

# AColyte

GALA HOLIDAY ISSUE 2009  
A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things  
at Austin College



## E-Gifts of the Magi

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# COMING UP IN JANUARY

## Every Sunday

6pm—Worship with Communion in the Small Chapel  
7pm—Talk-Back Dinner

## Every Tuesday

12-12:20pm—Midday Prayers in the Small Chapel  
5:30pm—Carry-Your-Tray Bible Study in the Moseley Room

## Jan Serve on January 20

This is like a mini-Great Day of Service during Jan Term.  
Watch for more information.

## Grace Presbytery Senior High Youth Celebration

800 or so Senior High Presbyterians singing, dancing, and carrying on in Sid Richardson  
Gym January 29-31.

Contact John Williams ([jwilliams@austincollege.edu](mailto:jwilliams@austincollege.edu)) if you'd like to help.

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THE TRANSLATION ENTITLED *THE MESSAGE* BY EUGENE PETERSON  
(NAVPress:2003)

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## TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

Wright Center Living Room (the "Couches")

Finals Week

Advent

*Here comes the sun;*

*And I say:*

*It's alright...*

*When I find myself in times of trouble,*

*Mother Mary comes to me...*

*Love is all you need.*

--The Beatles

(that was the band George Harrison was in  
before *The Traveling Wilburys*)

I'm feeling a little like the "six pound, eight ounce baby Jesus" (as he is known in *Talladega Nights*). Like him, I have also received three gifts from Wise People.

We don't actually know exactly how many wise guys came to see Jesus. The Bible just tells us that they brought three gifts (gold, frankincense, and myrrh). My gifts were less shiny, less smelly, and less myrrhish.

In the last few days, three Wise People have sent me e-mails that, taken together, have greatly affected my attitude as I go stumbling into this holiday season.

I'll tell you what they said – but not yet.

First, we need to spend a little time in the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke.

As you know, lots of us in the Christian tribe can geek out a little bit at this time of year. We get out our Christmas trees and wear our Christmas sweaters and bake our Christmas cookies and sing our Christmas songs (the only songs that most of us ever call "carols"). We get out our Bibles and we piously and seriously and reverently read to each other the same stories year after year after year.

Those stories typically end up with Blessed Baby Jesus in a crowded barn being worshiped by curious shepherds, peculiar & inscrutable foreigners, and lots and lots of singing angels. It's one of the great, show-stopping production numbers in the whole Bible and it's wonderful.

The conventional wisdom in the circles I run in is that lots of us in the Church tend to want too quickly to gallop straight to Christmas. It's important that we pause first and get ourselves ready to celebrate Christmas – to hear that wild, subversive, scary, revolutionary story as if we've never heard it before. That's why we call the four Sundays preceding Christmas the season of Advent.

Advent is a time of getting ready – setting context.

And that’s how we end up in Luke 1.

On December 1, several of us spent our weekly Bible Study time looking at Luke 1:68-79. That’s known as the “Song of Zechariah” and it’s really cool.

First, a little back story:

Luke’s Gospel begins with a series of stories about the Angel Gabriel visiting some people and telling them some really weird stuff. After four introductory verses dedicating his book to some guy named Theophilus, Luke begins his story with the following verses:

**5** During the rule of Herod, King of Judea, there was a priest assigned service in the regiment of Abijah. His name was Zechariah. His wife was descended from the daughters of Aaron. Her name was Elizabeth.

What we have here is a nice, if uneventful love story.

**6** Together they lived honorably before God, careful in keeping to the ways of the commandments and enjoying a clear conscience before God. **7** But they were childless because Elizabeth could never conceive, and now they were quite old.

Tragedy enters the picture. How sad that this sweet couple can’t have kids!

**8** It so happened that as Zechariah was carrying out his priestly duties before God, working the shift assigned to his regiment, **9** it came his one turn in life to enter the sanctuary of God and burn incense.

“One turn in life” – this was an unprecedented and unrepeatable event in Zechariah’s priestly career. And he was ready.

**10** The congregation was gathered and praying outside the Temple at the hour of the incense offering. **11** Unannounced, an angel of God appeared just to the right of the altar of incense.

Definitely not part of the script. This is not how things are supposed to happen there in the Temple. Something’s up.

**12** Zechariah was paralyzed in fear.

Well, yeah. Wouldn’t you be?

**13** But the angel reassured him, "Don't fear, Zechariah.

Gabriel – the angel – tends to say that a lot.

Your prayer has been heard. Elizabeth, your wife, will bear a son by you.  
You are to name him John.

Get the cigars and diapers ready!

**14** You're going to leap like a gazelle for joy, and not only you - many will delight in his birth.

Everybody loves a baby.

**15** He'll achieve great stature with God. **16** He will turn many sons and daughters of Israel back to their God. **17** He will herald God's arrival in the style and strength of Elijah, soften the hearts of parents to children, and kindle devout understanding among hardened skeptics - he'll get the people ready for God."

This is foreshadowing. It happens a lot during Advent.

**18** Zechariah said to the angel, "Do you expect me to believe this? I'm an old man and my wife is an old woman."

"Where's Ashton Kutcher? Am I being punk'd?"

**19** But the angel said, "I am Gabriel, the sentinel of God, sent especially to bring you this glad news.

You unimaginative, ungrateful gasbag.

**20** But because you won't believe me, you'll be unable to say a word until the day of your son's birth. Every word I've spoken to you will come true on time - God's time.

Is it just me – or does Gabriel sound a little like Dave Chappelle imitating Rick James? ("Don't mess with me – I'm Gabriel, the sentinel of God, B\*\*\*\*!")

**21** Meanwhile, the congregation waiting for Zachariah was getting restless, wondering what was keeping him so long in the sanctuary. **22** When he came out and couldn't speak, they knew he had seen a vision. He continued speechless and had to use sign language with the people. **23**

When the course of his priestly assignment was completed, he went back home.[ 24 It wasn't long before his wife, Elizabeth, conceived. She went off by herself for five months, relishing her pregnancy. 25 "So, this is how God acts to remedy my unfortunate condition!" she said.

"Cool!" but "Yikes!"

Speechless old men and pregnant old women?!

"This is how God acts?"

Apparently.

Some other stuff that we'll discuss later happens in the next 30 verses and then the baby is born.

**57** When Elizabeth was full-term in her pregnancy, she bore a son. **58** Her neighbors and relatives, seeing that God had overwhelmed her with mercy, celebrated with her.

Wouldn't that be a great Christmas card?

*May you be overwhelmed with mercy.*

**59** On the eighth day, they came to circumcise the child and were calling him Zechariah after his father. **60** But his mother intervened: "No. He is to be called John."

See verse 13 above.

**61** "But," they said, "no one in your family is named that."

"No – bless your geriatric heart – that's not how you're supposed to name your baby. Let's get the man to straighten this out."

**62** They used sign language to ask Zechariah what he wanted him named. **63** Asking for a tablet, Zechariah wrote, "His name is to be John." That took everyone by surprise.

Don't know why. It's a perfectly good name.

**64** Surprise followed surprise - Zechariah's mouth was now open, his tongue loose, and he was talking, praising God!

Much of what we do here at Austin College is – and should be – about studying, learning, explaining, and critiquing things. We try very hard never to be surprised.

**65** A deep, reverential fear settled over the neighborhood, and in all that Judean hill country people talked about nothing else.

“This is even bigger news than a chicken egg with a cross on it or a philandering golfer!”

**66** Everyone who heard about it took it to heart, wondering, "What will become of this child?"

We've read the rest of the story, so we know:

He'll be John the Baptist.

Clearly, God has his hand in this." **67** Then Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied,

And what he said was the passage that we studied on December 1.

**68** Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel; he came and set his people free.

Past tense. We're talking about a done deal.

**69** He set the power of salvation in the center of our lives, and in the very house of David his servant, **70** Just as he promised long ago through the preaching of his holy prophets:

We should have seen this coming.

**71** Deliverance from our enemies

Loneliness, sadness, disgrace, despair, abandonment.

and every hateful hand;

**72** Mercy to our fathers, as he remembers to do what he said he'd do,

We thought that was just naïve, sentimental wishful old-man thinking.

**73** What he swore to our father Abraham - **74** a clean rescue from the enemy camp,

You mean loneliness, sadness, disgrace, despair, and abandonment are not the last word? Not just the way it is?

So we can worship him without a care in the world, **75** made holy before him as long as we live.

We can do better.

Because we can be (or at least be made) better.

**76** And you, my child, "Prophet of the Highest," will go ahead of the Master to prepare his ways,

How do I know?

Look at this baby!

I'm a Dad!

Maybe he won't be so surprised by surprises.

**77** Present the offer of salvation to his people, the forgiveness of their sins.  
**78** Through the heartfelt mercies of our God, God's Sunrise will break in upon us, **79** Shining on those in the darkness, those sitting in the shadow of death,

Surprise!

Then showing us the way, one foot at a time, down the path of peace.

Maybe not all at once.

But it's gonna get better.

Every little thing is gonna be alright.

In our Bible Study on December 1, we decided that Zechariah's song, Advent, and Christmas are all ultimately about Good News and happy endings.

It doesn't mean that everything's gonna be great all the time. We know how the world is. We all had the good, educated "Yes, but..." reaction. We know how the world really is.



**69** He set the power of salvation in the center of our lives, and in the very house of David his servant, **70** Just as he promised long ago through the preaching of his holy prophets: **71** Deliverance from our enemies and every hateful hand; **72** Mercy to our fathers, as he remembers to do what he said he'd do, **73** What he swore to our father Abraham - **74** a clean rescue from the enemy camp,

Yes, but the world is still full of violence, abuse, loneliness, despair, illness and death.

What if the amazing, surprising, astonishing, revolutionary element of this set of stories that we read to each other at this time every year is that some things are every bit as good as we hope they might be?

Not always.

But not never.

When I got to my office the next morning, the following e-mail was in my Inbox:

Thank you for saying what you said about some good things actually being as good as they seem. All I could think about was that "one foot at a time," things get better, and maybe after 17 operations and 20 years, I can believe that things are really going to be ok now. I don't think I could even begin to believe that before tonight.

Yeah.

That's part of the Whole Truth.

Joy to the World!

Until 2010, I remain  
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,  
Wishing you happy surprises,

JOHN WILLIAMS  
Chaplain

P.S. – I haven't forgotten about the other 2 e-mails. Keep reading.

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## LIFE AFTER AUSTIN COLLEGE

Back there in Luke 1, in the 30 verses between Zechariah's losing and regaining of his voice, Gabriel pays and even scarier visit to a girl younger than any AC student.

26 In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to the Galilean village of Nazareth 27 to a virgin engaged to be married to a man descended from David. His name was Joseph, and the virgin's name, Mary. 28 Upon entering, Gabriel greeted her: Good morning! You're beautiful with God's beauty, Beautiful inside and out! God be with you. 29 She was thoroughly shaken, wondering what was behind a greeting like that.

Wouldn't you be?

30 But the angel assured her, "Mary, you have nothing to fear. God has a surprise for you:

This is clearly Gabriel being Gabriel.

31 You will become pregnant and give birth to a son and call his name Jesus. 32 He will be great, be called 'Son of the Highest.' The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David; 33 He will rule Jacob's house forever - no end, ever, to his kingdom." 34 Mary said to the angel, "But how? I've never slept with a man."

Good question.

35 The angel answered, The Holy Spirit will come upon you, the power of the Highest hover over you; Therefore, the child you bring to birth will be called Holy, Son of God. 36 "And did you know that your cousin Elizabeth conceived a son, old as she is? Everyone called her barren, and here she is six months' pregnant! 37 Nothing, you see, is impossible with God."

Surprises.

38 And Mary said, Yes, I see it all now: I'm the Lord's maid, ready to serve. Let it be with me just as you say.

"Let it be."

Remember that.

Then the angel left her.

2009 Austin College graduate **Megan McCarty** is serving this year as a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Young Adult Volunteer in South Florida.

*Here is a blog posting and an e-mail from her:*

*From September:*

SFLUM is the organization overseeing my site placement for the up coming year. It is an acronym for South Florida Urban Ministries. Branches, my new job placement, is part of SFLUM. There are quite a few Branches sites in Miami and I have been assigned to the Branches ministry in Florida City, a small community about 45 minutes south of Miami. I have been at training for the last week now in Miami and Florida City. It was an unexpected visit to Miami, and I was frustrated by the lack of notice and by having to fly to Florida the day after I returned home from family vacation. However, it was a blessing in disguise; as I am quickly figuring out, most of these inconveniences are. I was able to get a feel for the area, see where I am working, meet a majority of the children I will be seeing on a daily basis, meet my co-workers, and sit down and figure out my job description. Essentially, I was able to get my questions answered and my fears quelled, for the time being. I will be working mostly with the youth of Branches, which is in connection with a Methodist Church in Florida City. I will be tutoring middle school and high school students and building relationships and community with these youth for the next year. My hours will be odd, there will be a long commute some days, and I have been told not to get upset if the youth don't want to talk to me for weeks. And I couldn't be more excited about the entire process!!! I know that the year, maybe years, ahead will bring challenges beyond my control and beyond my realm of knowledge. I know I will be tried and tried again. And I know I will grow and be shaped and molded into the person I am supposed to be.

*December 9 E-Mail:*

I cannot believe it is already December! This past month has just flown by! But, I also can't believe it's December in Miami because yesterday I was snorkeling in the Keys in the 80 degree Atlantic Ocean! Plus, the fact that it is too hot to run if I wake up after 8:30 in the morning reminds me constantly that this is a different world that I am living in down here. Sorry, I have to rub that in as much as I can to the rest of the world since you all can actually feel like the Christmas season is upon us! I find it strange going to an Advent service without a coat and I have a feeling flying home to Texas might be a bit of a rude awakening to my newfound hot bloodedness. Who would have thought that there is a place to live that is hotter than Texas??

Weather aside, my time in Miami is moving along quite smoothly. This past month, we spent a lot of time talking with the children and youth about thankfulness, in honor of Thanksgiving. Some days I come home from work, sink into the couch, look at my roommates and ask, "Did I really sign up to be disrespected day after day?" The answer to this question should, of course, be "no". But, in reality, signing up to work with middle school boys means that the answer to this question will always be a resounding "YES!" Sometimes I think, "these kids don't even realize how much we do for them." Or, "How can they actually say they don't like the FREE food we are giving them?" We tried as hard as we could to teach these kids what it means to

be truly thankful and the value of just saying a simple “thank you.” Some of them caught on. Most of them didn't.

I have started a newsletter at Branches as a way to teach the kids about writing, editing, and as my sly little way of being able to slip in photography lessons. This month's letter focused on what our youth were thankful for. Some of them didn't take it as seriously as others and wrote short sentences on why they are thankful for football. (At least they were getting into the spirit of the Thanksgiving holiday...) But, one girl, in particular, took it very seriously. She wrote a very touching article on why she is thankful for her family. However, halfway through writing it, she asked, “do I have to write something I am thankful for about my dad?” Knowing these kids come from very broken homes, I told her only if she wanted to; after all, I wasn't going to force her to be thankful. Her response was, “Ok, because the only thing I could think of was that I was thankful he isn't around anymore.” I told her I thought it would be alright if she left that part out. I really like it when these youth open up to me. However, I am never actually prepared for the things that come out of their mouths.

We went on our first retreat as a house this past week. (Hence the snorkeling in the Keys...) And part of the retreat was to have a day of silence (about 12 hours) where we did not talk to each other at all. It was supposed to be an exercise in listening to God. I used a vast majority of the time journaling, photographing, reading, and enjoying the freeing silence that is so hard to find in my daily life in Miami. But it wasn't until I had only about two or three hours left when I realized I had not even begun to listen. I was supposed to be using this time to let God in and instead I was doing all I could to occupy my time and keep him out. I should probably add in at this point that I am completely unaware of how to “listen” to God. (And others, sometimes...) I am very good at talking at God in prayer, but I never actually listen for a response. I am never just quiet or still. I like to attribute this problem to our society and the fact that if you are not constantly doing 'something,' then you are considered lazy and unproductive. But, in reality, I do have a hard time listening. So, I tried, very, very hard, to mediate and partake in *lectio divina* and do all of these things that was supposed to help me listen. But, by the time Heidi, our site supervisor, told us it was time to debrief our time of silence, I thought, “WAIT! I'm not finished. I don't have all the answers yet!!” But, as we debriefed, I realized I had figured out more than I expected. While journaling I had written down two phrases that had stuck out to me while reading: “Be still and know that I am God.” (Psalm 46:10—ed.) And “**Let It Be.**” (I should probably add that I, in no way, am equating the Beatles with the Bible. Although they are pretty close to one another in my life...) Heidi had said she was struggling with a similar problem that I was. What do you do with these people you work with that continuously make the wrong decisions? No matter what you say to them, or how you warn them, or what you give them, they revert back to what they know. They go back to the man who abuses them. They continue to make bad grades and put their education last in life. They continue to spend money on drugs while their own children or brothers and sisters starve. What do you do? What can you say? Heidi, being a little more gifted in listening than I am, got the same answer as me, I just didn't actually realize it until talking to her. You do all you can, and then you let it be. You continue to work as hard as ever, even if you will not receive a “thank you.” You give them all the tools they need and then you give it to God and pray that they will one day see the gift you gave them.

So, we answer the phone when they call. We pick them up from jail and off the street corners at 4 AM. We listen without saying one word of judgment. We say “You're welcome” when they don't say thank you. We attempt to teach them right from wrong, but show them love and grace

when they still choose wrong. We laugh with them. We cry with them. We pray for them. Then we wake up and do it all again the next day.

Yeah.

That's part of the Whole Truth.

*When the morning light comes streaming in  
We'll get up and do it again. Amen.*  
--Jackson Browne

Let it be.

Be surprised. Be the surprise.

We're pretty proud of Megan.

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## **AND – FINALLY – E-GIFT #3**

I got the following e-mail last Wednesday from Associate Professor of Biology Kelly Reed:

John,

Courtney [Mullins] asked me yesterday if I would give the sermon at the One service next Monday. My initial reaction given purely out of fear was no. After some prayerful consideration and a restful night sleep, however, I have reconsidered. If you still have not gotten someone for the sermon, I will do it.

The "One" service to which she was referring is a worship service planned and led by members of the different Christian student groups on the Austin College campus. They usually take place in Wynne Chapel on the Monday night of Finals week.

Each semester, the students ask a professor to preach at the service.

As you can tell, Dr. Reed spoke this semester.

Here's what she said:

# Many As One

Kelly Reed

## Romans 14:7-12

*7 We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. 8 If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. 9 For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. 10 Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. 11 For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." 12 So then, each of us will be accountable to God.*

When I was first asked to speak tonight, I'm sure the expression on my face looked much like that of a deer caught in the headlights. I know, you'd think most professors would just jump at the chance to preach to a captive audience. I guess fear of the unfamiliar overtook me, and after hemming and hawing for a few minutes, I said no. That evening and during the night, the little voice in my head kept saying – you really should have accepted the invitation. The next day I awoke with a fresh perspective realizing that this was something I needed to do. I sent John Williams an email saying that I had reconsidered and before long, Katie Peterson contacted me. And so here I am. I do want to thank you all for inviting me.

I thought I'd start off with something I know a lot about – microbes. Microbes are organisms that cannot be seen with the naked eye. To put their size into perspective, you could place about one million microbes on the head of a pin in a single layer. While you probably equate microbes with nasty disease causing germs, in fact, most microbes are harmless to humans. One thing that's true about microbes is that they are very adaptable. Microbes live in every conceivable environment on Earth, even ones that other organisms consider much too hostile to reside such as volcanic soil or polar ice caps. In all of these environments around the globe, different types of microbes are living together in communities. Until recently, scientists didn't appreciate the interdependence of the microbes in these communities until they tried to remove individuals from the community. What microbiologists are discovering is that the majority of microbes on Earth cannot be isolated away from their communities because they depend on each other for their livelihood and survival. Each microbe contributes to the community's success by carrying out different but complementary functions. In these microbial communities, diversity is not a luxury; it's a necessity.

We as humans like the idea of diversity. Imagine going to the cafeteria and having to eat the same exact thing meal after meal. Or imagine having to listen to the same lecture over and over and over. It would be pretty boring, wouldn't it? I know I like going to the grocery store and being able to select amongst 6 or 7 varieties of apples, one week I might choose a granny smith and the next week a gala apple. The same holds true for eating out. One night I might crave Chinese food and another night Mexican. I love that there are a variety of cuisines to choose from. But it seems as much as we like diversity in many facets of our lives, when it comes to our relationships with people, we tend to want to hang out with people that behave like us, think like us, and believe like us.

Certainly, that is not God's intention for us. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he writes:

*For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free- and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.*

Here the Apostle Paul tells us that if we ignore or discount one another because of our differences, we're way off the track of where we are called to be as followers of Christ. He goes on to compare the body of Christ with the human body. The human body contains a variety of different organs and tissues each of which carry out specialized functions. Like the microbial community, the organs and tissues of the human body must work together in order for the body to be healthy. Paul argues that the same is true in the body of Christ. Paul teaches us that each of us is gifted in a special way by God. God loves diversity. It is the differences in our giftedness that makes each and every one of us needed to carry out God's plan.

But how do we live out Paul's message in this world that is driven by competitiveness and judgment? Competition is a natural biological phenomenon that occurs when two or more organisms strive for a common resource or goal that cannot be shared. Even the microbes that depend on species diversity for community survival compete with one another. Some of the microbes even produce antibiotics to inhibit or even kill their competitors. People are also competitive. Here at Austin College, we compete for sports titles, scholarships, jobs, and positions in graduate school just to name a few. We are constantly being judged and graded.

In the scripture readings for this evening, Psalm 139 and Romans 14:7-12, we are reminded that we're not in charge; God is in charge. God knows each of us and loves and accepts us as we are. We are reminded not to lose sight of the big picture – that which brought us all here tonight - we are all joined in Christ by faith. We are instructed to welcome and love those who don't see things the same way we do. It doesn't mean we have to agree with them. But rather we should treat them the way we'd like to be treated.

One of my favorite movies is the 1970s dark comedy, *Harold and Maude*. Harold is a 20 year-old young man from a wealthy family who has no friends and is obsessed with death. His mother doesn't understand him at all. Maude is a 79 year-old woman who exudes an infectious passion for living. Harold and Maude meet at a cemetery and through the course of the film this different and unlikely pair become inseparable. Maude's presence has a healing, life giving effect on Harold. At one point she gives Harold a pep talk saying, "A lot of people enjoy being dead. But they are not dead, really. They're just backing away from life. Reach out. Take a chance. Get hurt even. But play as well as you can. Go team, go! Give me an L. Give me an I. Give me a V. Give me an E. L-I-V-E. LIVE!" Maude accepts Harold just as he is and in time she helps him to see the value of his uniqueness. Maude understands that only when we reach out of our comfort zone, do we really experience life.

God calls us together, with all of our diversity, to reflect His love into the world. A new perspective may await us when we view the world through someone else's eyes. The opportunity for loving across differences is never ending. So if I may, I leave you with a slightly modified version of Maude's advice to Harold. "Reach out. Take a chance. Venture into the unfamiliar. God will be with you. And don't forget your call – L-O-V-E. Love!"