I'd probably quote my favorite Bob Marley song:

Don't worry about a thing.
Every little thing's gonna be alright.

I really do believe that.

I really do think that's essentially why Christmas is such a big deal.

I think the Christmas story serves to remind us that ours is not a stand pat God;
that God's not finished;
that good things will happen that haven't happened yet.

The Christmas story reminds us always to prepare to be surprised.

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But when I got to the Chapel for the Lessons and Carols service on December 4, someone had written the words "I can't breathe" in chalk on the Chapel steps.

They're still there.

In a video of his arrest, **Eric Garner** can be heard saying "I can't breathe" as he was being restrained and arrested by New York City Police officers. Soon after saying those words, Garner lost consciousness and died.

He was an unarmed African-American man.

Michael Brown – another unarmed African-American man – was killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9.

And neither of the officers responsible for those deaths has been indicted by a Grand Jury.

That means that neither Grand Jury thought there was sufficient evidence in either case to charge the people responsible for the deaths of those unarmed African-American men with any crime.

It's hard for me to convince myself that – if all the circumstances were identical except that Michael Brown and Eric Garner had been white – the police and the Grand Juries would have done exactly the same thing.

Maybe they would have.

But I doubt it.

And that's when Bob Marley starts messing with me.

In "Redemption Song" Marley sings:

*Old pirates, yes, they rob I;
Sold I to the merchant ships,
Minutes after they took I
From the bottomless pit.*

I heard Cornell West on Book TV the other day pointing out that, although President Obama was technically correct in his Immigration speech when he called America "a nation of immigrants" he neglected to mention that millions of Americans weren't *voluntary* immigrants.

They didn't "go" to America.

They were brought here.

Against their wills.

By people who regarded them as less than human.

That's what Marley is talking about.

*But my hand was made strong
By the 'and of the Almighty.
We forward in this generation
Triumphantly.*

It's hard to know what to do with that.

At first reading, it seems to be a statement of faith and confidence.

Marley is suggesting, I think, that he and his colleagues are not limited or defeated by the circumstances that got them where they are. And that God supports them in their struggle.

And here's where it gets interesting.

*Won't you help to sing
These songs of freedom? -
'Cause all I ever have:
Redemption songs;
Redemption songs.*

What's the difference between "songs of freedom" and "redemption songs"?

Maybe it's the distinction between addressing immediate, current circumstances and waiting for some promised happy ending.

I think this chorus is an invitation to quit singing about how we hope things will get better someday – "in the sweet by and by."

It's a call to fix it now!

*Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery;
None but ourselves can free our minds.*

In October 1937, *Black Man* magazine quoted African-American author and leader **Marcus Garvey** as saying, "We are going to emancipate ourselves from mental slavery because whilst others might free the body, none but ourselves can free the mind. Mind is your only ruler, sovereign. The man who is not able to develop and use his mind is bound to be the slave of the other man who uses his mind ..."

*How long shall they kill our prophets,
While we stand aside and look? Ooh!
Some say it's just a part of it:
We've got to fulfil de book.*

The reference to "our prophets" and "fulfilling the book" feels again like impatience with being told that – even though things are difficult now – someday every little thing is gonna be alright.

The Bible tells me so.

*Won't you help to sing
These songs of freedom? -*

*'Cause all I ever have:
Redemption songs;
Redemption songs;
Redemption songs.*

If I were a young African-American man, I'm pretty sure I'd be pissed off every time I thought about Eric Garner.

Or Michael Brown...

Or **Trayvon Martin**— an unarmed 17-year-old African-American who was shot and killed by a Neighborhood Watch captain in Florida who was acquitted of second degree murder charges...

Or **Tamir Rice**— a 12 year old African-American boy killed by police in Cleveland, Ohio while playing with a toy gun...

I don't think I'd have much patience with "redemption songs."

I wouldn't want to hear that things will get better someday.

I'd want things to be different and just and fair and better NOW!!

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Singer/songwriter **Bruce Cockburn** went to Guatemala in the early 1980s and saw all sorts of tragedy and injustice.

He came home and wrote a song in which he expressed empathy for the unbridled rage of an imagined young man in the middle of that situation; a situation characterized by drug lords and death squads, violence and uncertainty.

*Here comes the helicopter -- second time today
Everybody scatters and hopes it goes away
How many kids they've murdered only God can say
If I had a rocket launcher...I'd make somebody pay*

*I don't believe in guarded borders and I don't believe
in hate
I don't believe in generals or their stinking torture
states
And when I talk with the survivors of things too
sickening to relate
If I had a rocket launcher...I would retaliate*

*On the Rio Lacantun, one hundred thousand wait
To fall down from starvation -
or some less humane fate
Cry for Guatemala, with a corpse in every gate
If I had a rocket launcher...I would not hesitate*

*I want to raise every voice -
at least I've got to try
Every time I think about it
water rises to my eyes.
Situation desperate, echoes of the victims cry
If I had a rocket launcher...
Some son of a bitch would die*

There's real and legitimate rage out there and I think we all need to be careful before we simply dismiss it because it makes us uncomfortable.

Some things ought to make us angry.

Not murderously angry – but truly angry.

Multiple violent deaths of unarmed black men at the hands of police or “neighborhood watch captains” ought to be one of those things.

That shouldn't happen.

But it did.

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Bruce Cockburn has another song that's potentially as disturbing as “If I Had a Rocket Launcher”.

Mary grows a child without the help of a man

That's a really interesting way to begin an old, familiar story.

Joseph gets upset because he doesn't understand

See Matthew 1:19 (Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.)

*Angel comes to Joseph in a powerful dream
Says "God did this
and you're part of his scheme"*

Matthew 1:20-21 (*But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; 21 she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."*)

*Joseph comes to Mary with his hat in his hand
Says "forgive me
I thought you'd been with some other man"
She says "what if I had been -
but I wasn't anyway
and guess what I felt the baby kick today"*

There's no direct biblical tie for these lines, but they make Mary and Joseph both seem a little more human, a little more like us, than they do in most Christmas Carols and manger scenes.

I think that's significant. This is a story about people. Like us.

*Like a stone on the surface of a still river
Driving the ripples on forever
Redemption rips through the surface of time
In the cry of a tiny babe*

An unwed mother gave birth to a little boy thousands of miles from here and a long, long time ago.

And we're still telling that story.

What's up with that?

*The child is born in the fullness of time
Three wise astrologers take note of the signs
Come to pay their respects
to the fragile little king
Get pretty close to wrecking everything
'Cause the governing body of the whole land
Is that of Herod, a paranoid man
Who when he hears there's a baby
born King of the Jews
Sends death squads to kill
all male children under two
But that same bright angel
warns the parents in a dream
And they head out for the border
and get away clean*

That's Matthew 2:1-12 (*Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it is written by the prophet: 'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will govern my people Israel.'*" Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star appeared; and he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." When they had heard the king they went their way; and lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.)

It's also a story of Middle Eastern refugees fleeing systematic violence from an oppressive government.

That doesn't seem old or outdated or irrelevant at all.

*Like a stone on the surface of a still river
Driving the ripples on forever
Redemption rips through the surface of time
In the cry of a tiny babe*

He keeps going back to that baby.

*There are others who know
about this miracle birth
The humblest of people
catch a glimpse of their worth
For it isn't to the palace
that the Christ child comes
But to shepherds and street people,
hookers and bums*

That sounds a lot more like Luke than Matthew.

When Luke tells the Jesus story, his heroes are foreigners and poor people, women and invalids, victims and criminals.

Note that the "humblest of people" don't catch a glimpse of his worth.

When they see the baby, they begin to think differently about themselves.

*And the message is clear
if you've got ears to hear
That forgiveness is given
for your guilt and your fear*

Forgiveness for fear?

I don't know if that's just a throwaway line because Cockburn needed something to rhyme with "hear."

What if it's more than that?

What if the Christmas message – this wild idea of God coming among us as one of us – involves our being forgiven for our fear?

What if the "redemption" that "rips through the surface of time" gives us a little impetus, a little energy, to try to live in a world where we're less afraid of each other?

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It's a fact that young black men in this country are legitimately afraid that they will be killed (*killed!*) by someone who doesn't know anything about them other than how they look.

That's just awful. And it ought to make all of us outraged.

It's also a fact that, every day, thousands of police officers go into places on our behalf where we certainly don't want to go. They also face real and legitimate fears that most of us can barely imagine.

And some of them make honest mistakes.

And some of them lose perspective, panic, and commit crimes for which they should be held accountable.

*It's a Christmas gift you don't have to buy
There's a future shining in a baby's eyes
Like a stone on the surface of a still river
Driving the ripples on forever
Redemption rips through the surface of time
In the cry of a tiny babe*

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Look back at the top of this *AColyte*.

Read again those verses from Habakkuk.

*O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?
Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save?
Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble?
Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.
So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails.
The wicked surround the righteous –
therefore judgment comes forth perverted.*

Now read God's response to Habakkuk (this is Habakkuk 2:2-3 and I'm using the Revised Standard Version – instead of the New Revised Standard Version that I usually use – because I like it better).

*Write the vision;
make it plain upon tablets, so he may run who reads it.*

That means, "Put it on a dadgum billboard so joggers can read it without slowing down."

*For still the vision awaits its time;
it hastens to the end--it will not lie.
If it seem slow, wait for it;
it will surely come, it will not delay.*

God "writes the vision" by coming among us. Year after year after year.

And the vision gets written when we:
say a prayer for the families of those young men in the pictures;
and say a prayer for the people who killed them.

The vision gets written when we:
pay attention;
think about which things matter more than other things;
and listen to others – particularly those whose experiences are different from ours;

When we sing songs of freedom;
and stand with grieving families;
and apply pressure to ensure that those who act on our behalf act responsibly.

Redemption doesn't mean that the struggle is over.

But it does mean that the struggle is possible.

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Those of us who recognize ourselves in the narrative and vocabulary of Christianity don't get so exercised about all this Christmas business just because we like giving and receiving gifts (although most of us do like that).

When we reread and retell these old stories about a baby born under peculiar circumstances a long time ago and a long way from here, we remind ourselves that we don't necessarily think the paint is dry on this marvelous and messy story in which we find ourselves.

We try not to ignore real tragedy, or real suffering, or the truly nasty stuff that's really out there (and also within and among us).

We just can't bring ourselves to conclude that that's all there is.

Nope.

Can't do it.

The paint's not dry.

God's not finished.

Joy to the World!

Until 2015, I remain,
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,
Still Stubbornly Seeing "A Future Shining in a Baby's Eyes",

JOHN WILLIAMS
Chaplain

Spring 2015 ACtivators Events

Look over these events and let me know if you're interested in participating in any of the following events.

January 30-February 1, 2015

Grace Presbytery Senior High Youth Connection (AC Campus)

This event will involve approximately 600 senior high youth who come to our campus to attend this weekend retreat. We need as many ACtivators as possible to help plan for and lead this retreat. If you'll be off campus during JanTerm, but still want to help, that will be fine. There will be a variety of ways for you to be involved. If you can help us, please fill out and return the response form below.

February 22, 2015

Lead Worship at Presbyterian Village North (Dallas, TX)

- ACtivators will lead two worship services at the Presbyterian Village North Retirement and Assisted Living Community in North Dallas.
- The services will be at 3:15pm and 4:30pm.
- ACtivators will leave campus at 12:00 noon and return to campus by 8pm.
- There will be planning meetings in the Small Chapel at 4:30pm on February 17 and 19,

February 27-March 1, 2015

Grace Presbytery Youthquake #2 at Glen Lake (Glen Rose, TX)

- We need Small Group Leaders for this event.
- Being a Small Group Leader means leading four Small Group meetings over the course of the weekend, participating in fairly silly keynote skits, and doing some other work related to the planning and leadership of the conference.
- ACtivators teams need to leave the AC campus no later than 3:00pm on the Friday of the event and will be back to campus around 4:00pm on Sunday. If you are interested in serving as a Small Group Leader at either of these Youthquakes, please fill out the Response Form below.

March 13-15, 2015

Jill's House Oxygen3 Camp (Austin, TX)

YES, I KNOW, THIS IS THE LAST WEEKEND OF SPRING BREAK, BUT WE HAVE A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY TO PARTICIPATE IN A JILL'S HOUSE OXYGEN3 CAMP OUTSIDE AUSTIN.

Here's a description:

OXYGEN3 is the Jill's House three-day mission trip which gives your team a chance to have real impact, together, by serving children with intellectual disabilities under the guidance of Jill's House's experienced professionals.

Jill's House is the first and only mission of its kind in the United States. We provide overnight respite care for children between the ages of 6 and 17 with intellectual disabilities so that their weary families get a break. Our innovative programs allow children to experience fun and exciting activities for the very first time and meet other kids just like them.

While we celebrate special children, their parents and typical siblings get the gift of time. This rhythm of respite makes a positive impact. Their families use their time of respite doing things that may otherwise be difficult while caring for their child with special needs. This physical rest points the way to the true spiritual rest that Jesus offers.



We will leave from Sherman on Thursday morning March 12. You can ride down with us, meet us on the way, or join us in Austin on Thursday night March 12.

This will be the official 20th Anniversary ACTivators event.

Planning meetings for the Oxygen 3 Camp will be at 4:30pm in the Small Chapel on March 3 and 5.

There will also be additional training.

March 15, 2014

ACTivators Alumni 20th Anniversary Dinner (Austin, TX)

This will be the last part of the Oxygen3 Camp.

ACTivators will spend Sunday night March 15 in Austin and drive back to Sherman on Monday March 16.

March 20-22, 2015

Grace Presbytery Kidquake #1 at Glen Lake (Glen Rose, TX)

- This is a weekend retreat for 1st through 5th grade kids.
- ACTivators make up half of the Leadership teams for each of these events.
- 6 ACTivators will be part of the Leadership Team for this event.
- There will be planning meetings at 4:30pm in the Chapel Conference Room on March 17 and 19.

April 17-19, 2015

Grace Presbytery Kidquake #2—Gilmont

- This is a weekend retreat for 1st through 5th grade kids.
- ACTivators make up half of the Leadership teams for each of these events.
- 6 ACTivators will be part of the Leadership Team for this event.
- There will be planning meetings at 4:30pm in the Chapel Conference Room on April 14 and 16.

April 24-26, 2015

Grace Presbytery Kidquake #3—Gilmont

- This is a weekend retreat for 1st through 5th grade kids.

- ACTivators make up half of the Leadership teams for each of these events.
- 5 ACTivators will be part of the Leadership Team for this event.
- There will be planning meetings at 4:30pm in the Chapel Conference Room on April 23 and 25.

April 24-26, 2015

First Presbyterian Church, Austin All-Church Retreat (Mo-Ranch)

- We will need 4-6 ACTivators.
- We will leave campus at 8:00am on Friday April 24 and return by 10:00pm on Sunday April 26.
- There will be planning meetings at 4:30pm in the Small Chapel on April 23 and 25.