



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN  
CHURCH

**“A Light to the Nations”**

**Isaiah 49:1-7**

**Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones**

**January 16, 2011**

**(The launch of our year-long celebration of our 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary)**

My father grew up on a farm in Oklahoma back in the 20s and he told me stories about milking cows and raising chickens and bartering at the General Store. Once he told me about a common practice among farmers at the first sight of a snow storm. He said they would tie a long rope to the back door of the house and run it out to the barn, where they would fasten the other end. They did this because they had heard stories about farmers who went out to the barn to check on their animals, but then found themselves in such a blinding snow storm that they could not find their way back to their house. And they wandered around in the blizzard until they froze to death. The rope was their safety line.

Today, many find themselves caught in the storms that swirl in our world. There is the economic storm that has blown people out of their jobs and out of their homes. There is the storm of violence that annually claims more than 30,000 lives in our gun-happy society. There is the blizzard of materialism that blinds people to what is truly important in life. There are storms of animosity and prejudice and greed and indifference. All of us know people who have lost their bearings and wandered off and their souls have frozen. Some are wandering around searching for something solid to grasp. Others are stumbling and have not yet figured out that they are very far from home.

For the past 125 years, Westminster Presbyterian Church has been the rope for tens of thousands of people. Individuals have clung tightly to this community of faith when the blizzards of life threatened to overcome them. Many have pulled themselves along this rope hand over hand to find their way back to God, back to joy, back to hope when the winds were fierce.

This morning we embark on a year-long celebration to remember what this congregation has meant to people in the past and what it means today.

***The following six members shared why Westminster is important to them.***

***Jan Patrick:*** “Let’s see - where shall I start? For me, it begins with Sunday morning, where each week we come together to join in a journey - a spiritual journey.

It has been said, “A journey may be long or short, but it must start at the very spot one finds oneself”. Every Sunday, the doors of our magnificent sanctuary are opened wide to all who choose to be part of a journey – a journey of the spirit, a journey of the soul. We come here as we are, from the very spot we find ourselves. Although as a congregation we come from a broad spectrum of places, it makes no difference. Each Sunday we bind together in worship, in prayer, in thanksgiving and in praise.

In my own spiritual journey, it has been in this very place that I have experienced powerful, enriching and enlightening moments that have stirred my heart, nourished my soul and expanded my mind. Whether in meditation, or in prayer, or in reflection, or in joyful celebration, deep within, I have so often

sensed God's presence. I find such moments to be life-changing. Sometimes through a sermon I find God revealed to me in astonishing new ways; sometimes through a prayer I experience humility at a deep and profound new level; sometimes I feel that a children's sermon has been directed at me as much as to the children who sit on steps of the chancel; and always, ALWAYS, my soul is inspired and lifted up to all things spiritual when surrounded by the glorious music that fills this sanctuary each and every Sunday. I love that this is a place where I come not only to learn, but also a place where I am challenged to teach; where I come not only to give thanks, but where I am inspired to reach out to others and to give; where I come not only to be filled, but where I am encouraged to help others also find fulfillment. There are moments when sitting in the pew on a Sunday morning and the exquisite sounds of the organ and the choir penetrate to my very core, that I am overcome with feelings of gratitude and love; gratitude for a place such as this to which I can come and in which I can worship, and love for all of the people with whom I am able to share such a journey - a journey of the spirit, a journey of the soul. Thanks be to God for Westminster!"

**Sue Bryde:** "What I love about Westminster is the way we care for one another. Compassion and warm understanding have surrounded me when I have been most needy, yet challenging opportunities for me to extend myself to others have been abundant & richly satisfying.

Through Deacon, and then Stephen Ministry training, WPC nurtured my evolving skills to walk with another through the varied crises of life: such as the terminal illness of a spouse, and then supporting the young widow as she re-choreographed her life. Learning to deal with fear, anger, and grief isn't for sissies!

Another time as a trained Stephen Minister, I found myself in a position of profound privilege visiting an elderly man, an old golfing buddy of my dad's, prior to open heart surgery. He told me he was unlikely to survive the surgery, but didn't much care for life without it. Only after asking him if he would like to pray with me, did I fully understand what it means for God to speak through us. In the words of Henri Nouwen, "True intimacy comes from touching each other's wounds." **This** is how we care for each other at Westminster ...and hopefully also outside our doors.

This Christmas our young adults thanked us with tear filled eyes as they opened their Echo Gifts, gifts carefully selected for personal impact. As with most giving, the giver reaps a 7-fold return. They were delighted that these are called "Echo "gifts.

Yes, I cherish the opportunities for growth I have so richly been given. Yet when I have been my most needy - our pastoral staff has offered me a seamless caring safety net. I was guided and supported through the end of life process with both of my parents.

Congregational Care - it's a quilt...a quilt with rich texture & vibrancy. I most certainly am a recipient having been wrapped in this quilt...and to be a quilter of such comfort to others."

**Jeff Kline:** "One of my favorite verses from the Bible is 1 Peter 4:10. From the New International Version, it reads, "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms."

At Westminster, I see this faith in action in so many ways, but none more vividly than Westminster's support for Habitat for Humanity. One of Habitat's core principles is that each of us has gifts from God, and one by one, the effort of giving and passing on our gifts are multiplied in helping families in need of better housing.

Last year, I was moved as I watched Westminster members take inventory of their gifts and pass them on to help raise enough money to build a Habitat home for a deserving family in memory of Rev. Chad Miller. Westminster members, served on committees, captained teams, rode a bike, donated money, volunteered, or showed up to cheer all the riders and enjoy the presence of God's grace

When the beautiful Saturday came to a close, we collectively accomplished our goal and raised the \$125,000 - enough to build a home for Darin Thomas and his family. Westminster's contribution was outstanding - 80 riders and 280 donors! Westminster continues to share their gifts as our members

work to build the house and insure that the Thomas family move into a home filled with God's blessings.

Not to be content with last year's accomplishments, our members are asking what they can do in 2011 to continue our mission. This year the 2011 Bike 2 Build has a goal to raise \$250,000 to build 2 homes in memory of both Rev. Chad and his brother Chris.

That's what I love about Westminster!"

**Chris Hickey:** "I love Westminster for numerous reasons, but most importantly, the youth of Westminster is essentially my family. Every Sunday, when 180 occurs, I yearn for 4:30 to arrive so I can see my church family. Our youth group, however, would not be as unified without the vast exposure provided by the church. Traveling to remote destinations in Guatemala in 2009 and Houma, Louisiana in 2010, the youth have met eclectic individuals from Decatur, Georgia to Milwaukee, Wisconsin - all of whom bonded by the love of Christ. The trip to Louisiana, in particular, was a powerful experience. The utter joy exuding from one's eyes after completing as menial a task as retouching the paint on lattice is a wonderful feeling. Until then, I never really understood how appreciative one could be of a simple act of kindness. At such a young age, it was enlightening to witness God's disciples from all walks of life help those in need. Such amazing exposure to God's creation is why I love Westminster."

**Janet Steinwedel:** "I love Westminster because of the educational opportunities. I have always valued education and the opportunity to learn. Since my first visits to this beautiful church, I took part in various educational offerings. "Collegium" was the first group that drew me in and I was hooked -- New, edgy topics every week and bright, inquisitive participants.

Most recently I took part in a Marcus Borg series that really challenged me to progress my spirituality.

There is no end to the variety of classes offered. And, the internal resources are impressive.

Under Greg's leadership we moved to a sandwich schedule four (?) years ago, creating many more possibilities for the church's educational efforts. For one, Greg and Anne get to contribute regularly. Their commitment to the delivery of new and stimulating curriculum is much appreciated by adults of all ages.

A wide variety of congregants present on their current interests and areas of concern. As much as I like participating, it's also been a joy to be a part of the presenting and facilitating of programs. Developing new relationships while developing my faith and my spiritual insights has been an added bonus.

If you're looking for an engaging opportunity for your children, you'll also find that at Westminster. In fact, the children's programming has really blossomed under the direction of church educator, Susan Moseley, and the many volunteers that support her.

Finally, the Distinguished Speaker Series has been a great addition. The program began with John Polkinghorne on Science and Religion. This year we met Dr. Brian Blount, from Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, VA, when he introduced us to the Book of Revelation. It was, revelatory!

Leonardo da Vinci said that "learning never exhausts the mind." The learning opportunities here at Westminster never exhaust my curiosities."

**Fred Carspecken:** "What do I love about Westminster? For me it's the hospitality - *'We are a friendly church!'*

Now on its face, this seems like an awfully banal statement. But to say that Westminster is a hospitable church is probably a better description given the requirements of our faith.

Hospitality has been an important element in many cultures for millennia. Jews, Christians & Muslims are urged to welcome the stranger and look after the aliens among them. In early times, hospitality could mark the difference between life and death as people traveled in a hostile land among thieves and murderers without Wawa's, 7-11's and highway rest stops conveniently spaced every 20 miles or so. Hospitality then was far more than a social nicety.

Now there are extremes along the continuum of hospitality. There can be too little or none at all or so much that the visitor can feel overwhelmed and smothered by an exuberant member. The hospitality that I have enjoyed here at Westminster seems just right.

Last Sunday, Greg mentioned in his sermon the children's game; "You're out, you're out, you can't come in". It's a game about exclusivity. It's a game we have all probably played many times in our lives. But we may **not** play it here. And wouldn't it be nice if we could banish it from our battery of social responses altogether.

We at Westminster seek to provide and I think do offer a warm, sincere welcome to stranger and friend alike. Since I joined, I now count many Westminster members among my closest friends and I truly enjoy the fellowship and the hospitality that the members have shown me over the years. "

*After these six responses, Dr. Jones continued with his sermon.*

People love Westminster for many reasons – Worship, mission, education, music, hospitality, programs for children and youth, the way we care for one another, the way we care about the state of our world and partner with God to transform it. During this anniversary year, I hope you will reflect on the reasons our family of faith is vital to you.

We will be reminiscing this year. We will share stories about people and events that have highlighted our first 125 years. We will become better acquainted with some of the outstanding individuals upon whose shoulders we stand today. We will highlight some of the milestones in our history. Such remembering is not only interesting and fun, but it helps us better understand *why* we are *who* we are in 2011.

Yet during this year-long celebration, we will not fall prey to romanticizing the past, wishing that we could simply recapture the good ol' days. The world has changed a great deal in the past 125 years and continues to evolve. The Christian Church does not play as dominant a role in our nation as it once did, as our society drifts further into secularism.

However, I do not believe that all of our best years are behind us; so we will not simply gaze at our past and remember significant events of yesteryear. We will boldly look to the future, because God constantly calls us to embark on new adventures.

In our Scripture reading from the prophet Isaiah, we discover that God addresses the Hebrew people in one of their darkest hours. They have been routed in battle and dragged away from their homes to Babylon. They have been living there for decades and most have given up hope of ever returning home.

And then, God calls Isaiah to speak a new word. The prophet declares that God envisioned a plan for Israel before they were even born. God said, "You are my servant in whom I will be glorified." The people respond that they have worked hard, but their labors have been in vain. Just look at their dreadful situation. They want to cling to the dream that somehow they can return home and worship God together, but it has become very difficult to maintain that hope.

Then, God says, "That dream is too small." God has greater things in mind than to simply restore the survivors of Israel. God says, "You are to be a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

First spoken to the Hebrew people, and now to the followers of Christ, God calls us to be a light to every person, every tribe, and every nation. In a world where many spew vitriolic diatribes, we are to speak words of kindness and compassion. In a world where some want to denote lines between winners and losers, we are to work for the common good. In a world where many promote "Us verses Them," we are to remind

people that we are all children of God and God intends for us to live together in peace. We are surrounded by these glorious colors and divine command God challenges us to lean into the future and to become more than we are today – more welcoming, more caring, more giving, more devoted to seeking justice, more committed to peacemaking.

Over the years, thousands of people have passed through this church, faithfully serving as beacons of light to those in darkness. As we rejoice in our past 125 years, we know that in order to be faithful to God we must also focus our sights on today and tomorrow because God wants us to become more – more than we can even envision.

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*Prayers of the People*  
*Rev. Dr. Anne Ledbetter*

Eternal God, you formed us in our mothers' wombs  
claimed us in the waters of baptism and  
knit us into a family, a church, a vibrant tapestry of faith, hope, and love.

Today we celebrate the fruit of our forebears whose love and service have led to this momentous anniversary year.

We bless you for Westminster's rich heritage –  
for leaders who were daring and trusting and obedient to your call, and members who were adventuresome, committed, and generous with their gifts. We rejoice in your ongoing gifts to your church – artists who create brilliant banners, musicians who offer anthems of praise, teachers who help us grow disciples, storytellers who make the Bible come alive, greeters and ushers who epitomize hospitality, preachers – both lay and ordained – who inspire faithful living, caregivers whose presence heals and sustains, and leaders who embody the servant hood of Christ.

Ignite our lives with your Spirit, and make us, like your people Israel, a light to the nations.

Make us a beacon of good news and good will, shining Christ's love in all the dark and despairing places, and pouring His compassion upon all who suffer, so that your salvation shall spread throughout this community and nation, reaching to the end of the earth.

With you as our strength, O God,  
Christ as our guide,  
and the Spirit as our power  
Invigorate us to live as your people in the world  
Doing justice, propagating peace, and  
Loving our neighbor as ourselves.  
As Christ rose breathing forgiveness, so make us a resurrection people – forgiving any and all who have hurt or betrayed us.  
O God whose name is Love and whose work is Justice,  
May our lives be a daily celebration of your powerful presence and continual call.  
Save us from pride and complacency, and forever mold us into the body of Christ – a servant church, a caring church, a community where all are embraced as your children, fed in the faith, and commissioned as disciples of the Lord of Love, who taught us to pray saying:

**Our father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name**  
**Thy kingdom come**  
**Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven**  
**Give us this day our daily bread**

**And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors  
And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil  
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever  
Amen.**