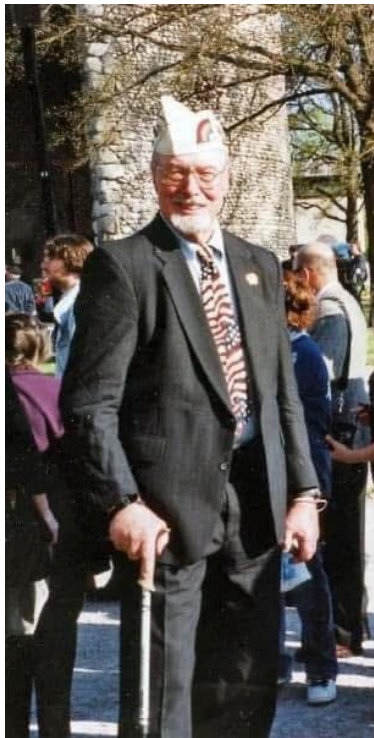


AColyte

Advent 2025

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



**THE LAST GOOD THING
HASN'T HAPPENED YET**

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

Wynne Chapel

20 feet from the Christmas Tree

December

*It was Christmas Eve, babe, in the drunk tank
An old man said to me "Won't see another one"
And then he sang a song, "The Rare Old Mountain Dew"
I turned my face away and dreamed about you
Got on a lucky one. Came in eighteen-to-one.
I've got a feeling, this year's for me and you
So happy Christmas. I love you, baby.
I can see a better time when all our dreams come true*

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

*The search light in the big yard
Swings 'round with the gun
And spotlights the snowflakes
Like the dust in the sun
It's Christmas in prison
There'll be music tonight
I'll probably get homesick
I love you, goodnight
--John Prine,
"Christmas in Prison"*

The first verse of Psalm 98 says:

*O sing to the Lord a new song,
for he has done marvelous things.
--Psalm 98*

In Luke 1:76-79, Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, sings:

*And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,*

*to give his people knowledge of salvation
by the forgiveness of their sins.
Because of the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to shine upon those who sit in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."*

Earlier in Luke 1, in verses 46-55, Mary, who has just consented to be the mother of the Son of God, sings:

*"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor
on the lowly state of his servant.
Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name;
indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud
in the imagination of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty.
He has come to the aid of his child Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."*

Later, in Luke 2, after the angel tells the shepherds about the birth of Jesus, verse 13 says

*And suddenly there was with the angel
a multitude of the heavenly host,
praising God and saying,*

*"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"*

The text says the angels were just talking, but I'm thinking that many angels there all together were probably singing.

Then, in verse 20, Luke tells us that, after they had been to the stable and seen the newborn Jesus,

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

Whenever I think about the Christmas story, it always feels to me like there's a whole lot of singing.

It's hard for me to imagine Zechariah, Mary, the heavenly host, and the shepherds just reciting their words of praise and glory.

I think they were all singing.

"Silent" night?

I don't think so.

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Bill was 19 years old when he got shot at for the first time.

It was a terrifying experience for him.

He could have been seriously injured.

He could have been killed.

. . . But he wasn't.

And he thought he knew why.

Those shots were fired 81 years ago —

- On December 24, 1944
- Near Strasbourg France.

And Bill went to his grave convinced that the German soldier who shot at him that day missed him on purpose because it was Christmas Eve.

Think about that.

Bill knew the story of Christmas Eve and Christmas — he knew the significance of the birth of Jesus.

He knew how that story affects how many think of themselves and their world.

And he was convinced — and not necessarily unreasonably — that the German soldier shooting at him knew that story as well.

I've always found that fascinating.

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Let's think about that Christmas story for a minute.

There will be a Worship Service in Wynne Chapel at 5:00pm on Christmas Eve. Feel free to join us if you're in town.

As I mentioned above, I think there's a lot of singing in the Christmas story in Luke.

There will be a lot of singing in that service as well.

We will sing a lot of Christmas songs that evening.

They are a great way for us all to remember and re-tell the Christmas story – the same Christmas story that Bill knew and that he thought that German soldier knew.

Let's think for a moment about some of the actual words we'll sing on Christmas Eve.

When we sing *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, one of the lines will be:

*The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight.*

The hopes we bring to that service and that story every year are hopes that God will continue to come among us as one of us.

They are hopes that sin and death are not the last word – that they are not the end of our story with God.

Every year we are reminded again in this Christmas story that God has not abandoned us and will not abandon us.

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We will also sing a lot about glory and joy and triumph in that service.

*O come all ye faithful
Joyful and triumphant*

Gloria in Excelsis Deo

We'll be joyful and triumphant – and we'll giving glory to God in that service on that night – because whenever we remember and re-tell the Christmas story we are reminded again of the oldest words in the whole Bible:

God is

- gracious,

- merciful,
- slow to anger,
- and abounding in steadfast love.

Always has been.

Always will be.

Our story with God is not over – and that's good news.

Those words about who God is (gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love) occur seven times in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The God who's doing all that stuff in the Christmas story is not some new god doing new things.

It's God behaving in the same way that the people of Israel had known for thousands of years before the birth of Jesus.

Same God.

New baby.

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We usually sing about mangers in the Christmas Eve service.

We don't talk much about mangers except at Christmas. "Manger" is an old English and French word that's not commonly used any more.

A manger is just a feeding trough.

Every year we make a big deal about the fact that Jesus was born in a stable and slept in a feeding trough.

That's important because it's a way of reminding ourselves and reminding the world that the birth of Jesus was not some big, dramatic, over-the-top "Event."

It's a story about run-of-the-mill people like us —

- Privates, not generals
- people who are a long way from the mainstream
- and the centers of power,

Jesus wasn't born

- in the spotlight
- in a major media market
- where people would expect a king to be born.

That matters.

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And we're gonna sing about *The First Nowell* on Christmas Eve.

That's a song about the first time somebody told somebody else about the birth of Jesus.

When we sing *The First Nowell*, we are

- remembering the ones who told us this story and
- committing to tell the story to others.

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I didn't know Bill when he got shot at in Strasbourg on Christmas Eve in 1944.

I didn't meet him until I started dating and then married his daughter in 1989. (That all happened in less than 8 months).

I knew and loved Bill for the last 20 years of his life.

He was an excellent and fascinating guy.

He used to come to the Wynne Chapel Christmas Eve service every year.

He'd sing all the songs and hear all the sermons about the same Christmas story.

And he'd often end up talking about the German who shot at him on Christmas Eve all those years ago.

As I said earlier, Bill went to his grave convinced that that soldier intentionally missed him because it was Christmas Eve.

Why would he think that?

Maybe because he knew the Christmas story.

Maybe because he knew he lived in a world where an act of mercy like that might not have been common--but it was certainly possible.

Maybe because he knew that there's more in this world than just violence, separation, fear, and greed.

We'll never know if that German soldier missed him because it was Christmas Eve.

But we all know it could be true.

And Bill was convinced that it was.

That's the world he lived in -- the world in which some of us live now.

That's joyful news.

Until 2026, I remain,
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,
Certain That the Last Good Thing Hasn't Happened Yet,

JOHN WILLIAMS
Chaplain

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ONE MORE THING:



I am an avid collector of Santa Clauses.

This one sits in my office at all times.

I took the photo without getting up from my desk.

I probably have 30-40 of them at home:

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

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.

(In fact, 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'.)

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) currently works for the Presbyterian Church (USA) Office of Christian Formation and still lives 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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We had our annual Austin College Service of Lessons and Carols in Wynne Chapel on December 4.

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 passage 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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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).

The Christmas tree at my house 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.

And that's why I believe in Santa Claus.