

AColyte

Christmas 2021

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



believe

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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

Wynne Chapel
Winding Up the Fall Semester
Two Weeks before Christmas

Come on in my kitchen.
--Robert Johnson

Last Sunday night (December 5) – after the end of the weekly Austin College Communion Worship Service – several AC students and I walked up Grand Avenue, knocked on doors, and sang Christmas Carols to

- Vice President for Student Affairs and Chief Inclusion and Diversity Officer **Carllos Lassiter**,
- **President & Mrs. O'Day**, and
- Vice President for Institutional Enrollment **Baylee Kowert** (as well as her husband and sons).

It was definitely a lot of fun. We were not the best singers on campus, but we were living examples of the injunction from Psalm 100 to “make a joyful noise.”

Eventually we ended up at Moseley House. That’s where my wife **Linnea** and I live. Since I was with the students, I had them walk straight into our house without knocking, singing “Silent Night” as they entered.

Linnea teared up a little bit.

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Here’s why:

In the Fall of 1993, Linnea and I began hosting students for “Talk-Back” dinner in our home after our weekly Sunday Night Communion services.

We got the term “Talk-Back” from the tradition of St. Luke Presbyterian Church in Dallas of having “Talk-Back” lunch with the pastor after Sunday morning services.

Through the years, we’ve hosted hundreds of Talk-Back dinners with many wonderful AC students.

The Talk-Back Dinner last Sunday was our first one since March 2020.

I think that’s why Linnea cried a little.



We didn't just eat on Sunday (although that would have been enough).

We also decorated our Christmas tree.

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Linnea and I met and started dating just after Christmas in 1988.

We got married in August of 1989 so our first Christmas together was that year.

I was Youth Director at NorthPark Presbyterian Church in Dallas then. I got the church youth group to come to our apartment and help us decorate our tree.

Until last year, when the pandemic forced us to stop having Talk-Back Dinners, Linnea and I have had a Presbyterian youth group (1989-1992) or hungry Austin College students (1993-2019) help us decorate our Christmas tree every year.

Our family did fine last year with no help.

Santa still came.

But we missed our friends.

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We had help again this year.

That was better.

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We decorated the tree before we ate dinner (Baked Potato Soup, some kind of good salad with pears in it, Reindeer cookies).

And then we just hung out for a few minutes admiring the tree and helping Linnea get to know some of the students she hadn't yet met.

The conversation eventually turned to additional Christmas decorations we planned to put out in our house. The students were surprised to learn that I am an avid collector of Santa Clauses.

I probably have 30-40 of them;

- Stuffed
- Ceramic
- In a rocking chair
- With a Guitar
- White-skinned
- Black-Skinned
- Wooden
- Skinny
- Fat

And, as you can tell from the photo above, there is always a Santa Claus in my office.



I'm a huge Santa fan.

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I understand and pretty much agree with most of the common criticisms of the Santa Claus phenomenon.

I have strong (and solidly Biblical) objections to the notion of some supposedly benevolent figure keeping lists of those who are "naughty" and those who are "nice." In my experience, those are highly subjective terms that are not particularly helpful or encouraging.

I'm vaguely uncomfortable with the whole "Elf on a Shelf" surveillance regime. That feels more like Big Brother than Saint Nicholas. It gives me the creeps.

(Actually, every time I see an Elf on a Shelf I get this image of my brother and me sending my parents a photo of a bound, gagged, and blindfolded Elf with a ransom note made from letters cut out of a magazine. Just sayin'.)

In fact, a lot of what comes with the whole Santa Claus enterprise feels more like totalitarian mind and thought control and manipulation than peace and goodwill.

I don't like the idea of using Santa Claus to trick and coerce children into behaving a certain way.

I resonate to some degree with concerns over the "commercialism of Christmas." (although I'm pretty sure it's not Jesus who sends people to Wal Mart on Black Friday)

And yet...

And yet...

I still believe in Santa Claus.

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Here's why:

(Many readers of the *AColyte* are familiar with this story.
But not all of you.
I'm gonna tell it again.)

For over 30 years, Austin College has hosted a program that used to be called the Saturday Morning Program (it's now Roo Bound).

In that program, elementary school children from the neighborhoods around here are invited to come to our campus on selected Saturday mornings every semester to meet some Austin College students and participate in games and activities and lessons with them.

Years ago, the November meeting of the Saturday Morning Program always included a time when the children wrote letters to Santa Claus. For a variety of cultural, religious, and socioeconomic reasons, we don't do that any more. But for years, A.C. students collected letters to Santa every year and made sure they got where they needed to go.

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In November 1994, a little boy who was a first grader at Jefferson Elementary School came to the Saturday Morning Program and wrote his letter to Santa. (I don't remember for sure – but I think his name might have been “Charles”.)

That year, the director of the Saturday Morning Program was student named Janet Chester.

Janet (now Janet Chester Hayes) is currently the Director of Christian Education at Grace United Methodist Church in Sherman.

Long before she came back to Sherman as a church professional, Janet did significant ministry here as an Austin College student through her work with the Saturday Morning Program. (She was also one of the original five ACTivators).

Janet and some of her student friends had the responsibility in 1994 of taking Charles' letter to Santa and making sure it got to the right place.

But there was a problem.

A couple of days after the kids wrote their letters to Santa, Janet showed up in my office and showed me Charles' letter:

*Dear Santa,
For Christmas, I want a mocking troll car.*

That's what it said:

M-O-C-K-I-N-G
T-R-O-L-L

A "mocking troll car."

That clearly worried Janet.

"What is a 'mocking troll' car?," she asked me,

"And is it a good thing for a child to ask for that?"

I think she had visions of some evil little garden gnome, driving around in some obnoxious little car and making fun of people. And that was surely a scary, unpleasant, and perplexing thought.

We puzzled over Charles' letter for a long time.

And we figured it out.

We kept reading and re-reading it — and when we finally had the sense to read it out loud, the answer became clear.

Charles was a first-grader who was still pretty new to all this reading and writing business. He was trying to write down a phrase he had never seen before. He had only heard it.

He didn't intend to ask Santa for a "mocking troll" car. He wanted a "MOE-king troll" car.

That's an entirely understandable — and skillful for a first-grader -- rendition of a phrase he had probably heard and spoken many times before.

Read it out loud.

Charles was asking Santa for a “remote control” car.

I don’t blame him.

They’re really fun.

And I know for a fact that he got one.

From Santa — or at least a guy in a Santa suit.

I love that story.

I think it’s a great Christmas story.



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(By the way, as I was telling this story to the students who helped decorate our tree the other night, first year AC student **Aiden Varnell** figured out the meaning of the “mocking troll” before I even got to the punch line. We’ve got some pretty sharp friends around here.)

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We had our annual Austin College Service of Lessons and Carols in Wynne Chapel on December 2.

One of the passages, the “Lessons”, we read that night was Isaiah 9:2-7.

Isaiah 9:2 says:

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.*

Isaiah 9:6-7 says

*For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named Wonderful Counselor,
Mighty God,
Everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace.
His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts **will do this**.*

As he talks about light shining on the people who have walked in darkness and about the birth of one who will be called “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace,” Isaiah is essentially telling his readers:

“Some things are gonna be as good as you hope they might be.
The zeal of the Lord will make sure of that.
Peace and justice are what’s gonna last.”

The message of this Isaiah passages is that some things are gonna be as good as we hope they might be.

God has promised that.

In the circles I run in, we read that passage at this time every year to remind ourselves of that promise that disease, destruction, disappointment, despair, and death will not have the last word.

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We also read the famous Christmas story from Luke 2:1-20 at Lessons & Carols. (I still hear Linus' voice from *Peanuts* whenever I read this passage):

*In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus
that all the world should be registered.*

*² This was the first registration
and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.*

There's not a lot of theological significance to this early detail of the story, but it was very important for the early Church to tie this story to a historical event (a Roman census) that was part of a historical record that was recognized beyond the Church.

³ All went to their own towns to be registered.

*⁴ Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea,
to the city of David called Bethlehem,
because he was descended from the house and family of David.*

It was also important for the early Church show that Joseph, and therefore Jesus, was a descendant of King David. See the reference in Isaiah 9 above to "the throne of David."

*⁵ He went to be registered with Mary,
to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.*

⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.

*⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son
and wrapped him in bands of cloth,
and laid him in a manger,
because there was no place for them in the inn.*

So the baby gets born.

Meanwhile...

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

⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them,

Angels show up a lot in the early chapters of Luke.

and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

Wouldn't you be terrified?

*¹⁰ 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:
¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior,*

Another reference to David.

*who is the Messiah, the Lord.
¹² This will be a sign for you:
you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."*

The arrival of this baby is clearly a big deal.

If you think about it, the arrival of any baby is, or at least should be, a big deal.

*¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel
a multitude of the heavenly host,
praising God and saying,
¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"*

That would have been pretty cool to witness; like a big, loud, show-stopping production number.

*¹⁵ 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."*

"Let's go check it out."

*¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph,
and the child lying in the manger.
¹⁷ When they saw this,
they made known what had been told them about this child;
¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.*

How did those shepherds know?

¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

It makes perfect sense to this new Mom that strangers are excited about her new baby.

*²⁰ The shepherds returned,
glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen,
as it had been told them.*

Good for them.

They had their heads in the game.

They weren't cynical or dismissive.

They were available for this experience.

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When the angel shows up to talk to those shepherds in the Luke passage, his message is not just some future promise like Isaiah's that some day things will get better.

With "the glory of the Lord" shining around him, the angel tells the shepherds "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people. For to you is born this day [present tense] a Savior."

While Isaiah reports God's promise of justice and peace and says "the zeal of the Lord will do this," [future tense] the angel in Luke essentially tells the shepherds, "the zeal of the Lord *is* doing this" – present tense. Not just, "some day things are gonna be as good as you hope they might be" but "today – right now – already, some things – the most important things--are as good as you ever hoped they might be."

That's a pretty good way to think about the Christmas message:

Today – right now – already, some things are as good as you ever hoped they might be.

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Although he probably wasn't thinking in ultimate, theological terms, I think Charles wrote his letter to Santa because he thought that some things could maybe be as good as he hoped they'd be.

That's essentially why my Christian friends and I geek out a little at this time every year.

We remember and re-tell this story that suggests that:

God is here. Among us. As one of us.

We believe that is truth that abides after the presents are opened, the wrapping paper is thrown away, and the family goes home.

We act like we act because we believe God is acting in the present tense to ensure that disease, destruction, disappointment, despair and death are not the only things – or the most abiding and powerful things – in our world.

Right now – today; this week; all year – we know some things are as good as we hope they might be.

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Again – Charles wasn't thinking about all that. But when he came to the Saturday Morning Program and Santa gave him a remote control car, maybe he experienced – at least for a moment; in a very small way – the truth that some things were as good as he had hoped they might be.

By paying attention to Charles and all the other children who came to our campus;
and by welcoming them
and listening to them
and helping them celebrate Christmas
Janet and the other students who led the Saturday Morning Program demonstrated –
at least in a small way-- the truth that some things *are* as good as we hope they might be.

Not all of it.

But not none of it.

We all know that Christmas is not about getting stuff – even cool stuff like remote control cars.

But it *is* about experiencing and remembering and proclaiming in word and deed the truth that some things are as good as we hope they might be.

Charles used his gifts to write to Santa.

Janet and the other students used their gifts to decipher his letter.

Charles got a remote control car for Christmas in 1994.

From Santa (or at least somebody in a Santa suit).

Our Christmas tree got decorated last week.

By people we didn't know in 1994 (because they hadn't yet been born).

That's part of the whole truth about the world where we woke up this morning.

Sometimes things get better.

Sometimes good news is just good news.

Sometimes hope isn't foolish.

Until next year, I remain,
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,
Wondering Why Anyone Would Choose Not to Believe in Santa Claus,

JOHN WILLIAMS
Chaplain