

AColyte

Advent 2022

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



The Unused Wheelchair Lift

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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

December 2022

Wynne Chapel

After the Renovation

I.

*The sun's gonna shine
In my back door someday.
--Big Bill Broonzy*

*I believe that one fine day
The lion and the lamb
Will lie down in peace together
In Jerusalem
--Steve Earle*

It was late in the Fall of 2019.

President O'Day and I were discussing the details of the renovations in Wynne Chapel.

One important part of our conversation had to do with wheelchair access.

When Wynne Chapel was built in 1958, it included an exterior ramp and pews that were adequately spaced to accommodate wheelchairs. But the stage was not accessible except via stairs.

Since the renovations did not involve structural changes to the building, the College was not legally required by the Americans with Disabilities Act to bring the Chapel into full ADA compliance as we did the renovation.

Nevertheless, in our conversations, President O'Day and I decided that it wouldn't be appropriate for Austin College to spend all that money renovating the Chapel without taking steps to make the sanctuary stage accessible to persons in wheelchairs. We wanted to be sure that people with limited mobility would be able to get safely onto the stage and help lead services or participate in musical programs in Grum Sanctuary.

After all the important time and energy we'd spent in recent years thinking seriously about Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at AC it was a no-brainer.

As we imagined future services that would involve leadership by persons with limited mobility, Steven and I spoke specifically about **Anika Chand**.

At that time, Anika was a bright, articulate, first-year student. She had been active in the AC Religious Life program in her first year here (she's still bright and articulate, she's just not a first-year student any more).

And Anika spent almost all of her time in a wheelchair.

It was helpful for us to have a specific person in mind as we made decisions about ensuring wheelchair access to the sanctuary stage as part of the Wynne Chapel renovation.

Our first thought was to add a wheelchair ramp at the front or the side of the Chapel stage.

But that wouldn't work.

There are specific criteria for the angles of wheelchair ramps. For obvious reasons, they can't be too steep. Our problem in Wynne Chapel was that

the stage is so high that a ramp at the appropriate angle would need to be longer than any available space that we had in the sanctuary.

So we decided that, since we couldn't build a proper wheelchair ramp, part of the Wynne Chapel renovation would include the purchase of a wheelchair lift that we could keep in the back of the sanctuary and move forward to the stage whenever we needed it.



Problem solved.

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Then COVID came, with all its disruptions.

One of those disruptions, of course, was that we were not able to have any large gatherings on campus, including in Wynne Chapel, from Spring Break 2020 through the end of the calendar year.

As we tried to accommodate all the COVID protocols and maintain some semblance of a Religious Life program in the Fall of 2020, we decided to produce a service of Lessons and Carols by recording the Choir (appropriately masked and socially distanced) singing carols and anthems and then separately recording all the readers of the eight lessons that we traditionally read.

After that, AC's A-V wizard **Nick Hummert** edited all those recordings together and produced a nice video that the College was able to stream on various platforms during the holiday season.

It was good for us to continue AC's tradition of holding a Lessons and Carols Service every year even under those difficult circumstances.

If you're interested, you can see that service here:

<https://youtu.be/OixeHxN8YT8>

Two things about that particular service:

1. It includes the debut of AC Choir Director **Wayne Crannell** on Irish Tin Whistle as the Choir sings "Canticle of the Turning" (along with a guitar player of curious repute); and
2. The third reader in the service is the aforementioned **Anika Chand**.

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All of us who read or had speaking roles in that service met in the Chapel one afternoon to record our parts.

When it was time for her reading, Anika walked up the steps onto the stage and read Isaiah 11:1-9.

Read that sentence again:

When it was time for her reading, Anika walked up the steps onto the stage and read Isaiah 11:1-9.

The student in the wheelchair whom President O'Day and I had discussed by name as we talked about ensuring that the Chapel stage was accessible for persons with limited mobility **walked up the steps onto the Chapel stage.**

Mark that.

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II.

It's gonna be a bright, bright, sunshiny day
--Johnny Nash

If they take it away again someday
This beautiful thing won't change.
--Vienna Teng

When my daughter was in high school in the early 2010s, she had a friend in the orchestra who was a very talented singer and musician.

Over the course of several months, this friend was in our home at various hootenannies and picking parties. She was great.

At roughly the same time, I learned privately from my daughter that this friend was in the process of Coming Out.

I know that no two Coming Out stories are identical. But this friend's story involved several details that are common in other stories that I know.

It's hard to Come Out, even when it becomes so clearly hard or impossible not to. It's an incredibly vulnerable time.

And it's hard for parents. They've had dreams and plans for their children since before they were born. And it's really hard for them to abandon or adjust those dreams and plans as they learn true things about their children; things that leave them surprised, upset, and confused.

All of that was true about my daughter's friend.

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One night, at one of those picking parties, I sang this song:

<https://youtu.be/rikj0WMGbDU>

“City Hall” is a terrific folk song. It’s kind of a protest song that is on Vienna Teng’s *Dreaming through the Noise* album that she released in 2006.

It’s a great song because it’s hopeful and joyful and there’s not an angry word in it.

*Me and my baby on a February holiday
'cause we got the news
Yeah, we got the news
500 miles and we're gonna make it all the way
We've got nothing to lose
We've got nothing to lose*

*it's been 10 years waiting
But it's better late than the never
We've been told before
We can't wait one minute more
oh, me and my baby driving down
To a hilly seaside town in the rainfall
Oh, me and my baby stand in line
You've never seen a sight so fine
As the love that's gonna shine
At city hall*

*me and my baby've been through
A lot of good and bad
Learned to kiss the sky
Made our momma's cry
I've seen a lot of friends
After giving it all they had
Lay down and die
Lay down and die*

*10 years into it
Here's our window*

*At the vegas drive-through chapel
It ain't too much
For 'em all to handle
oh, me and my baby driving down
To a hilly seaside town in the rainfall
Oh, me and my baby stand in line
You've never seen a sight so fine
As the love that's gonna shine
At city hall*

*outside, they're handing out
Donuts and pizza pies
For the folks in pairs in the folding chairs
My baby's lookin' so damned pretty
With those anxious eyes
Rain-speckled hair
And my ring to wear
10 years waiting for this moment of fate
When we say the words and sign our names
If they take it away again someday
This beautiful thing won't change
oh, me and my baby driving down
To a hilly seaside town in the rainfall
Oh, me and my baby stand in line
You've never seen a sight so fine
As the love that's gonna shine
at Ciy Hall*

That's a song about same-sex marriage.

When the song was written and released in 2006, same-sex marriages were legal in some cities and states but not others.

"City Hall" celebrates the relationships affected by that changing moment in history.

And it does so without rage or meanness.

It's a great song.

About love.

That night, Emily's friend and I had a long conversation about that song.

In 2020, I did her wedding.

In her parents' back yard.

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III.

The passage Anika read at Lessons & Carols in 2022--and that we read every year--includes these words:

*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 on 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.*

At one level, that passage is very specific to the Judeo-Christian tradition from which it arises. It's a significant part of the Messianic prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures from which early Christians produced language about Jesus.

But I think it's more than that.

At its most elemental level, Isaiah 11:1-9 is about hope and a promise that things will get better.

I thought about that language as I realized that Anika didn't need the wheelchair lift.

I thought about it as I thought of my daughter's friend who is living her best life.

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IV.

I cried at church on December 11.

It was the Lessons and Carols service at Covenant Presbyterian in Sherman.

I was doing fine until we got to the fourth verse of *It Came Upon a Midnight Clear*.

But when we sang

*And ye beneath life's crushing load
Whose forms are bending low
Who toil along the climbing way
With painful steps and slow
Look now, for glad and golden hours
Come swiftly on the wing
Oh rest beside the weary road
And hear the angels sing*

I teared up and my voice cracked.

I thought of Anika.

And my daughter's friend.

And others I know who "toil along the winding way with painful steps and slow."

Some things are just hard.

But some things get better.

Not necessarily everything.

Not necessarily as quickly as we'd like.

But some things.

Seriously.

The last good thing hasn't happened yet.

Joy to the World!

Until 2023, I remain,
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,

Grateful both for the Wheelchair Lift,
And for the fact that Anika didn't need it,

JOHN WILLIAMS
Chaplain

