

AColyte

Epiphany 2014
A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things
at Austin College



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COMING THIS MONTH:

Bible Study

5:30pm Tuesdays in the Moseley Room
Bring your tray, we'll provide the rest.

Worship with Communion

6:00pm Sundays in the Small Chapel

Jan Serve

Wednesday January 22
Watch for details

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

The First Day of JanTerm
The Twelfth Day of Christmas

Christmas Glee Is In Full Swing. And That Has Got To Stop.
--Christina Ruffini, CBS News

On Thursday December 5, the Ice came.

And that changed everything for at least a few days.

It was a little weird.

Finals Breakfast was canceled.

The Finals Week schedule was changed.

And I wasn't able to hang out in the couches, checking in with students, giving away bubble gum, and writing an *AColyte* like I normally do during Finals Week.

For the last 20 years, I have sent out an *AColyte* during Finals Week in the Fall Semester.

I like to offer a some kind of Christmas message, reflect a little about the semester, tell Chaplain stories that other people seem to like, and remind ACTivators to put SHYC on their schedules (January 31-February 2, 2014).

But not this year.

This year it felt like I missed the opportunity to check in with you about Christmas and why there are elements of the Christmas message that are potentially relevant and useful and interesting for all of us – no matter what we think about Jesus or God or “holy days.”

Now here we are on January 6.

And the Christmas tree is still up and lit at my house.

Not just because we're overly-sentimental.

Or lazy.

There's good reason to keep the Christmas tree up until January 6 (today).

It's not too late to talk about Christmas.

I know, I know. Christians like me have been geeking about Christmas stuff for several weeks already (technically since the First Sunday of Advent on December 1 – actually, probably for longer than that).

The presents have all been given and received.

The calendar has changed.

The department stores have long since taken down the Christmas decorations. We'll probably see the first Valentine's Day advertisements any day now.

It's hard to blame folks for being ready to get beyond Christmas and on to the New Year and our regular lives.

But, through the centuries, the Christian Church has tried to keep the story going until January 6. And there are some reasons that that's a good thing.

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*When you're down and hoping that someone will understand you
If you're lost and no one has a helping hand to lend you
I will be there
To comfort all your sorrows and your fears
I will be here
--Cowboy Scott Boyer*

In addition to the arrival of the Ice, another interesting thing happened around here on December 5. That was the night we had the Service of Lessons and Carols in Wynne Chapel.

For a variety of reasons having to do with the Fall Semester Finals Week and our desire to allow and enable our students to spend significant time with their families between the end of the Fall Semester and the beginning of Jan Term, the Lessons and Carols service is sort of the official College Christmas celebration.

Every Fall, we have a service on the Thursday before Finals Week that includes readers from all four undergraduate classes, faculty members, staff members, and administrators as well as music from all the various choral groups affiliated with the College.

And there's another bunch of folks who aren't involved in leading the service at all. They just come to participate.

Some come to hear and support singers and readers.

Some come because it's a nice event in which students, faculty, and staff can gather together.

Some come because it's a specifically Christian service in which passages are read from the Old and New Testaments that Christians find meaningful as we think about Christianity in general and Christmas in particular.

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Christians have developed Lessons & Carols services so we can read and sing about promises made and promises kept.

My own experience participating in this service varies from year to year.

Some years, I'm mostly just concerned to be sure the lights are on and the sound system works.

Some years (actually most years) I'm moved by the singing and the variety of gifted and committed student leaders.

Some years I'm amazed by the faculty members who agree to be readers.

Some years I'm moved by seeing retired colleagues and other old friends.

But this year it was mostly Risa.

My primary memory of this year's Service of Lessons and Carols is of a sudden realization I had after sophomore **Chris Melton** finished reading Isaiah 11:1-9 and then senior **Risa Rylander** left her place in the *A Cappella* choir, walked right in front of me, and took her place with the Chorale to sing *Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming*.

Here's what Chris read:

*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
The Spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,*

*the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.*

*He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.*

*Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.
The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.*

*The nursing child
shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child
shall put its hand over the adder's den.
They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.*

As early Christians were trying to get their heads around what they believed about who Jesus was and how his story was related to the stories they already knew and believed about themselves and their relationship with God, they grabbed on to this old passage that most of them had known for centuries.

They remembered those ancient words as a promise made to them from God that things were going to get better; that God wasn't finished; that their very real difficulties would not be the last word in their stories.

Early Christians were familiar with the promises of Isaiah 11.

The language of promises made was already a part of their vocabulary.

And they saw Jesus as the fulfillment of those promises.

I thought of that when Risa walked in front of me after Chris finished his reading.

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*All around the world, in every little town
Every day is heard a precious little sound
And every mother kind, and every father proud
Looks down in awe to find
Another chance allowed.
--Steve Earle*

Almost exactly 21 years ago, when she was still a baby, **Risa Rylander** was the first person I ever baptized.

I stood in front of the congregation at NorthPark Presbyterian Church in Dallas, held Risa in my arms, and asked her parents if they promised to live the Christian faith and to teach that faith to their child.

They said, "Yes."

Then I asked the whole congregation if they promised, on behalf of the whole Christian Church, to guide and nurture Risa, by word and deed, with love and prayer.

They said, "We do."

And they did.

Risa is about to begin her last semester at Austin College.

For her whole life, she has been a walking, talking example of promises made and promises kept.

And the only difference between her and the rest of the Austin College student body is that I have known some of the details of her story longer than any of yours.

Risa is special, but she's not unique in that regard.

I guarantee you that there's somebody who looks at you – right now; today – and sees promises made and promises fulfilled.

And they're right.

That's essentially why us Christians keep going back to the Advent and Christmas stories year after year after year.

We do it because we know that—despite all the desperation, profound disappointment, crushing tragedy, and broken promises that are clearly part of the whole truth—promises made and promises kept are part of that whole truth too.

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You ain't seen nothin' yet.
--Bachman Turner Overdrive

So we spend Advent talking about promises made and we spend Christmas focusing on promises fulfilled, but we're still not finished.

There's one more story that we always read a week or two after Christmas.

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod, magi came from the east to Jerusalem.

*They asked, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews?
We've seen his star in the east, and we've come to honor him."*

*When King Herod heard this, he was troubled,
and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him.*

*He gathered all the chief priests and the legal experts
and asked them where the Christ was to be born.*

*They said, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for this is what the prophet wrote:
You, Bethlehem, land of Judah, by no means are you least among the rulers of Judah,
because from you will come one who governs, who will shepherd my people Israel."*

*Then Herod secretly called for the magi
and found out from them the time when the star had first appeared.*

*He sent them to Bethlehem, saying,
"Go and search carefully for the child.*

When you've found him, report to me so that I too may go and honor him."

*When they heard the king, they went;
and look, the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them
until it stood over the place where the child was.*

When they saw the star, they were filled with joy.

They entered the house and saw the child with Mary his mother.

Falling to their knees, they honored him.

*Then they opened their treasure chests and presented him with gifts
of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.*

*Because they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod,
they went back to their own country by another route.*

--Matthew 2:1-12

It's easy to focus on the vivid, concrete details of this story.

The tradition generally says that there were three of these “magi,” or wise men. The only reason we think so is that Matthew lists three gifts that they brought.

I don’t think it matters.

The star is a cool image. And lots of folks have produced all kinds of scientific theories about whether the star might have been a comet or a meteorite or some other astronomically explainable phenomenon. Good for them.

I don’t think it matters.

I’m usually in favor of situations in which somebody gets filled with joy.

But we read about “good tidings of great joy” in Luke 2. So the joy of the magi when they see Jesus isn’t particularly unusual. It’s not really news.

And the dream in which the magi are warned not to go back to Herod is kind of interesting. It moves the story forward. But throughout history it has also been used as a justification for Christian anti-Semitism.

I’m not sure if any of that really moves the story forward very much either.

The Christian tradition calls this the “Epiphany” story. “Epiphany” means “shining forth.”

In the traditional interpretation of the story (and I’m a Church Historian—I don’t think “traditional” is a bad word at all) the glory of God “shines forth” to the magi as they encounter the baby.

But most of those features are present in Luke’s version of the Christmas story. I don’t know that we’d miss much if we went ahead and shut down Christmas on December 25 instead of dragging it out for these 12 additional days.

Except that the Magi weren’t from around there.

The fact that Matthew mentions them and makes clear that they were from somewhere else—beyond the community and culture that included Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, John the Baptist—suggests, in a way that Luke doesn’t, that the birth of Jesus has significance beyond one particular religious community.

The inclusion of this story of the Magi every year reminds Christians to remember that—as surely as the Christmas drama includes promises made (Advent) and promises kept (Christmas)—it also includes promises discovered (Epiphany).

We don't know what all it might mean for God to come among us in this way.

In the context of this larger narrative, we are reminded that our own stories might include characters who we don't even meet until the third act.

Characters who are not from these parts.

Characters who aren't like us.

We don't know what all might happen before we return to this story again next year.

And that might be why we should return to is again and again and again.

The story won't change, but we will.

*I was alive and I waited, waited
I was alive and I waited for this
Right here, right now
There is no other place I want to be
Right here, right now
Watching the world wake up from history.
--Jesus Jones*

Risa will graduate this Spring, along with a couple hundred more of you.

When you seniors walk across that stage, you'll each represent promises made and promises kept.

And also promises yet to be discovered.

Who knows what all it might mean for y'all to be unleashed into the world?

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This Spring, lots of us around here will be engaged in a Strategic Planning process (*I hope that's not too much of a buzz kill.* – ED).

Faculty members, Board members, Administrators, Alumni, Students will all be doing some serious thinking together about who we need to be and what we need to do in the next few years to be sure that Austin College continues responsibly, intentionally, and effectively to live out its mission; to offer what we can offer to students and to the world.

There will be lots of rooms full of lots of smart, committed, wise, insightful, generous, compassionate people.

I'm sure they'll be talking about Liberal Arts,
Money,
Demographics,
Technology,
Data,
Access,
Service,
Leadership,
and other things I can't even think of now.

If you look closely, you might see me in the back,

Thinking about promises made,

Promises kept,

Promises yet to be discovered.

And smiling.

It's good to be us.

Right here. Right now.

Until Next Time, I remain,
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,
Still getting used to writing MMXIV on my checks.

JOHN WILLIAMS
Chaplain



Austin College AActivators

Spring 2014 Schedule

January 31-February 2, 2014

Grace Presbytery Senior High Youth Connection (AC Campus)

March 28-30, 2014

Grace Presbytery Junior High Youthquake #3
Glen Lakes Camp (Glen Rose, TX)

March 28-30, 2014

Grace Presbytery Kidquake #1—Gilmont

Wednesdays March 26-April 23, 2014

Covenant Presbyterian Church “WOW” Program for Children

April 4-6, 2014

Grace Presbytery Kidquake #2—Glen Lake

April 26, 2014

Houston-area Senior High Event—Pines Presbyterian Church,
Houston

July 31-August 3, 2014

JHaMS Week at Austin College