



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Live Abundantly... in God's House

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We continue our *Live Abundantly* sermon series by marking the 75th anniversary of our church's birth and consider how God calls us to steward this community into future generations.

Our scripture reading from the first book in the Hebrew Bible, Genesis, tells the story of one of our patriarchs, Jacob, and his encounter with God.

Known as the trickster son of Isaac for all his conniving ways, after Jacob steals his older, twin brother's birth-right, this trick causes him to flee for his life. Living for his own desires, for his personal gain, without regard for others in the community caused him to become a fugitive.

Today's story picks up in a wilderness.

Our Prayer for Illumination was prayed by John Galbreath on behalf of this Westminster congregation frequently. Please join me and the long legacy of others from this congregation in prayer.

God, tell us what we ought to know, show us what we ought to do, that we might be obedient to the will of Christ our Lord, Amen.

Genesis 28:10-22

¹⁰ Jacob came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place.

¹² And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

¹³ And the Lord stood beside him and said, “I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring;

¹⁴ and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring.

¹⁵ Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

¹⁶ Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!”

¹⁷ And he was afraid, and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

¹⁸ So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it.

²⁰ Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear,

²¹ so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God,

²² and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely return one-tenth to you."

By his own doing, terror, fear, and loneliness filled Jacob's daylight world, demanding he view anyone and anything as a threat to his very life. Only when he is no longer in wakeful control, but in the vulnerable quiet of sleep, his future unfolds in a dream.

Angles ascend and descend a ladder, startling him to imagine the possibilities of divine messages. Their sole purpose was to be the warm-up act.

God appears, not in the form of a burning bush or silent wind or shadowy trio. Unmistakable to Jacob, God appears.

God blesses Jacob with land and offspring – legacies he thought he'd abandoned when he left home – and most of all, divine protection against those small gods he'd previously served and those imagined as threats.

Jacob's dream reveals heaven is not a distant illusion. His dream woke him to a new day, protected by and serving the God beyond his ability to create or control. Earth is a place of possibility because of God's living presence among us.

God chose Jacob. Jacob chose only God. A model for us to remember.

On this day when we begin to celebrate our 75 years as a congregation, we honor its founding by the Reverend Dr. John Galbreath, and remember the story and dreams that created us.

I say “begin” in that we will mark the many significant milestones in that first year of a dream becoming reality.

While serving as a chaplain during WWII in the Pacific, Galbreath too felt the danger, far from home, and wondering if he would return home alive.

He knew he wasn’t alone though. He carried the stories of our faith and God’s promises to his soldiers. Stories such as Jacob’s dream and God’s protection, became the hope for those soldiers to rise to another day in places we might call a living hell, because God was with them.

After the war, Galbreath came to the rural fields south of Pittsburgh. He knocked on doors, listened, and he shared his dream.

On September 22nd, 118 people gathered at the Clifton School. Their fellowship flourished, giving birth to Westminster Church, organized only five months later on February 2nd with 172 members.

The people who created this congregation came together by asking the question: “where do people hurt?”

Westminster began not by serving those within the walls of the building, which did not exist until years later, but to seek out those in need. These people were led by the belief God’s house knows no limits and they were to be the blessings for others in desolate places.

“Where do people hurt?” animated the work of the congregation and in the process the church strengthen the community.

Years later, when asked about his growth strategy as other churches entered this neighborhood, Galbreath confidently kept to the founding vision and said, “Westminster has no need to grow, she has a never ending need to serve. Any question of size or sanctuary is second only serving people in the name of Jesus Christ.”¹

His love for the institution of the church – this church composed of people – kept himself and everyone accountable to this dream of ensuring God’s presence pervades so we do not fall into serving false gods.

Our archives do not contain the bulletin or his sermon notes from the first service. But we have a file from the second service. Galbreath preached a sermon probing, “How Large a God?”

He lifted up one of the finest short stories from the Book of Judges written of a theft, a curse, betrayal, and idol worship by those who believed God could be contained within an object, controlled, and possessed.

Stolen silver coins were fashioned into an idol for their worship. When this object that they had created was also stolen, the people cried, “they have taken away the god whom we made and what have we left?”

Galbreath likened the failure of the ancient Israelites, in worshipping small gods, to the same turn of events that precipitated the war and would continue to erode human flourishing if not confronted.

¹ John Galbreath, “40th Anniversary Celebration Brochure,” page 22.

Westminster’s archives are filled with the documents from the past created to memorialize the history and inspire the future. John Galbreath’s memoir, *A Fine Day*, chronicles his life and his ministry through Westminster.

He offered examples, tracing the history from the Nazi youth hostel of 1939 in which he witnessed others pledge their allegiance to Hitler only to find their god dead six year later. The same with Mussolini.

Generations who'd given their lives and livelihoods to these national gods, from nationalist pride, asked "they have taken away the god whom we made and what have we left?"

Over the course of his ministry, the file indicates he preached this sermon with edits four more times over several decades.

Throughout the years, Galbreath remained vigilant in cautioning against nationalist pride and all the devotions that lure us from love of God and love of neighbor.

In his 1988 version, Galbreath relates the story of Saddam Hussein – a leader who demanded complete devotion, allowing him the power to call for the death of thousands. When he was deposed and his statue toppled, fledgling followers must have cried, "you have taken the god whom we made, and what have we left?"

Galbreath digs into his listeners: "to what do you dedicate your most time, most money, most concern? That is your god."

He concluded with;

When we see with clarity the small gods we created, or when we lose those who failed to be what we wanted, we then turn to God. The Almighty is a God of Love – who does not fail.

(As I read this, I heard echoes of God appearing to Jacob.)

Our God created the world and humankind for companions into eternity. Our God offers mercy, demands justice, and makes the greatest demands – the demand for one's entire life.

This church grew from the everlasting dream, from our first faith ancestors, those that followed, who trusted God, and all who dedicated their lives so that God's house pervaded the north and south and east and west.

We steward this community when we turn from self-interests and small gods that fail to instead give our all to God. We steward this community when we remember the stories of the past and dream together of what we are called to do. We steward this community when we ask, "where do people hurt" and become that answer.

That answer comes in myriad forms, from hands-on work to provide food to those without, to tend broken hearts and families with quiet care, to create a safe harbor for youth and families amidst the toxic influences of anxiety and affluence, and when we wrap our giving in joyful fellowship at the Deacons' Giving Gala.

We live abundantly when we give abundantly to fuel these dreams.

Our call today is to pick up in this time and place, the hard and holy work begun long ago to create a loving community in which everyone thrives.

Dream of what our life could be and then rise each day to join with the others in God's house, to bring the reality to life.



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