

December 31, 2015

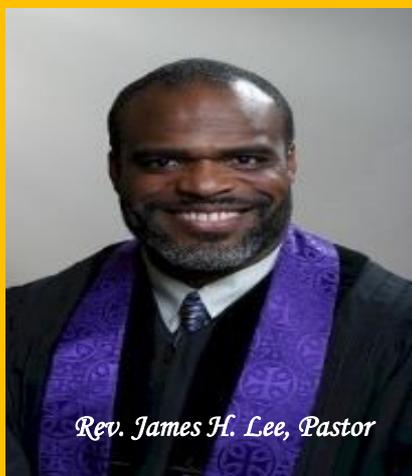


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Being Real, Relevant, and Racially Diverse!

Word from Our Pastor



Rev. James H. Lee, Pastor

NCFA Family and Friends:

As 2015 comes to an end, I pray that you have recognized and experienced God's blessings this past year. Even in the midst of calamities, crises, and challenges, it is crucial that we also choose to give thanks to God for the blessings of 2015 and recognize that, despite our challenges, God brought us through and continues to be faithful.

Please join us for worship this Sunday morning. Rev. Trish Holland will be preaching at the 8:15 early morning service on the Wilshire campus, and I will be preaching at the 10:15 worship service. It is with great joy that I welcome the Grisdales back from South Carolina, and I am thankful for the privilege of being able to baptize James Grisdale this Sunday during worship.

After worship on January 10th our Deacons will meet in the Kitchen, while the assembling of the "We Care Kits" will take place in Room 7.

The Sewing Class on December 20th was a great success, and future dates will be confirmed at the Evangelism Committee Meeting on January 6th.

During our next Session Meeting we will confirm that our Leadership Retreat will take place on February 20th rather than January 23rd. We will set our corporate goals, and I will encourage you to set your individual goals for 2016 during the meeting. This retreat will also provide our Church Officers with an overview of our commitment and tasks. I want to ensure that our leaders are equipped and informed so that they can better serve God through NCFA.

Please note that the sermon included in this week's Newsletter is from December 20th, "*Blessed To Be a Blessing.*" I would like to offer these highlights from this past Sunday's sermon, "*Clothed in Christ and Living the Life*":

Designation: In the same way that a guayabera (shirt) can symbolize the clothing of a pastor, our spiritual behavior helps others to learn of the transformation which is taking place in our lives. In *Colossians 3*, we are encouraged—indeed, admonished: ***2 As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. 4 Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.***

Discipleship: Joseph, Mary, and Jesus participated in the life of worship and faith every year. As a result of being in the Temple, Jesus as a teenager was comfortable. (Culturally, he would have had his bar mitzvah, signifying a rite of passage.) Discipleship is taking everyday occurrences in the church and in life and putting them in context as ambassadors for Christ.

Disappointments and Despair: Joseph and Mary were distraught because they had lost Jesus. Sometimes we are too controlling with the gift of lives in the ministries under our responsibility. Other times we compromise so much that it leaves us disappointed. The bottom line is that we are always going to disappoint other people, but we want to position ourselves in a place where we don't allow our despair and disappointments to get in the way of God's divine work.

Through the Holy Spirit, God uses his conviction as a way to confront wrong, clarify misunderstandings, and to lovingly challenge us to change. Conviction sometimes feels like condemnation, but it is not the same. According to *Romans 8:1*, ***There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*** If you are experiencing condemnation, it is not of God, and it is trying to keep you down or under control. Conviction always calls us to a better way. It reminds us of who we are and how our behaviors or thought processes are inconsistent.

Determination: We have to be determined to praise God for who God is and what God is doing even when it is easier to protest. We have to be determined to clothe ourselves with humility, kindness, and love—when it's so much easier to give people a piece of our mind or what's left of it. We have to be determined to allow God to help us nurture the gifts and responsibilities given to us like Joseph and Mary did after they expressed their disappointment. It is also what Jesus did after he expressed his disappointment. Anyone can quit. Anyone can make an excuse. Let's be determined people of God—seeing, believing, and doing even when it doesn't make sense.

God bless and keep you.
Pastor James H. Lee

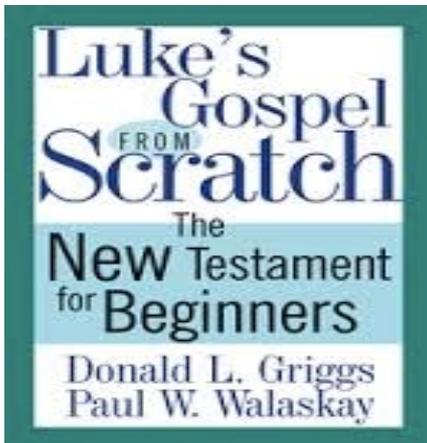
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Study of the Gospel According to Luke, January/February, 2016

Led by Rev. Jeff Saddington, Chaplain, Hospice Austin, 512-426-8805

Luke is the Gospel of focus during the new church year beginning at Advent 2015. Lectionary preachers have nearly 50 opportunities to proclaim the Word using a Lukan text during this coming church year.

Study Text: ***Luke's Gospel from Scratch: The New Testament or Beginners***
by Donald Griggs and Paul Walaskay
ISBN 978-0-664-23499-7

When/Where: **Thursdays, 7-8pm, January 7, 14, 21, 28; February 4, 11, 18, 2016. Fellowship Hall**

Class Format: As with our study of **Mark**, we will need to pre-read **Luke** and be willing to engage in discussion, prayer, and even occasionally end in singing a relevant hymn. We will rely on the Holy Spirit to reveal to us what the Holy Spirit wishes us to see and hear in this great summary of the life and work of Jesus by doctor Luke, a very careful and detailed author.

In anticipation of your interest, a dozen books have been purchased and are for sale for \$13, first come, first served. Please contact Jeff Saddington for purchase and payment.

The Gospel of Luke is a marvelously rich text, uniquely containing so many familiar teachings, such as the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, Zacchaeus in a sycamore tree, and a young Jesus conversing with teachers in the temple. It also relates stories of Jesus that are found in other Gospels, such as the Feeding of the 5,000 and a different version of **Matthew's** more familiar Beatitudes. It contains the most familiar of the Jesus birth narratives, with a manger, shepherds, angels, and no room at the inn. Food is also a theme, as Jesus in **Luke** is often going to a meal, at a meal, or leaving a meal, and each setting presents a wonderful teaching moment for us!

In **Luke** men and women serve side by side, and Jesus is very clear about the need to care for the least, the last, and the lost, and anyone who is out on the margins of society.

Come, be immersed in study! It will be a wonderful time to be together in the Word because of what all of you seekers bring to it. ALL ARE WELCOME!!

Until the whole world hears!

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- ⇒ Praise for the progress of Patrick's mother's recovery since Christmas Eve, and prayers that her health may be completely restored.
- ⇒ Praise for the joyful news of two anticipated births:
 - Jenny and Patrick are expecting their baby in June.
 - Jen and Thomas (son of Carol and Jeff in Virginia) are expecting their baby in July.
- ⇒ Thanksgiving for Ann's presence in worship again (Ben's mother).
- ⇒ Praise for the presence of the entire Unegbu family in worship.
- ⇒ Lift up Cathy T. for safe travel to be with her family for a delayed-yet-grace-filled Christmas celebration.
- ⇒ Praise for Cathy A.'s cousin Ian reconnecting with her by phone on Christmas Day. Lift him up for protection and safety on his deployment with the Air Force Reserve in mid-January. Prayers for his grandmother (Cathy's Aunt Pat) as she is experiencing serious health problems.
- ⇒ Traveling mercies for Charles and Stacy's visit to each of their parents in the northeast. Thanksgiving for cousins Thomas and Jacques having opportunities to visit them here in Austin during the holiday season.
- ⇒ Prayers of healing for Caly's uncle who fell during exercise in a mall, and lift up his wife that she may care for him.
- ⇒ Lift up all families in the path of current storms.
- ⇒ Lift up Angela's sister, whose family miraculously survived the tornado that destroyed their home. Prayers for God's provisions so that they can rebuild their home.
- ⇒ Lift up Robert and his family for stamina, peace, and comfort in the midst of his illness.

Cast your cares upon the Lord because God cares (about us).

**HAVE YOU
TALKED
TO GOD
TODAY?**

December 31, 2015



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SUNDAY MORNINGS

NCFA Sunday Schedule

8:15am - Worship Service

1507 Wilshire Blvd.
41st St. and Red River

10:15am - Worship Service

1507 Wilshire Blvd.
9am Adult Sunday School
10am Fellowship

10:45am - Children's Church



NCFA SUNDAY WORSHIP AT 8:15am -- Wilshire Blvd.

Come rise and shine with us
at our 8:15am service
where we glorify God
through the Word, Prayer, Hymns,
and Communion.

1507 Wilshire Blvd.

In the words of Phillips, Craig & Dean,
"Come, just as you are, to worship."

All are welcome to this traditional,
intimate style of worshipping our Lord.

NCFA SUNDAY WORSHIP AT 10:15am

We would love to have you and your family come share in the CELEBRATION OF THE GOOD NEWS!

We are worshipping in the Fellowship Hall of Genesis Presbyterian Church on the Wilshire Campus starting at 10:15 a.m.

Real Church...
Real People...
Real Simple...

New Covenant Fellowship of Austin PC(U.S.A.) is a racially diverse community informed by the Bible, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and motivated to share God's love with all. In response to God's love, we are called to equip disciples to faithfully serve, to encourage seekers to joyfully commit, and to implore all to worship our Lord, as we love our neighbors, grow in grace, and live by faith.

JOIN US IN THE CELEBRATION OF THE GOOD NEWS

December 31, 2015



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We Care Kits

"But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect." 1 Peter 3:15

We are currently accepting the following donations

Food/Drink Items:

Granola Bars or Trail mix
8 ounce size water bottles

Hygiene/Personal Items:

Travel Size Toothbrush & Toothpaste
Travel size hand sanitizer or hotel size bar soap
Men's size small crew ankle length white or black socks

Quart size freezer bags

Please note: this is a smaller kit with fewer items.

All donated items should be placed in the donations box located on the back table by the AV equipment. If you have any questions, please email me: calyflower2020@yahoo.com or call me at (512) 228-4712.



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2016 POINT IN TIME COUNT **REGISTER NOW!**

ABOUT

The Austin/Travis County Point in Time (PIT) Count is part of the national effort to eliminate street homelessness spearheaded by the federal Departments of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and Veterans Affairs (VA). By knowing who is on the street, where they are, and what they need, ECHO and its partner agencies can most effectively target services to those that need them the most.

OBJECTIVES

- ♦ Determine the total number and characteristics of those who are homeless in Travis County
- ♦ Provide quantitative results including demographics, trends in homelessness, with stratified outcomes by homeless sub-populations (veterans, unaccompanied youth, etc.)
- ♦ Compare annual results with previous count information to assess and improve community performance in preventing and ending homelessness

WHEN AND WHERE

- ♦ **Shift 1:** Saturday, Jan. 23rd from 3-7am-Downtown
- ♦ **Shift 2:** Saturday, Jan. 23rd from 5-9am-Suburban
- ♦ **Shift 3:** Saturday, Jan. 23rd from 6-9am-Rural

WWW.AUSTINECHO.ORG

TRAINING

Echo will provide volunteer training and assign volunteers to areas. All teams will receive maps, clipboards, flashlights, pens, and all necessary forms. All volunteers will be required to attend at least (1) volunteer training prior to participating in the count.

VOLUNTEERS

We are looking for:

60 Team Leads

600 General Volunteers

Note: Team leads must register by November 24th!

THE COUNT

Teams generally consist of at least three members. Volunteers will observe and count homeless individuals within a defined area of Austin or Travis County. Each volunteer will choose from 3 available shifts.

JOIN US

Raise awareness and learn about homelessness in our community, along with the need for viable, long-term solutions that will alleviate suffering and improve the quality of life for all Austinites.

REGISTER!

www.austinecho.org/2016-point-in-time-count-registration/

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THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN
Women in Engineering Program



INTRODUCE A GIRL TO ENGINEERING DAY (GIRL DAY)

The University of Texas at Austin
Women in Engineering Program (WEP)
Saturday, February 28, 2015, 2 - 5 p.m.
Cockrell School of Engineering Complex on Campus

DESCRIPTION

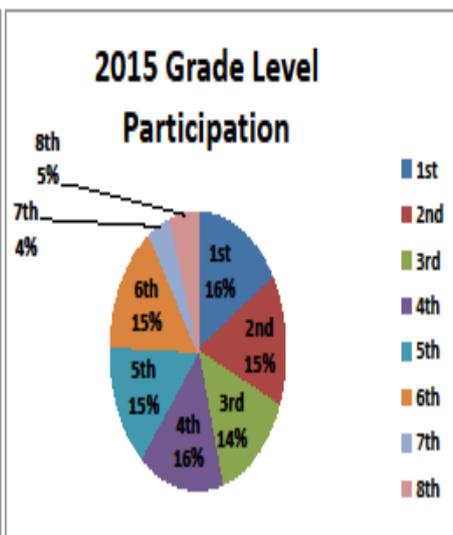
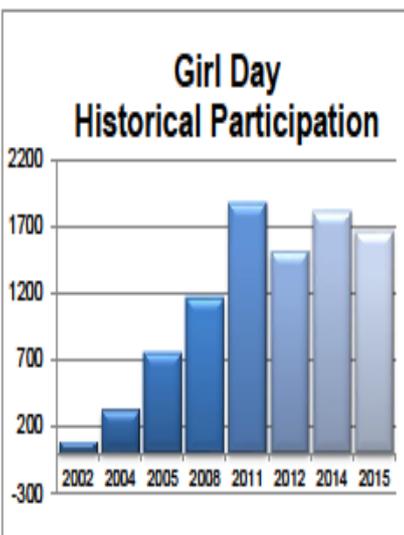
Families and educators were invited to join their students during Engineers Week for an afternoon of hands-on engineering fun during WEP at UT Austin's Introduce a Girl to Engineering Day (Girl Day). WEP at UT Austin's national award winning and 14th annual Girl Day gave over 1,600 first through eighth grade students a chance to:

- have fun doing grade-specific, hands-on engineering activities
- interact with 952 UT students, staff and faculty as well as volunteers and engineers from industry
- explore 96 activities, booths and demonstrations hosted by 113 student organizations, corporate partners, community organizations, schools and college/university partners

Participating Girl Scouts received a Girl Day patch available through partnership with the Girl Scouts of Central Texas. Current engineering students were provided leadership and presentation skills development opportunities. The day concluded with an exciting interactive show from Science in the Movies showcasing the engineering and science behind movie stunts.

SUMMARY of STATS

Girl Day, WEP's premier outreach program, has reached over 15,500 girls in its 14 year history. In 2015, 1660 first through 8th graders participated – 98% of participants were female, 9% African American, 26% Latina, 12% Asian, 1% American Indian and Native Hawaiian. Approximately 64% of participants came from Central Texas, 15% from the greater Houston area, 11% from the greater San Antonio area and the rest coming from as far as Dallas, Laredo, and Ft. Lauderdale. Volunteers have grown from 51 in 2002 to 952 in 2015. Note that Girl Day 2015 was hit with wintery weather which greatly impacted participation with less than 40% of those registered actually attending.



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PUBLICITY & RECOGNITIONS

Saturday, February 28, 2015 was proclaimed “Introduce a Girl to Engineering Day” by Mayor Steve Adler and the City of Austin. Girl Day was featured in a [USA Today College article](#), a [Time Warner Cable News story](#), a [KEYE TV news story](#), a [The Daily Texan article](#), and a student’s [news documentary story](#). WEP’s Girl Day program was also featured in a press release and a [Capitol Hill briefing](#) on Introduce a Girl to Engineering Day led by Discover Engineering. Finally, Girl Day was featured in a [promotional video produced by Discover Engineering \(previously\) the National Engineers Week Foundation](#) using extensive footage from Girl Day 2012.

PROGRAM SUPPORT

The Women in Engineering Program (WEP) partnered with 113 university, corporate and community organizations to ensure the success of Introduce a Girl to Engineering Day 2015. WEP event and initiative staff, materials and supplies, and administrative and overhead costs for programs such as Girl Day are supported through corporate, community and government grants.

Corporate: Girl Day 2015 was made possible through generous grants or donations from Girl Day Lead Partner Halliburton along with all our fantastic Girl Day Partners: 3M, AMD, Applied Materials, BASF, Bechtel Corporation, Caterpillar, Chevron, Chevron Phillips Chemical Company, ExxonMobil, Fluor, General Motors, GivePulse, Google, IBM, Intel, and National Instruments. Microsoft provided an in-kind contribution of check-in technology. DSW, Minigrip and Payless ShoeSource provided in-kind contributions of materials for our hands-on activities. AMD and IBM provided in-kind contributions of printing. Partnering companies also hosted hands-on activities, displays or demonstrations at the event.

Community & College: Numerous community organizations and nearby colleges and universities have missions and goals in alignment with WEP and Girl Day. By partnering with the Girl Scouts of Central Texas, local-area Girl Scouts are encouraged to participate in the program and are able to receive a specially designed Girl Day patch. In 2015, 660 participants (40% of participants) identified themselves as Girl Scouts.

In total, 25 community organizations supported and volunteered for Girl Day efforts:

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. 4-H CAPITAL | 14. Phoenix Arising Aviation Academy |
| 2. American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air Conditioning Engineers (ASHRAE) | 15. PyLadies ATX |
| 3. ATX Hackerspace | 16. Science in the Movies |
| 4. Bullock Texas State History Museum | 17. Skillpoint Alliance |
| 5. Central Texas Discover Engineering | 18. Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers (SHPE) – Austin |
| 6. Geekbus | 19. Society of Women Engineers (SWE) Southwest Texas Section |
| 7. GenAustin | 20. Southwest Texas American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics (AIAA) |
| 8. Girl Scouts of Central Texas | 21. Texas Museum of Science & Technology (Austin Planetarium) |
| 9. Girl Scouts of Central Texas Lady Cans Robotics Team | 22. Thinkery |
| 10. Girlstart | 23. VentureLab |
| 11. KLRU | 24. Westlake High School’s Team 9053 Psionics |
| 12. Laurel Mountain Elementary LEGO Lions | 25. YPW Camps |
| 13. National Association of Women in Construction | |

In addition, 6 college programs outside of UT Austin participated in Girl Day 2015:

1. Austin Community College Renewable Energy Student Association
2. Baylor Women in Computer Science
3. Society of Women Engineers - Texas State University Section
4. Society of Women Engineers – Trinity University Section
5. Society of Women Engineers - UT San Antonio Section
6. Texas State Technical College – Waco

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UT Austin Programs and Organizations: WEP partnered in 2015 with 67 UT Austin engineering and science student organization, research groups, classes and programs. Over 700 students, faculty and staff participated in Girl Day.

University Partners

1. Fun with Chemistry
2. Longhorn Energy Club
3. Physics Circus
4. Rose Research Group, Chemistry Department
5. UT Austin Center for Identity
6. UT Austin US DOE Solar Decathlon Team
7. UT Undergraduate Women in Physics
8. UT Women in Computer Science (WiCS)
9. UTeach Outreach

Cockrell School Partners

10. Alpha Eta Mu Beta (Biomedical Engineering Honor Society)
11. American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics (AIAA)
12. American Institute of Chemical Engineers (AIChE)
13. American Nuclear Society UT Chapter
14. American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE)
15. American Society of Mechanical Engineers (ASME)
16. Architectural Engineering Institute (AEI)
17. ARE WEP Engineering Ambassador Group
18. Austin Chapter of the Acoustical Society of America
19. Biomedical Engineering Society (BMES)
20. Biomedical Optics Graduate Organization (BOGO)
21. Biomedical Outreach and Leadership Team (BOLT)
22. BME Engineering Ambassadors
23. Chemical Engineering Women (ChEW)
24. Chi Epsilon
25. Department of Petroleum & Geosystems Engineering
26. Donglei Fan Research Group
27. Dr. Korgel Research Group
28. Engineering Chamber Orchestra (EChO)
29. Engineers for a Sustainable World
30. Eta Kappa Nu (HKNU)
31. Formula Society of Automotive Engineers
32. Graduate Engineering Council (GEC)
33. Graduate Leadership Council
34. Guihua Yu Lab
35. IEEE Communications Society
36. IEEE Power and Energy Society
37. IEEE Robotics and Automation Society
38. Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE)
39. Institute of Transportation Engineers/Intelligent Transportation Society
40. Kinney Lab and Environmental and Water Resources Engineering
41. Longhorn Maker Studio
42. ME WEP Engineering Ambassadors
43. Mechanical Engineering Graduate Student Board (MEGSB)
44. NASCENT Engineering Research Center
45. National Society of Black Engineers
46. Omega Chi Epsilon
47. Pi Sigma Pi (PSP)
48. Pi Tau Sigma International Mechanical Engineering Honor Society Texas Kappa Chapter (PTS)
49. Sigma Gamma Tau Aerospace Engineering Honor Society
50. Society for Biomaterials at the University of Texas at Austin
51. Society of Asian Scientists and Engineers (SASE)
52. Society of Automotive Engineers (SAE)
53. Society of Petroleum Engineers (SPE)
54. Society of Women Engineers (SWE) UT Austin
55. Student Engineering Council (SEC)
56. Student Engineers Educating Kids (SEEK)
57. Tau Beta Pi: The Engineering Honor Society
58. Texas Theme Park Engineering Group (TxTPEG)
59. Theta Tau Professional Engineering Fraternity
60. University of Texas Solar Vehicles Team
61. WEP First-year Interest Groups
62. Women in Aerospace for Leadership and Development
63. Women in Biomedical Engineering (WBME)
64. Women in Electrical and Computer Engineering (WECE)
65. Women in Engineering Program
66. Women in Mechanical Engineering (WME)
67. Women in Petroleum & Geosystems Engineering (WPGE)

GIRL DAY 2016 & CONTACT INFORMATION

Introduce a Girl to Engineering Day 2016 is scheduled for Saturday, February 27, 2016, 12 - 4 p.m. on The University of Texas at Austin campus. Contact Tricia Berry (triciaberry@utexas.edu or 512-471-5650), WEP Director, for all partnership and community organization opportunities.

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“Blessed to Be a Blessing”
Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-55

Pastor James H. Lee

New Covenant Fellowship of Austin
December 20, 2015 – 4th Sunday of Advent

Hebrews 10:5-10

⁵Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; ⁶in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. ⁷Then I said, ‘See, God, I have come to do your will, O God’ (in the scroll of the book it is written of me).” ⁸When he said above, “You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings” (these are offered according to the law),⁹then he added, “See, I have come to do your will.” He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. ¹⁰And it is by God’s will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Luke 1:39-55

³⁹In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” ⁴⁶And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.” ⁵⁶And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

I often share with folks these two common models that come from our church: that come from our church: “We are blessed to be a blessing,” and the other one is, “We need to have a place where people can belong, and then they will come to believe.” Amen? Even as we have been in this church community, it's been a safe place, where even if we differ theologically or politically, we learn how to be a family, how to be more communal and to walk that process out. Sometimes with joy, sometimes with trepidation, and sometimes with frustration, but nevertheless, we do it.

I am loving watching HGTV lately, the how-to shows that focus on home remodeling...not that I'm going to go cuckoo, and not because I'm going to build anything. It's just good to know I could do something special or see something being created out of nothing. There was a celebration that just took place for this couple—“Property Brothers” friends—and they asked, “Well, ma'am, how did y'all make it 50 years?” Anyone who's been married and made one year, you're like “Thank you, Lord!!” But 50?! And she said, “Well, I'll tell you this much. The way you make it 50 years is that if something's broke, you fix it; you don't just throw it away.” I said, “GLORY!!” That's what I'm talking about! It just blessed me tremendously.

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Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-55

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New Covenant Fellowship of Austin
December 20, 2015 – 4th Sunday of Advent

The Lord could have looked down on earth and said, “I created this beautiful creation. I had a perfect plan. I loved them like no one could ever love them. And yet, the more I love them, the more they turned away from me. The more I called them back, the more they turned away from me. The more I embraced them, the more they left me. Then they had the audacity to get upset because I didn’t do what they wanted me to do—as they turned away from me!” That’s love. That’s *agapeo* [Greek for ‘highest love’]. And that’s a love that will say “I will love you unto, not until....” ‘Unto’ and not ‘until.’ “In your imperfection I’m going to love you. In whatever you have achieved that’s good, I will love you. There will be nothing you can say or do that will change the depth of love I have for you!” Can I get an Amen? You are loved by God!!

We celebrate this Advent season because God became a human flesh, embarked upon our life as an **expression of love**. He loves us in our imperfections. He loves us in our iniquity. And he loves us so much that he indwells within us. It is this One that we come to worship and to celebrate today. Amen?

I get to hear a whole lot of folks joke about preachers and churches and talk about w here “I went to this church and they had this offering, then they had that offering, and then they had that offering...” as a way of talking about the money...the money, and the money. And the sacrifices! God is not just pleased with money! What can God do with money? God owns the cattle upon the hills and every hill that the cattle graze upon. God owns the homes we live in and the cars we drive. God owns our very lives, and God gives us a capacity to live life and make choices. But nevertheless, God owns it all and allows us to steward it and be in relationship within it. *He abolishes one system to establish another.* So I’m glad I don’t have to work on doing certain things for penance; I’m glad, because I’ve messed up, you know? I’m glad I don’t have to pull out a turtle dove every time my thoughts go wrong. They’d call the law on me or something, you know? This isn’t dove season, man, come on!

But he abolishes that. Because it’d be blood, after blood, after blood, sacrifice, sacrifice, sacrifice! Once and for all, **FOR ALL!** That’s what we’re celebrating! *That God brought forth life out of love, once and for all, for all: the ones you love, the ones you hate, the ones you struggle with.* God loves them and loves you too. Amen? The other piece that is so important is that he talked about being sanctified. Sanctified. When I was beginning ministry and would hear a preacher talking about falling short and not having it all together, it offended me. Because I was told, “You know, you gotta have the right standards, wear the right clothes, do the right stuff. It is because of y’all that so many people have fallen away, so you gotta do this!” And I was doing it, and it was driving me crazy! See, you could put on a show, but only for so long. *But to thine own self be true!* Am I creating a way, a license, for sin and for a license for us to not do right

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December 20, 2015 – 4th Sunday of Advent

No! You'll ever hear me when I lift up how we walk by grace and by faith, lifting up *Romans 6* that would say, ***“Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?”*** And the Word of God say, ***“By no means!”*** God forbid! If you're really grateful for what God has done in your life, if you really appreciate grace, ahh, you can't help but say, “Lord, help. Help me get through this. Help me to do what I need to do. Help me go where I don't want to go but I need to go.” That's when you really appreciate what grace is about. Grace gives you what you don't deserve! Anybody grateful for grace? And I'm grateful for the mercy we hear in the text!

Earlier this morning, I went with the *Micah* texts because we needed to hear in that Old Testament how the prophet Micah was speaking to Bethlehem and saying, ***“You are of the tribe of Judah. You're very small. You're very insignificant. But God is going to bring the Messiah, the Savior, out of you.”*** It was so important that we know that even in the bigness of Austin, Texas and the greater Austin area, God knows where you are. God knows who you are. And you need to know that, that no matter how insignificant other people may make you feel, you have significance in the Body of Christ! You have significance in the presence of Almighty God! And all we can say is a little bit of what Mary said: ***“I may be humble, but my soul magnifies the Lord. And I rejoice because God chooses to use me.”*** Amen?

Three familiar words that I want to lift up are **Affirmation**, **Acceptance**, and **Accomplishment**.

The Affirmation:

I talked about what happened when Mary hears her news. But when she hears her news, she hears that her cousin Elizabeth is also pregnant. Isn't that something? You get a visit by the Lord through an angel. You say yes. And when you say yes, you get a word that your cousin is going through the same thing! *Corinthians* uses the word “temptations,” but I want to let us know trials and situations are common to all humanity. But it is God who makes a way out; God makes a way in so that something can happen. So the affirmation comes when Elizabeth and Mary have an interaction together. And she goes to a cousin's house, a cousin who happened to be the wife of the High Priest. The High Priest would take all of sins of humanity on the Day of Atonement and present them to God (lifting hands, as if sending sins heavenward). And she goes to that house. The Spirit of God was at work all in the place. It says when she arrived, the baby within Elizabeth's womb leaped! She greeted Mary, Mary greeted her, John the Baptist and Jesus greeted each other! The Spirit was moving....There was a party going on, y'all! But that's not when the affirmation came. The affirmation came when Elizabeth could have said, “Now child, really? Fourteen years old? Betrothed and saying that child in your womb is of God, and God wants to use you?!” That isn't what Elizabeth said. What she says is, ***“For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that these words would be fulfilled, were spoken to her in the Lord.”*** She affirmed Mary. Mary could be frightened; she could have been stoned to death, even as Joseph was going to kind of set it aside in silence. But Elizabeth affirmed her.

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“Blessed to Be a Blessing”
Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-55

Pastor James H. Lee

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I want to ask you, who's waiting for your words of blessings? Who's waiting to hear your words of affirmation? I'll tell you, you think it's powerful to withhold it. Wait till the day when it doesn't even matter. Did you hear me? You think you got power when you can withhold blessings, but wait until the day when it just doesn't really matter. Did you hear me? And you could say it all day long, and the folks don't care because they've gone. They've left where they were, to where they need to be. ***I want us to be the people who understand that we are blessed to be a blessing!*** And as we affirm each other, it says more about the God whose Imago Dei [image of God] is present in every one of us. It says more about us when we have the capacity to say “I can build someone else up, and I don't have to tear them down to accomplish what I need.” Amen? What I love about this also is that this is a multigenerational blessing, when the younger and the older are not competing and talking and murmuring but putting hands on and blessing. And embracing and opening and welcoming. Wow! There are some places I have gone in the last 10 years that I never would have gone if it weren't for older folks embracing me and asking me to go places that I would never have gone. In some cases I wouldn't have wanted to go. But when I did, God did something amazing. The affirmations are so important. Think about how long it took for Esau and Jacob to come to a point of reconciling as brothers because somebody withheld a blessing, or somebody snuck a blessing. ***I don't want us being stingy with our blessings, let's be generous.*** I want to ask you, has anyone given a blessing to somebody and felt bad about it? “Maybe I should have withheld that one...” No! There is something warm and fuzzy, I don't know what it is. But when you say it, they hear it, they accept it, and you watch something change! And then you say, “Now, Lord, I understand what you're doing, you're blessing us, so we can be a blessing.”

Acceptance:

The second “A” is acceptance. Accepting the blessing. Accepting words of affirmation because you all know we'll say, “Aw, shucks, this is an old suit, this is an old dress.” But inside, you're saying, “Say it again, say it again...say it again!” Why? Because there's so much negativity, so much finding fault, so much criticism that we don't know how to bless. But ***our God who created us, created us to bless!*** And so I want to invite us to accept some things. Mary had to accept the word that came from the angel...that came from the Lord. Well, she could have said “No.” And she could have, because God is not going to force God's will and purpose on us. But she accepted. And I shared earlier today that *Courage is not acting in faith without fear. Courage is acting in faith in the midst the fear.* Can I get an Amen? Why would I say “Yes” if I don't know what's around the corner? Why would I say “Yes” If I'm not sure of the outcome? Why would I say “Yes”? Because I am an ambassador. God asked, and I choose say “Yes.” Now, I have more people tell me “James, you need to say “No” a little more, but “Yes” is still a part of the process. And know that every “yes” is a “no” and every “no” is a “yes.” And we have to keep learning how to best say the “yes,” and know where the “no” is or say the “no” and know where the “yes” is -- where the greatest good can be accomplished.

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Zechariah, even though he was a High Priest, heard a word from the angel and guess what he didn't do? He didn't accept. The angel told him when it comes time to name the boy, you're supposed to name him John. He didn't accept. You know what happens? His ability to speak was taken away. How are you going to be the High Priest when you can't say anything? Anybody ever been in a bad situation and you couldn't get the words out to pray, and all you could just do is let the tears run from your eyes and just moan? Call upon **Romans 8:26** and say sometimes we don't know how to pray or what to pray. But the Spirit of God makes intercession for us and the prayers come forth in a powerful way. Even though he didn't accept in the beginning, when the time came for him to establish the name, guess what he did? He called him 'John!' And guess what happened....He spoke!

Something powerful took place. She says "Yes." And she said ***"My soul magnifies the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant."*** Again, it doesn't matter how you think of yourself, God thinks you're something special. But it's something awesome when the Almighty God says "I want to use you." Then you start saying, "Ooh, ooh..." and get a little humble there. It will bring you down a notch or two. Really, God? God says, "Yes, baby, there's some things I need you to do." But what about *them*? "The answer is there are other things for them, and this is what I have for you; I want you." When the babies are here, I've talked about a Pokemon and said *"I choose you."* (It's a little game they play.) And God says, *"I choose you. You are significant."* And God chose Mary, and she said, "Yes." And when she accepted, she made a bold declaration.

How many bold declarations have you made about God choosing to use you? We've got marketplace ministers here. God chooses to use you every day in ways that you haven't accepted or acknowledged. But I bet you when you start looking and thinking, you'll say "Wait a minute; how did I get that? How did I know what to do? Well, Lord, you blessed me with that word, that knowledge and insight." Some might ask why would God want to do that for you? "Because I'm blessed to be a blessing. Because blessing me blesses someone else." And the blessings flow. But we gotta keep the conduit open, Amen?

I was blessed a little over a month ago to go to an event that Breakthrough Austin was lifting up. They work with students from fifth grade through middle school, through high school, through college, to help deal with the education gap. But the young man who gave the speech that day had his mother and his father standing by him and his younger brother to his right. They acknowledged what had happened to help him with his academics. He said the first time the floods came in South Austin, they were basically put out because they couldn't be in the flood-ridden house, and that almost derailed this young man; but the folks at Breakthrough Austin came alongside of them. They accepted him and his family in the beginning, and they accepted him even in a crisis. He said the family got established and things were working well until the floods came again and put him out of the house again.

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But this time they couldn't return. Sometimes when we accept responsibilities or accept things, it can be a burden; but for this young man it was a blessing. His parents got to see people who weren't in their family bless them and come alongside of them. The younger brother got to see his brother accomplishing things that he ordinarily couldn't have done. So his brother wanted to join the organization himself. And the thing that blessed me was that I got a chance to see how marketplace ministry blesses people in ways that we can't begin to understand. I was focusing on academics. And he was talking about life. Both the parents were overjoyed because of the experience.

Accomplishment:

A lot of times we look for what it is that we have done and say, "Well, I can be satisfied, now I've accomplished this and I've done that." But what does it mean when you gain the whole world and you lost your capacity to love? Or you gain the whole world and you can't even enjoy the money you have? Or you gain the whole world but you're all alone because you stepped on everybody going up? When I get to a part of this text, I needed to hear some things. How do we see things that need to be accomplished, and how will we expect them to be accomplished? It says ⁵⁰***His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.*** That doesn't sound like good accomplishment, does it? Does God oppose those who are blessed financially? No! **Deuteronomy 8** will let us know that it is God who gives us the capacity to gain wealth. Is God opposed to those who are not financially in the best position? No! God loves all. But what will happen if we start losing our minds? Getting proud? Forgetting who we are, and whose we are, and whose possessions we have? God has a way of letting us know. *"If I need to take it from you, to let you know that you are not God and I am God, I can do that."* So this isn't negativity against lifting up rich versus poor, north versus south, east versus west....God is not about all of that. It's about the purity of the heart. It's about us acknowledging God so God can accomplish great and wonderful things through us. Amen?

His mercy! Mercy withholds what we deserve. He says *"I'm going to bless them anyway."* And y'all know what the Scriptures say? They are new every morning! Isn't that good?! You know there are some people who are going to hold a list on you: "Now you did this yesterday. And you did that this morning. And I know you're going to do something later on today...." And so we go to the Lord because we fear Him—not that we're scared, but that we *revere* Him! We say, "Lord, I made this mistake, and I did this and I did that...." And the Lord says, *"Did you confess?"* I say, "Yes." He says *"Well then, Scriptures say that I'll forgive you and cleanse you of the unrighteousness."* Then I come back and say, "Lord, you know when I messed up the other day, and I did that?" He says, *"Boy, what are you talking about?"* *"You know, that thing I was telling you about, that I struggled with and I messed up on."* *"I cast that as far as the east to the west. (And when you're Spirit, that's a long way!)* *Why are you talking to me about something that has already been dealt with? Walk in the liberty. Let the Spirit help you do what you need to do, and go accomplish things and not let things weigh you down. So you can do what I need you to do, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of your faith, laying aside those things that so easily beset you."*

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As I end the sermon, I just want us to know we are blessed to be a blessing. Elizabeth affirmed Mary. Mary affirmed Elizabeth by going to her, and they open up their home. Three months she stayed, and God blessed. You are the one who gets to choose to accept. Accept to continue to be an instrument used by God, an ambassador of God, to be on this earth to bless others. Mary accepted, and when she did, she said ***“My soul magnifies the Lord!”*** May your souls magnify the Lord! I don't care what you do! If you're cooking, magnify the Lord. If you're cleaning, magnify the Lord! If you're teaching, magnify the Lord! In whatever capacity you serve, and even when frustrated in your work, magnify the Lord! Why? Because God has chosen to use you where you are. Amen? And watch God accomplish things. *Not us, because we'll mess it up.* But watch God accomplish something great. She couldn't conceive this holy, righteous thing, but she could bear. It is only God who can accomplish and bring forth salvation for all of us who need it.

*Lord,
we thank you for your Word. Thank you for your time. Thank you for your people, whom you love. Thank you, God, that you made a covenant with Abraham and out of that covenant, the many nations, the many ethnicities, the many races. Those who are here, are here. And because of that same covenant, God, we can cry out that we are blessed to be a blessing! God, when we want to withhold blessing, will you push us so hard that we just have to burst with something that says something good about someone else, as a reflection of your blessings upon us, as you choose to look at our lowliness and say “I'm going to lift it up to bring forth life, and light, and love out of you.” We ask this humbly through Christ our Lord. Amen.*