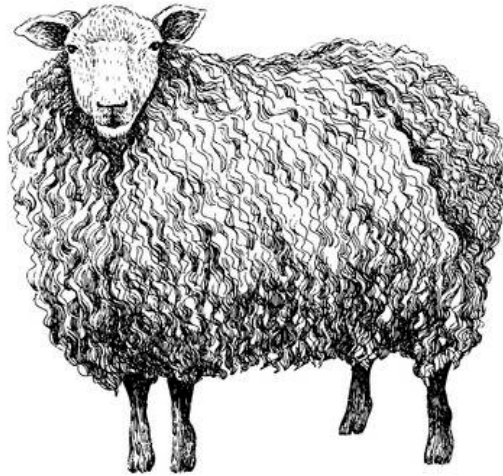


# AColyte

Advent 2019

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



## *Christmas 101: Sheep and Motown Music*

AColyte

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

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We'll be moving back into the renovated  
**Wynne Chapel** in January.  
The first event in there will be the  
**Grace Presbytery Senior High Youth Connection**  
(January 31-February 2)

At 7:00 p.m. on Monday April 27  
we'll have a service to dedicate the  
**Clifford J. Grum Sanctuary**  
and  
**Sallie Majors Small Chapel.**

That service will feature remarks from  
Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary President  
(and former Grand Avenue Presbyterian Church pastor)  
**Ted Wardlaw**  
and a performance of  
**Vivaldi's "Gloria"**  
by the **Austin College A Cappella Choir**  
and  
**Student Chamber Orchestra.**

This is gonna be so cool!

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## TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

December 2019

Enjoying my last few days in my Exile Office

(thanks to **Andrea Restrepo** and the **Service Station** for your hospitality)

*It was Christmas in prison and the food was real good  
We has turkey and pistols carved out of wood*

--John Prine,  
"Christmas in Prison"

*Happy Christmas, your ass  
I pray God it's our last*

--The Pogues.  
"Fairy Tale of New York"

*So, Virginia, if there's a Santa  
And if Santa ain't too mean  
He owes me a box of candy  
And a f\*\*\*in' tangerine*

--Bob Gibson and Tom Paxton,  
"A Box of Candy and a Piece of Fruit"

I spend a lot of time thinking about – and celebrating – diversity at Austin College.

We're a tremendously diverse community. And, frankly, I think we're pretty good at that.

On November 18, the **Muslim Students Association** hosted an Interfaith Panel and Dinner and I was reminded again, by the turnout and the quality of the conversations, that we do diversity well here.

That great panel discussion, and many other interfaith conversations we've had on this campus through the year, made me wonder what "the Holidays" mean to different members of our community.

I don't think anybody minds a break between semesters. And it's cool to have some time to prepare for Jan Term.

But the culture goes crazy this time of year.

We repeat sentimental (but often true) stories to each other about kindness, and sacrifice, and forgiveness, and hope.

But we also encouraging an orgy of economic activity and gift-giving.

It's ironic to me how many of us get so stressed in our efforts to create (or avoid) meaningful interactions with family and friends at this time of year.

It can get intense.

And frankly I don't know how this religiously-justified, economically-frenzied, and potentially stressful season plays out in the lives of my non-Christian Austin College friends and colleagues.

Y'all are smart and articulate and perceptive.

And I wonder what you think about all this complicated "Christmas" business.

For what it's worth, here's why I still think it's all worth it:

I think it's mostly sheep and Motown music.

## *Sheep*

I always think about sheep this time of year.

I think about sheep whenever I prepare the Children's Sermon for the Sherman Presbyterian Christmas Eve Service that we hold every year. This year will be the 27<sup>th</sup> Christmas Eve that I get local children to help me tell the story of the angel Gabriel's visit to the shepherds in Luke 2:8-20.

*<sup>8</sup> In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.*

*<sup>9</sup> Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.*

*<sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—*

*I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people:  
<sup>11</sup> to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.*

*<sup>12</sup> This will be a sign for you:*

*you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth  
and lying in a manger.”*  
<sup>13</sup> *And suddenly there was with the angel  
a multitude of the heavenly host,  
praising God and saying,  
<sup>14</sup> “Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”*<sup>10</sup>  
<sup>15</sup> *When the angels had left them and gone into heaven,  
the shepherds said to one another,  
“Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place,  
which the Lord has made known to us.”*  
<sup>16</sup> *So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph,  
and the child lying in the manger.  
<sup>17</sup> When they saw this,  
they made known what had been told them about this child;  
<sup>18</sup> and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.  
<sup>19</sup> But Mary treasured all these words  
and pondered them in her heart.  
<sup>20</sup> The shepherds returned,  
glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen,  
as it had been told them.*

And next week – just like every year – the congregation will make great, and convincing, sheep noises when the children help me act out that story.

Presbyterian adults (at least in Sherman) are always good at sheep noises.

I also think about sheep this time of year because we often hear selections from Handel’s *Messiah* during Advent. In one of the many famous choral pieces from the *Messiah*, choirs sing these familiar words from Isaiah 53:

*We like sheep have gone astray.*

And whenever I think about that music I’m reminded of one year – it was probably 10 or 12 years ago – when the Covenant Presbyterian Choir sang selections from the *Messiah* at our Lessons and Carols service.

All the words to the choir pieces were printed in the service bulletin that morning, but the lines broke such that when you looked at the bulletin, it looked like the choir was just going to sing: “We like sheep.”

That’s all. Just “we like sheep.”

Well – an Austin College student named **Keatan King** was sitting with our family that morning, and Keatan and Linnea (my wife) and Emily (my daughter) thought it was pretty funny that the choir was apparently going to sing about their great affection for sheep.

They got a little silly and began joking with each other:

“We like sheep.”

“Yes, I definitely like sheep.”

“Do you like sheep?”

“Oh, I think we all like sheep”

That’s become kind of a family joke. We have exchanged numerous sheep-related gifts with Keatan through the years. And we always chuckle when we hear the “We like Sheep” part of Handel’s *Messiah*.

So I usually laugh and think about Keatan and Linnea and Emily when I hear that verse.

They like sheep.

It makes sense that sheep have figured heavily as I’ve thought about exactly why us Christians get so jazzed during the holidays.

## ***Motown Music***

But I’ve also had Motown music on my mind a lot during this particular Advent season.

That’s a little more complicated, but I think I’ve figured it out.

For his birthday gift last year, my family added my father to our Spotify membership. That means that we can all share music and access digital versions of new and old recordings that we like. And it also means that my Dad can now access digital versions of recordings that he originally only had on vinyl.

As many of you know, music is a big deal in our family. And that was true long before my brother and I came along. We grew up in a house full of all sorts of music.

Right after he got access to Spotify, my Dad made a playlist called “Doo Wop and Motown.” That should give you a good idea of the generation he’s from.

His first Spotify playlist contains lots of good songs from the ‘50s and ‘60s. And a lot of it is Motown.

I know Smokey Robinson’s *Tracks of My Tears* is on there;

and *I Second that Emotion*;

and *You’ve Really Got a Hold on Me*.

Dad likes his Spotify account. And he likes his Motown.

And I guess that’s probably why I’ve been thinking about a lot of Motown songs this Fall.

So, my thoughts during this Advent season are about Sheep and Motown music.

## ***Sheep***

When Isaiah says, “we like sheep have gone astray” in Isaiah 53:6, he’s speaking particularly about the failure of the people of Israel to live faithfully in their Covenant with God. It’s one of the many instances throughout the Old Testament where the Israelites are scolded for their failure to keep God’s Commandments.

And we Christians remember those words during Advent and at Christmas because we know they still apply to us and to our world as well.

By the way:  
“Advent” is the season of the Church year in which Christians prepare for Christmas.  
We spend 40 days every year getting ready to celebrate the birth of Jesus.

That’s why we read the story of Adam and Eve’s disobedience in Genesis 3 during Advent and on Christmas Eve. Even – maybe especially – as we celebrate the birth of Jesus, we in the Church endeavor to recognize and remember that we all are also sinners in need of forgiveness (like the people that Isaiah was comparing to sheep who have gone astray).

Genesis 3:1-12

**1** Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made.

He said to the woman, "Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?"

**2** The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden;

**3** but God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.' "

**4** But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die;

**5** for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

**6** So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.

**7** Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

**8** They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.

**9** But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?"

**10** He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself."

**11** He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"

**12** The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate."

Those of us in the Christian tribe believe that's an important story. It's clearly part of the truth about us and our world.

It's not so much that we believe in talking snakes, but we believe that story helps us recognize and remember that we all behave like that man and that woman in the story.



Like Eve, we all deny our dependence on anything beyond ourselves.

Like both of them, we tend to separate ourselves from each other (fig leaves) and separate ourselves from God (hiding in the garden).

Like Adam, we deny our responsibility for our own actions (“The woman who you gave me made me eat.”)

We read that story every Advent because we recognize that we have also wandered away from where God intends for us to be. And we can’t fully understand Christmas and its significance without recognizing and remembering that.

It turns out that we, like sheep, have gone astray.

We believe human sin is clearly part of the truth.

## *Sin*

The Bible accounts for human sin 12 verses into the third chapter of the first book.

Adam and Eve go astray right from the git go.

And the rest of us have been doing that ever since.

But there are 66 books and 47 chapters still left in the Bible after those first humans eat the forbidden fruit.

And you can make a good case that those 66 books and 47 chapters are about God’s response to human sin.

We see God’s first response to human sin in Genesis 3:9.

After Eve defies God’s commandment and eats the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the *very first* thing God says is, “Where are you?”

That’s huge.

We can’t overlook that part of this story, especially during Advent.

God’s first response to the first human sin is to seek out the sinners.

Because my Motown brain is humming this Fall, now when I think of God's words to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:9 – when I think of God's first response to human sin--I hear the words of the Temptations; I hear the opening lines of their song, *Ain't Too Proud to Beg*.

<https://youtu.be/crWSG6liT5Y>

*I know you want to leave me  
But I refuse to let you go.  
If I have to beg, plead for your sympathy  
I don't mind, 'cause you mean that much to me.*

In the face of that sinfulness,  
that disobedience,  
that failure to live as God intends for us to live,  
that's essentially what *God* says to each of us and all of us:

*I know you want to leave me,  
But I refuse to let you go...  
I don't mind, 'cause you mean that much to me.*

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And--as the story continues through the Old Testament--there's plenty of sin for God to respond to.

From Cain's murder of Abel (Genesis 4:8),  
to the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11);  
from the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt (Exodus),  
to their exile in Babylon (2 Kings 25 and 2 Chronicles 36)  
the Old Testament contains story after story after story of tragedy,  
suffering, violence, exploitation, greed, and injustice.

It's Sin.

It's all sin.

The Old Testament is full of lots and lots of sin.

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That's the world that the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk is describing as he asks God:

*O Lord, how long shall I cry for help,  
and you will not listen?  
Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save?*

That's why he's asking God:

*Why do you make me see wrongdoing  
and look at trouble?*

And why he complains that

*Destruction and violence are before me;  
strife and contention arise.  
the law becomes slack  
justice never prevails.  
the wicked surround the righteous—  
and judgment comes forth perverted.  
--Habakkuk 1:2-4*

Habakkuk paints a pretty intense, but accurate, picture of a world in which people have gone astray.

And based on what we know from the Old Testament—and based on what we know about the sinful world where we all woke up this morning—Habakkuk's got it about right.

You and I don't have to look far to see violence, wrongdoing, trouble, destruction, strife, contention, lawlessness, injustice, and wickedness in our lives and in our world.

And in the Book, God doesn't argue with Habakkuk at all as he makes all his complaints. There's no suggestion that Habakkuk's characterization of his world that has gone astray is inaccurate in any way.

But God tells Habakkuk,

*...there is still a vision for the appointed time;  
it speaks of the end, and does not lie.  
If it seems to tarry, wait for it;  
it will surely come, it will not delay.*

That's essentially God telling Habakkuk, "Yes, that's the truth, but it's not the whole truth. There's something else."

That's God reminding Habakkuk of the promise of a better world; reminding him of the same promise we see expressed in different ways all over the Old Testament.

In Isaiah 11, it's the promise that:

*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.*

In Jeremiah 31 it's the promise that:

*I will put my law within them,  
and I will write it on their hearts;  
and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.  
...I will forgive their iniquity,  
and remember their sin no more.*

And in Jeremiah 33:

*The days are surely coming, says the Lord,  
when I will fulfill the promise I made  
to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.  
In those days and at that time  
I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David;  
and he shall execute justice  
and righteousness in the land.*

It's the promise that's repeated, in multiple forms, throughout the Old Testament.

In 1966, Motown singers Sam & Dave sang

<https://youtu.be/AREppyQf5uw>

*When the day comes, and you're down  
In a river of trouble, about to drown  
Hold on, I'm coming.  
Hold on, I'm coming.*

That's essentially what God is telling Habakkuk, reminding him to wait for the vision if it seems to tarry.

It's what God is saying to the Israelites through Isaiah and Jeremiah.

*"Hold on, I'm coming."*

Think about the shepherd in the Parable of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:4-6).

*4 "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?  
5 And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders  
6 and goes home.  
Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.'*

One of the flock is missing, so the shepherd leaves the other 99 and goes searching for the one who is lost.

And with our Motown ears we can almost hear him as he searches, quietly singing

*"Hold on, I'm coming."*

That's the promise that the people of Israel heard over and over and over again.

It's the promise at the core of this and every Advent season.

And next week, as Christians gather to remember and celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, that promise is fulfilled.

When we get together and light our candles and sing our carols, we're essentially remembering and proclaiming that what God has been promising to do for thousands of years, God is doing right now!

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The New Testament offers us several different ways of thinking about the fulfillment of God's promise. Matthew and Luke tell us the story of the birth of a child – a child with an unwed teenage mother; a child with a working class father; a child born into a time and place of great political unrest; a child whose birth is foretold by angels and announced to shepherds; a child who is the Son of God.

John tells us that

*The Word became flesh and dwelled among us  
...full of grace and truth.*

And later, Paul takes a stab at explaining how Jesus is the fulfillment of God's response to human sin when he says:

*neither death, nor life,  
nor angels, nor rulers,  
nor things present, nor things to come,  
nor powers,  
nor height, nor depth,  
nor anything else in all creation,  
will be able to separate us  
from the love of God  
in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Many of us know those stories.

All that New Testament language is familiar to most Christians.

Those passages are all different ways for Christians to try to get our heads around what it means for God to respond to human sin by coming all the way to us – for God to join us out here where we've gone so badly astray.

And there's a Motown song that fits perfectly at this point in the story as well.

After we all go astray and God says:

*I know you want to leave me,  
But I refuse to let you go,  
and  
...I don't mind 'cause you mean that much to me*

And after God has reassured us when we are frustrated, weary, and lost, saying

*Hold on, I'm coming;*

Every Christmas, as we celebrate the birth of the Christ child, "Emmanuel," "God with us," we realize and remember that what God has told and shown and reminded us again and again is

<https://youtu.be/Xz-UvQYAmbg>

*Ain't no mountain high enough,  
Ain't no valley low enough;  
Ain't no river wide enough  
To keep me from getting to you.*

I bet some of you saw that one coming.

But it's spot on incarnational theology.

It's Christianity 101.

The truth we remember and celebrate every Christmas is that  
wherever you are,  
whatever you face,  
whatever you've done,  
whatever has been done to you,  
we believe that God has come all the way to you.

No matter how alone, displaced or forgotten you feel;  
no matter how exhausted and discouraged you are by your own suffering or by the  
suffering of others,  
no matter how much pressure you feel as you try to think about out **THE REST OF  
YOUR LIFE**,  
Christmas is a time when we remember and remind each other that we are not alone.

We Christians tell this long and complicated Christmas story every year to remind  
ourselves and proclaim to the world that we believe that God is with us,  
Pursuing,  
Accompanying, and  
Comforting all of us who have gone astray.

Christmas is a time for us to remember that truth in our own lives.

And to share that good and joyful news – in our words and in our actions--with the whole world.

We really believe that God is here.

Like sheep who have gone astray, we have been found.

Your story matters.

And that story matters.

“Joy to the World.”

Until 2020, I remain,  
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,  
Fleece Navidad!

JOHN WILLIAMS  
Chaplain