

AColyte

August 28, 2020

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

SAFE

SECTS

Religious Life at Austin College

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AColyte

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

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WHAT IS THE *AColyte* AND WHY DO I HAVE ONE?

Welcome to the first edition of the *AColyte* for the 2020-21 school year.

This journal is intended to provide a forum for the Austin College community to discuss theological issues and keep up with what's going on in our various Religious Life programs.

We operate with a fairly broad definition of theology around here. As far as we're concerned, anybody who spends time thinking about which things matter more than other things is a theologian.

That probably even includes you.

The use of the term "AColyte" for our title is based on our hope that, like an acolyte who lights candles in a worship service, we can also be "bringers of light," or "bringers of flame," or instruments to help "lighten things up." If nothing else, we can promise to provide ample opportunities to practice the virtues of patience and forgiveness.

Feel free to reply if you have questions or comments or corrections.

This issue includes:

- A Discussion of **Religious Life at Austin College**;
- Information about local **Churches and Worshipping Communities**; and
- Some vaguely biblical "TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN..." ramblings that have tumbled out of the mind of the Chaplain.

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RELIGIOUS LIFE at AUSTIN COLLEGE

Sunday Night Worship with Communion

6pm every Sunday Night in the Grum Sanctuary of Wynne Chapel.

- Wear your mask
- Use hand sanitizer when you get there
- We will have COVID-appropriate Social Distancing, Singing, and Holy Communion
- Remote students can also join via Zoom

Zoom Link:

<https://austincollege.zoom.us/j/97600085209?pwd=ZEJoRHVmWWhRNUhSVlg2MUlVRVpHZz09>

Meeting ID: 976 0008 5209

Passcode: 534112

Tuesday Night Zoom Bible Study

5:30pm Tuesdays

- Participants will study the Scripture passage that will be used in the following Sunday's Worship Service
- Zoom Link:

<https://austincollege.zoom.us/j/93915355672?pwd=UEdJNVlicC8vQ3lYVjJVcjE3VD BmQT09>

Meeting ID: 939 1535 5672

Passcode: 754977

Student Religious Groups

Representatives of the following Student Religious Groups will be at the Opportunities Fair on the Campus Green

Tuesday September 1 from 11:00am-1:00pm

- Activators
- Intersity Christian Fellowship
- Catholic Students Association
- Hindu Students Association
- Jewish Students Association
- Muslim Students Association

Contact Chaplain John Williams (jwilliams@austincollege.edu) if you have any questions.

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LOCAL CHURCHES AND WORSHIPPING COMMUNITIES

Here's an alphabetical list of Churches and other Religious Congregations in and around Sherman

where Austin College students, faculty, staff, and alumni are involved.

Contact Chaplain John Williams (jwilliams@austincollege.edu) if you have any questions.

CHASE OAKS CHURCH (Plano and Fairview)

NAME OF YOUR CONGREGATION: Chase Oaks Church

WEBSITE: <https://www.chaseoaks.org>

PHYSICAL ADDRESS multiple venues...these 2 are closest to AC

- Legacy (main) Campus: 281 Legacy Dr, Plano, TX 75023 (off HW75 and Legacy ... North Plano)
- Sloan Creek Campus: 611 E Stacy Rd, Fairview, TX 75069 (off HW75 in McKinney)

CURRENT WORSHIP SITUATION (in person or online): online (about to transition back to face-to-face...maybe)

IF ONLINE, HOW CAN THE SERVICES BE ACCESSED?: <https://online.chaseoaks.org>

OTHER CONGREGATIONAL INFORMATION YOU WOULD LIKE US TO SHARE WITH NEW STUDENTS

- non-denominational,
- informal,
- diverse,
- outwardly focused (service oriented)

Austin College Contact: Mike Higgs, mhiggs@austincollege.edu

COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN (Sherman)

322 W. Pecan
Sherman, TX 75090

CURRENT WORSHIP SITUATION:

Facebook Live through the end of September
Facebook Page: "Covenant Presbyterian of Sherman"
10:50am Sunday morning

Austin College Contacts: Mark Hebert, mhebert@austincollege.edu

John McGinn, jmcginn@austincollege.edu

Kelly Reed, kreed@austincollege.edu

John Williams, jwilliams@austincollege.edu

EAGLE MOUNTAIN INTERNATIONAL CHURCH (Newark, TX)

The physical address is in Newark, Texas so it takes me an hour and a half to get there. <https://www.emic.org/> is a link to the church web site where they can get more information and directions. In the top right there is a tab saying Service Times and Directions. AN interactive google map link is provided at their site as well as directions. Address: EMIC is located at 14355 Morris Dido Newark Road, Newark, TX 76071.

If someone is interested in following me, I leave at 9:00 to attend the 11:00 service. I can take them in my car if they are interested in doing that.

Our congregation is Word of Faith; interracial, with some international members who are currently here.

Austin College Contact: LadyJane Hickey, lhickey@austincollege.edu



[Eagle Mountain International Church | Where Love is King](https://www.emic.org/)

This is more than just a place of worship. It is a growing, loving family! Everyone needs a group of friends, a family. Everyone needs a church to call home. We are that kind of church. Our mission is simple: LEARN. GROW. LOVE.

www.emic.org

FAIRVIEW BAPTIST CHURCH (Sherman)

NAME OF YOUR CONGREGATION: **Fairview Baptist Church**

WEBSITE: fairviewsherman.com/

PHYSICAL ADDRESS:

222 W Taylor Street
Sherman TX 75092

CURRENT WORSHIP SITUATION (in person or online): Worship online or in person at 10:30 am

IF ONLINE, HOW CAN THE SERVICES BE ACCESSED? Online Service at www.FairviewSherman.live

OTHER CONGREGATIONAL INFORMATION YOU WOULD LIKE US TO SHARE WITH NEW STUDENTS:
College Bible Study Tuesdays at 6:30 pm - dinner provided
Contact the church for more information at 903.892.3543

Austin College Contact: Janet Clark, jclark@austincollege.edu

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH (Sherman)

First Baptist Church of Sherman
400 S. Travis St.
Sherman, TX 75090

www.fbcsherman.org

Current Status:

Bible Study – available in person and some classes on Zoom

Worship Service – available in person, live streaming, and via television

How to Access:

Livestream of service Sunday mornings at 10:45am on fbcsherman.org

A broadcast of the prior week's worship service is available in several formats.

On facebook - @fbcsherman

On television - KXII Channel 12(CBS) broadcasts at 11am each Sunday morning

On youtube - at youtube.com/fbcsherman

Other Information:

There is a College and Career fellowship and bible study held on Tuesday nights at the home of the study leaders in Sherman. Snacks or a light meal is provided free of charge.

There are also opportunities for students to get involved with the youth ministry at the church.

For details on these or for any questions please contact Adam Pemberton, Student Minister at (903)892-9121.

Austin College Contact: Amy Gates, agates@austincollege.edu

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH (Denison)

800 W Woodard Denison, TX 75020

Sundays @ 10:15am In-Person (Social Distancing Required)

Online services @ <https://www.facebook.com/fccdenison/>

FCC Denison seeks to help people find and follow Jesus, invites all who profess their faith to celebrate the Lord's Supper every Sunday as we worship in a contemporary style in a traditional setting.

Austin College Contact: Edwin Clark, ebclark@austincollege.edu

FIRST METHODIST CHURCH MOSAIC SERVICE (Sherman)

Mosaic – modern service of First United Methodist Church Sherman

<https://www.firstmethodistsherman.org/mosaic>

118 W Pecan Street, Sherman

Hybrid of online and in person

Access the online via their Facebook page

OUR VALUES

AUTHENTICITY

Inviting you to come as you are to explore a relationship with God through Jesus Christ

COMPASSION

Seeking responsible living as a community of faith and in our local community

INTENTIONALITY

Growing in our faith through committed discipleship
Dress casually – come as you are!

9:30 am (has been moved up from 9:45 am as stated on website)
In person worship will require masks and social distancing of 6 feet
Online worship at 9:30 am (<https://www.facebook.com/1stMethodistSherman>)
Open Hearts. Open Minds. Open Doors.
LGBTQ+ and Allies Group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/lgbtandallies>

Austin College Contacts: Michael Deen, mdeen@austincollege.edu
Brandi Mitchell, bmitchell@austincollege.edu

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (Denison)

WEBSITE www.facebook.com/groups/965113283541696 AND www.fpcdenison.net

PHYSICAL ADDRESS 213 N Burnett Ave, Denison, TX 75020 . . (903) 465-3923

CURRENT WORSHIP SITUATION (in person or online) Online via our YouTube page. We try to experience the worship service together at 11:00 AM on Sundays

IF ONLINE, HOW CAN THE SERVICES BE ACCESSED? Via our YouTube page
[\[www.youtube.com/channel/UCw4Fjmf24iwB47Znvh9Z8Bw\]](http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCw4Fjmf24iwB47Znvh9Z8Bw) or website

OTHER CONGREGATIONAL INFORMATION YOU WOULD LIKE US TO SHARE WITH NEW STUDENTS
Communion: first Sunday of every month.
Additionally, we invite students who would like to play for our service videos to bring musical instruments—we record on Saturdays at 10:00 AM, either at Grand Avenue Presbyterian in Sherman or First Presbyterian in Denison. (Call or email fpcdenison@yahoo.com to inquire about recording schedule.)

Austin College Contact: Genna Bethel, gbethel@austincollege.edu

GRACE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH (Sherman)

PHYSICAL ADDRESS
2800 Canyon Creek Dr, Sherman 75092

CURRENT WORSHIP SITUATION (in person or online)
Online (<https://www.gracesherman.org/>) (<https://www.facebook.com/GraceUnitedMethodistSherman>)

OTHER CONGREGATIONAL INFORMATION YOU WOULD LIKE US TO SHARE WITH NEW STUDENTS
Weekly Bible studies in addition to Sunday services online; drive in communion; opportunities to serve

Austin College Contact: Dan Dominick, ddominick@austincollege.edu

GRAND AVENUE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (Sherman)

WEBSITE www.facebook.com/groups/123037887405

PHYSICAL ADDRESS 900 N Grand Avenue, Sherman TX . . (903) 893-1921

CURRENT WORSHIP SITUATION (in person or online) Online via our YouTube page. We try to experience worship together at 11:00 AM on Sundays

IF ONLINE, HOW CAN THE SERVICES BE ACCESSED? Via our YouTube page
[\[www.youtube.com/channel/UCw4Fjmf24iwB47Znvh9Z8Bw\]](http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCw4Fjmf24iwB47Znvh9Z8Bw) or Facebook page
www.facebook.com/groups/123037887405

OTHER CONGREGATIONAL INFORMATION YOU WOULD LIKE US TO SHARE WITH NEW STUDENTS Weekly Bible study: Wednesdays at 7:00 PM via Zoom. Call or email the church office for Zoom invitation: (903) 893-1921 or gapcoffice@cablone.net. Communion: first Sunday of every month. Additionally, we invite students who would like to play for our service videos to bring musical instruments—we record on Saturdays at 10:00 AM, either at Grand Avenue Presbyterian or First Presbyterian in Denison. (Call or email to inquire about recording schedule.)

Austin College Contact: Genna Bethel, gbethel@austincollege.edu

KINGS TRAIL COWBOY CHURCH

WEBSITE

<https://kingstrailcowboychurch.com/>

<https://www.facebook.com/Kings-Trail-Cowboy-Church-173179516072485>

PHYSICAL ADDRESS

King's Trail Cowboy Church
498 Bethel Cannon Road
Whitewright, TX 75491

CURRENT WORSHIP SITUATION (in person or online)

In person Sunday 8:00 am & 10:30 am

Wednesday 7:00 pm

online via Facebook

IF ONLINE, HOW CAN THE SERVICES BE ACCESSED?

Facebook or Website

OTHER CONGREGATIONAL INFORMATION YOU WOULD LIKE US TO SHARE WITH NEW STUDENTS

King's Trail Cowboy Church is a place where everyone is welcome!!

Many of those in our congregation regularly travel to rodeos and play days, both to compete and to witness to the changes that God has made in their lives.

We are a family of cowboys, cowgirls, and country folks that are in love with Jesus!

If you are not comfortable with traditional services or maybe you have never attended church, come by and visit!

Austin College Contact: Amanda Shepherd at amshepherd@austincollege.edu

LEGACY BIBLE CHURCH (Sherman)

WEBSITE

<https://legacybiblechurch.org/>

PHYSICAL ADDRESS

4818 FM 691, Denison TX 75020

CURRENT WORSHIP SITUATION (in person or online)

In person services are held at 9am and 11am on Sunday with online streaming service options.

IF ONLINE, HOW CAN THE SERVICES BE ACCESSED?

Through the website or using the Legacy Bible Church App (Android and iPhone)

https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.subsplash.thechurchapp.s_9KCND9&hl=en_US

<https://apps.apple.com/us/app/legacy-bible-church/id1021163413>

Austin College Contact: Jim Hebda, jhebda@austincollege.edu

MOSQUES (Islam)

Sherman:

Denison Central Mosque (DCM)
6544 FM1417, Denison, TX 75020

Plano:
Islamic Association of Collin County (IACC)
6401 Independence Pkwy, Plano, TX 75023

Notes from AC Economics Professor Mikidadu Mohammed:

DCM in Sherman is small and not open all the time but great proximity to campus (about 15 minutes drive). IACC mosque in Plano is large and open most of the time but far from campus (about 1 hour drive). For Jumah or Friday prayer, I perform it at DCM when I am time-constrained. When I do have enough time, I go to IACC. However, due to COVID, I have not been to either one lately. Following CDC guideline, IACC in Plano is now closed completely until further notice but I do not know whether that is the case for DCM in Sherman.

Austin College Contact: Mikidadu Mohammed, mmohammed@austincollege.edu

<https://prayersconnect.com/mosques/48685-denison-central-mosque-denison-texas/show>

ST. MARY'S CATHOLIC CHURCH (Sherman)

St. Mary's Catholic Church in Sherman
727 South Travis Street
Sherman 75090

[St. Marys Catholic Parish - stmarych.org](http://St.MarysCatholicParish-stmarych.org)

Weekday Masses are at 8 a.m. followed by private prayer time until 3 p.m. Mass on Tuesdays and Thursdays is bilingual. On Saturdays, Mass begins at 8 a.m. Masks are required and social distancing must be maintained. stmarych.org

Weekend mass is currently be live streamed via Facebook, however in person mass is occurring with social distancing and sanitizing.

Austin College Contacts: Brett Boessen, bboessen@austincollege.edu
David Whelan, dwhelan@austincollege.edu
Andrea Restrepo, arestrepo@austincollege.edu

ST. STEPHEN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

www.saintstephenssherman.org

**401 S. Crockett
Sherman, TX
75092**

CURRENT WORSHIP SITUATION (in person or online)
9:30am on Facebook live
Up to 10 persons by reservation in person, masks required.

IF ONLINE, HOW CAN THE SERVICES BE ACCESSED?
We're livestreamed on Facebook!
www.facebook.com/saintstephenssherman/live_videos/

OTHER CONGREGATIONAL INFORMATION YOU WOULD LIKE US TO SHARE WITH NEW STUDENTS

We are followers of the Risen Lord Jesus Christ, who by death destroyed death and brought life and hope to the world, and we strive to make his power known in our own lives and bring his message of salvation to our community.

Why St. Stephen's?

We combine a love for the Bible with reverent worship

We believe God loves his creation - and works through it in water, bread, wine, fire, ash, and palms

We believe in the Triune God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and his holy Church

We believe in the Sacraments

We believe in Eternal Life

We believe in Forgiveness of Sins
We believe in the Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ

Our two primary ministries in the community are to support the Grayson County Crisis Center which serves victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse, as well as our adoption of Wakefield Elementary.

Check out our YouTube channel with additional video resources including guided devotions, theology, and some of our worship services
www.youtube.com/c/SaintStephensSherman

Are you on Discord? We now have a server for the Church to begin building online community
<https://discord.gg/jUGnhjJ>

Austin College Contact; Sarah Wright, swright@austincolleger.edu

TEMPLE BETH EMETH (Jewish)

Notes from Congregation President Andy Faber (Austin College Class of 1977):

High Holy Days Services September 18 and 19.

Rabbi Mecklenburger said the Jewish laws state if participation can be unhealthy and cause illness or harm, you do not do it, even if it breaks tradition and customs. We have a perfect example of this very situation. There is no way for us to worship in the sanctuary, but we can as a group through Zoom in our living rooms, connected with the other members of TBE. We will use the same prayerbook we have used for years (more on this in later paragraphs).

Here is how this works, Rabbi Mecklenburger will be in Ft Worth in front of his computer reciting the service just as he would be on our Bima. We will all be attending in front of our computers joining him. If you have a camera on your computer, you can be seen by everyone, just like we were all together in person. You will get an invite for the Zoom teleconference emailed to you and you simply click on the link and enter a code. Then you see Rabbi Mecklenburger and the others who are joining in. We still can recite prayers together as a group, we can see each other standing at the parts of the service when we rise, and still hear the cat calls and comments that some of us blurt out during the services.

Yep, it will be different, but it is the only way to hold the service. Still have Rosh Hashanah eve on Friday night, Sept 18 and Rosh Hashanah day on Saturday morning, Sept 19. They will not be quite as long and we will miss going for lunch together, but everything else is the same. Yom Kippur will be Kol Nidre on Sunday night, Sept 27 and the next day, Sept 28. The day service will be abbreviated and unfortunately, we will not share foods in the break the fast, but we can still have a Kiddish and blessings over the bread. We need to get a head count of the number of Zoom participants and get prayerbooks to you.

Just set up a place to turn on the Zoom and act like you are in temple. Have nice clothes, maybe some flowers decorating your den, some wine for Kiddish and challah for a blessing and we are all in our own temples. Put a yamaka on your dog or cat while it sits in your lap (also talit for day services and Kol Nidre) and we can make this a pleasant experience. Different this year, yes, but safe and we still get to worship.

There are a couple of housekeeping things to work out. First, who is going to be in attendance. We need to know the numbers of Zoom participants to get our temple registration. Each family unit is one participant, no matter how many folks are watching at your house. Secondly, we need to get everyone a prayerbook for the service which are at the temple. I can bring some to my office for delivery or have a time folks come by the temple and pick one up. Also, get a weekly Siddur for Shabbat services as well in the future.

There you have it, High Holy Days for 2020. This is what every congregation will be doing. Let's take this situation and make it exciting as this is what we have to do this year. Any ideas or suggestions, please call or email. I do need a response to know you will be on the stream and how to get a prayerbook to you.

IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN PARTICIPATING IN THESE SERVICES, OR OBTAINING MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE CONGREGATION, PLEASE EMAIL MR. FABER DIRECTLY AT s.a.faber3@gmail.com

TRINITY LIGHTHOUSE CHURCH (Denison)

Trinitylight.org

2915 Spur 503, Denison, TX 75020

903-465-7268

On Line at both the website and on Facebook.

On Facebook at Trinity Light House Church

In-Person at the address

This is a beautiful Church of God. It is a very welcoming and warm church that accepts anyone.

Austin College Contact: Kelle Kennemer, kkennemer@austincollege.edu

TRINITY LUTHERAN CHURCH (ELCA)

Address: 1515 North Travis (Grand Avenue to N. Travis. Turn Left onto Travis head past Albertsons- church will be on your left after the storage units)

CURRENT WORSHIP SITUATION: in Person with Social Distancing and Masks- Communion (individual cups and wafers) service is also online Facebook live and Youtube.

Congregation is a wonderful supporting group with any talents that they share with the local community.

Austin College Contact: Andy Carr, acarr@austincollege.edu

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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

Wynne Chapel

Starting my 28th Year

With a mask within reach

Same as it ever was.

--David Byrne

Everything is different now.

--Don Henley

I woke up at 5:00am on January 17.

I was in Inverness, Scotland with 18 Austin College students and (AC A Cappella Choir Director) Wayne Crannell. I had to come home early to get ready for the Grace Presbytery Senior High Youth Connection – a big Presbyterian Youth Conference that takes place on our campus every year between Jan Term and the Spring semester.

So I caught a 7:00am flight from Inverness to London. When I got to London, I took a plane to Philadelphia, laid over for a couple hours, and then took another plane from Philadelphia to DFW. Then I drove from DFW Airport back home to Sherman.

That was a *long* day.

Twenty-three hours – by myself and among strangers at the same time.

Twenty-three hours from the time I woke up in Inverness until I got to my own bed in Sherman.

I read a lot.

I listened to a lot of music.

I completed about 100 levels on Wordscapes – a Crossword puzzle game on my phone.

And I spent a lot of that airplane time dreaming and imagining and thinking about some things that were coming up in 2020 that I was really looking forward to.

Last Fall, Austin College completely renovated Wynne Chapel and I was excited about dedicating and using the Grum Sanctuary and the Sallie Majors Chapel in all kinds of old and new ways with our students and our community in the Spring semester.

This year (2020) also marks the 25th Anniversary of the founding of the Austin College AActivators program. Over the last quarter century that program has involved hundreds of Austin College students who have done all sorts of ministry all over the country. We had some great services and parties organized to celebrate that anniversary by lifting up and celebrating those students.

And on a purely personal and trivial note, The Tone Deaf Cowboys – a group of college friends who I have been playing music with for over 35 years – were set to release a CD and take a little vacation tour to New Mexico and Colorado this summer and play some shows. That was gonna be so cool.

I had a lot to be excited about as I flew all day on January 17.

Now here we are on August 28, and *none* of that has happened.

None of it (well, almost none of it – we do have CDs for sale now).

I kind of feel like I got ambushed.

I've spent a lot of time in the last few weeks processing all that and trying to get my head around how to go forward.

And – as I’ve done that – I keep thinking about this story from the Book of Genesis in the Bible .

*²²The same night [Jacob] got up and took his two wives,
his two maids,
and his eleven children,
and crossed the ford of the Jabbok.*

*²³He took them and sent them across the stream,
and likewise everything that he had.*

*²⁴Jacob was left alone;
and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.*

*²⁵When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob,
he struck him on the hip socket;
and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.*

*²⁶Then he said, “Let me go, for the day is breaking.”
But Jacob said, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.”*

*²⁷So he said to him, “What is your name?”
And he said, “Jacob.”*

*²⁸Then the man said,
“You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel,
for you have striven with God and with humans,
and have prevailed.”*

*²⁹Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.”
But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?”
And there he blessed him.*

*³⁰So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying,
“For I have seen God face to face,
and yet my life is preserved.”*

*³¹The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.
--Genesis 32:22-31*

Lately, that story makes me think about the difference between how I thought the world was on January 17 and what it has actually been in the last six months.

It’s a complicated story about unexpected struggle.

After a couple introductory verses, verse 24 says, kind of matter-of-factly,

*²⁴Jacob was left alone;
and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.*

There’s no warning.

All of a sudden this wrestling match just breaks out.

I think I know what that feels like. Our individual lives and our common life in 2020 are like Jacob's story – they are complicated stories about unexpected struggle.

Coronavirus and the COVID-19 pandemic have involved a myriad of different struggles for all of us as we face real and serious concerns about our own health, the health of our loved ones, the health of our most vulnerable neighbors, and the prospect of continuing life at Austin College in safe and meaningful ways.

There are struggles and discord and disagreement within our society – and on this campus – about how we can live responsibly and lovingly together in the face of this pandemic.

This summer, there have also been real and serious conversations in our culture – and on this campus – about Black Lives Matter and social issues related to institutional racism.

These are essential and appropriate conversations for us all.

And they're hard.

And all of these conversations are taking place in the context of unprecedented and largely unexpected struggles.

I can definitely identify with Jacob – I think we all can.

We didn't necessarily expect this much struggle right now. We had other things on our minds.

But here we are.

As we face the individual and common struggles that are part of our lives today, I invite you to look at this moment in our life together through the lens of the story of Jacob wrestling with whomever it is that he wrestles in Genesis 32.

I think there are 3 relevant lessons for us in this story – three things in there that can help us find meaning and make sense of our own season of struggle.

The First Lesson is that this struggle – these struggles – *will* mark us.

Remember how the story begins?

*²²The same night [Jacob] got up and took his two wives,
his two maids,
and his eleven children,
and crossed the ford of the Jabbok.*

*²³He took them and sent them across the stream,
and likewise everything that he had.*

Earlier in Genesis 32, Jacob prepares to meet his estranged brother Esau. He's got his whole family with him, but he sends them across the river to safety.

*²⁴Jacob was left alone;
and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.*

To be honest, that's pretty weird.

There's no context for this.

It's entirely unexpected.

In the middle of this ongoing drama about how Jacob might be able to reconcile with the brother whose birthright he stole, we suddenly get this Hulk Hogan moment where some man shows up and wrestles with Jacob all night.

Nobody expected that.

Did you expect COVID?

Did you expect George Floyd to be murdered?

Did you expect to know about it?

Did you expect that we'd still be dealing with COVID in August?

Did you expect the outpouring of rage, hope, protest, engagement, and positive change that have arisen in the wake of George Floyd's death?

Do you ever wake up at night thinking about these things?

Do you wrestle with how to live faithfully and responsibly amidst these unexpected struggles?

Do you occasionally lie awake worrying about issues and questions that we can't simply ignore and walk away from?

I sure do.

At least to me, this story from Genesis 32 doesn't just feel like some irrelevant tale from a long time ago and a long way from here.

*²⁵When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob,
he struck him on the hip socket;
and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.*

Jacob gets hurt as he wrestles.

We know from the ending of the story that he will limp from now on.

Jacob's experience wrestling the man will mark him forever. He never completely goes back to the way he was before.

And that's true about all of us.

I pray to God that this COVID moment will end soon.

My prayers go out for all who have suffered or lost loved ones to this terrible disease.

And we lift prayers of gratitude for all who care for COVID patients and for all who are earnestly working to develop treatments and a vaccine.

But, even as those prayers are answered and the threat of this disease is minimized or eliminated, we can never go back to "normal."

There is no normal to go back to.

We shouldn't want to go back to "normal" if "normal" is what led to these struggles in the first place.

We can't—and we shouldn't—pretend that we don't know the things that we've learned about ourselves and each other in the last few months.

Like Jacob, we all will be forever marked by this struggle.

As we go further into the story, there's another relevant lesson for us in Jacob's experience.

*²⁵When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob,
he struck him on the hip socket;
and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.
²⁶Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking."*

Now, all of a sudden, the man who was wrestling Jacob is ready to quit.

But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

Jacob doesn't want to quit.

He wants a blessing.

*²⁷So he said to him, "What is your name?"
And he said, "Jacob."
²⁸Then the man said,
"You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel,
for you have striven with God and with humans,
and have prevailed."
²⁹Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me **your** name."
But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?"
And there he blessed him.*

We're gonna talk about Jacob's new name in a minute, but first we need to look at this "blessing" business.

It's not clear at all what that blessing is, or what it means.

It's a blessing that Jacob asks for in verse 26 and receives in verse 29. But what difference does that blessing make in Jacob's life or in his story?

I wonder if he might be asking for help, and sustenance, and energy, as he contemplates his life beyond that struggle on the riverbank.

When the man asks to be released, Jacob says, essentially, "not until you promise to help me."

It seems as though Jacob recognizes that he can't survive the struggle by himself. He's looking for all the help he can get.

If there's a blessing for us in this story, I think it's the similar recognition that we can't do what we need to do by ourselves. We also need help – we need each other – as we strive together to live faithfully in the midst of the struggle.

And that's why it's a big deal that Jacob gets a new name in this story.

*²⁶Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking."
But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."*

²⁷So he said to him, "What is your name?"

And he said, "Jacob."

²⁸Then the man said,

*"You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel,
for you have striven with God and with humans,
and have prevailed."*

The text tells us that Jacob gets his new name, "Israel," because he has "striven with God and with humans and ... prevailed."

So "Israel" might mean, "the one who wrestles against God and humans and has prevailed." But it can also be interpreted to mean "the one who wrestles – or struggles – alongside God."

Similarly, although "prevailing" might mean that Jacob won the wrestling match, I don't see how that's particularly helpful or consistent with the rest of the Bible. There are no other biblical stories about God losing battles or contests to people.

It would also be appropriate to interpret Jacob's new name, "Israel" to mean something like "the one who strives alongside God and persists."

That makes a lot more sense in this context and certainly feels more relevant to our own lives.

Understood in that way, we can see that that,

- just as Jacob is marked by his struggle with the man on the riverbank, and
- just as he is blessed and helped and empowered and nourished in this struggle,
- Jacob is also recognized and endorsed as a partner who strives alongside God.

I think that's a good way for us to think about this story in the context of our life together right here and right now.

Like Jacob, we can all expect to be permanently marked and affected by the unexpected struggles in which we currently find ourselves.

Like him, we should seek and expect help and blessing and nourishment as we strive to live faithfully together in this particular context.

And, also like Jacob, we should realize that our story is not over. It is just beginning.

This story from Genesis is not the end of Israel's story, it is the beginning of a new chapter; a new era.

The last verse of this story from Genesis says

*³¹The sun rose upon [Jacob] as he passed Penuel,
limping because of his hip.*

Jacob's – Israel's – story with God does not end when the wrestling match is over . . . when the struggle subsides. It's only just beginning.

And that's how it is with us.

We will be marked by our current struggles.

We will be blessed and helped and nourished as we strive to live faithfully together and do the work that we have committed to do.

And our story is not nearing its end. It is only just beginning.

We will never be the same.

We will never go back.

We don't have to do it by ourselves.

Our story continues.

Our common call and opportunity in this moment of struggle is to go limping together into the dawn of a new academic year – a new season where we can learn together how to serve this troubled and struggling world.

It is important and sacred work.

We can't do it by ourselves.

But this is our time.

Let's get after it.

Until Next Time, I remain,
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,
Glad to have Found a Biblical Warrant for Limping,

JOHN WILLIAMS
Chaplain