

**MORE THAN WE COULD HAVE HOPED FOR; GENESIS 15:1-12, 17-18; 2/21/16;
THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

Thank you Mike for your leadership as chair of this year's giving campaign and Sawrie Becker for your serving as co-chair! You spoke for all of us, Mike, when you said how fortunate we are to have this magnificent church and school prominently located on one of America's grand avenues; not to mention all the ministry that goes on here and beyond this campus thanks to the generous support of this congregation.

But I have to admit that I feel a little like Abraham this morning. While we have generous support for 2016, as you said, there is still a long way to go.

I say I feel a little like Abraham this morning. I worry about us being able to do what God is calling us to do. As some of you know and as our staff lives with every day, we are without an operations/business manager; plus our development position is vacant. Both of these positions are critical for the vitality of our church and school. We've lost competent people in these positions due to salaries well below market rates. The Session has increased these positions to attract and retain the expertise we need. We could do things 'on the cheap' but that approach hasn't worked and, in the end, costs more than it saves.

We are fortunate to have a highly talented Session – leaders of this church who are leaders in their business and professional fields. They are wise about money, generous in giving their time, talent and treasure and dedicated to Westminster.

There are exciting things on the horizon; a strategic plan in the works that charts our path with bold vision for the next three years; we are located a half mile west of Buffalo's new medical campus which bodes well for a congregation like ours with progressive values, ministry and program.

My feeling like Abraham has to do with making ends meet; ensuring we find the right people for our staff – not only business and development but social media, marketing, organizational change, and youth and young adult ministry when Mark Aquino pursues becoming a lay preacher. There are more moving parts than you might think: staff, program, funding, technology, and facilities repair and maintenance.

If I saw these things as problems you'd have to scrape me up off the floor. Rather, I see them as opportunities – not because that's the popular organizational/management speak but because of old Abraham.

You see God called Abraham and Sarah to go to a land God would give them where they would raise their family and become a great nation – with as many descendants as there are stars in the sky.

But when they start out for the Promised Land, all they have are a couple of wagons, a few hired hands and some tired livestock. Things don't go well: they get in a feud with Abraham's nephew, Lot, which causes a painful parting of the ways. Traveling through Canaan, Sarah almost loses her virtue; and then their little band gets drawn into some bloody conflicts with tribal chieftains in southern Palestine.

But the real problem is Abraham and Sarah have no heir, no children, no one to fulfill God's great promise that they will become a vast, numerous, sprawling nation. And so the question Genesis asks of us today is this: *is it possible to trust God even when the evidence is to the contrary of what we heard God say or promise?*

In fact, everyone in the Bible – the great and the ordinary heroes of faith ask this question. God calls them – Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, the prophets, Peter and Paul and all the others to some service; they clearly lack the talent and resources they need to fulfill the job God is asking them to do.

Jeremiah protests, "I'm only a kid," when God tells him he wants Jeremiah to be his spokesperson to a recalcitrant, gilded and corrupt nation. Moses is hiding out on his father-in-law's ranch after he kills an Egyptian in a fit of righteous indignation; he hears a voice from a bush that bursts into flame; God tells Moses he wants him to take on a fierce dictator, Pharaoh, and deliver Israel from slavery. Pick your Biblical hero, they all have the same story: called to great service without whatever it is they think they need.

That's what I mean when I say I feel a little like Abraham today. This congregation has been called to be and do great things in our one hundred and sixty two years.

We were on the cutting edge of the social gospel and settlement house movements in America, establishing Westminster House on the East Side of Buffalo; we were a progressive voice for faith and science before WWI when fundamentalism engulfed the church and nation and the preacher in this pulpit embraced evolution; we established relations with Jewish, African American and Roman Catholic congregations in the 1950s and 60s when country clubs, neighborhoods, corporations and schools were segregated.

Many of you can recite this history: we reached out to the Muslims within days of 9/11 and started an annual convocation for mutual understanding. We blazed a trail for the full acceptance and participation of gay and lesbian people in the life of the church – including same sex marriage. Our historic missions – Westminster Early Childhood Programs and Westminster Economic Development Initiative have become the poster children for excellence in their respective fields.

You and I are called, in 2016, to continue serving with courage, vision and dedication – to bridge divides between race and religion, wealth and poverty, and to meet emerging social needs in this city.

I can't think of a more important time to be the church – specifically a church like this one – with progressive values and a noble history.

Mike Reynolds said it amazes him that all this goes on for less than one million dollars a year. Yet, every year at this time I get nervous – because those last pledges seem to take forever to come in and until they do I have to remind myself of Abraham who protested when God said he wanted him to be the progenitor of a great nation, and there was nothing great about Abraham at all. So Abraham protests, God reassures, *and then*, Abraham trusts.

Abraham's story is a parable for all of us because inevitably we are called to do things that seem too big, too far-fetched, or too risky and we think we don't have the tangible resources of people or money or the personal resources of confidence or stamina or skill.

When I look at \$150,000 to reach our 2016 goal it's a little scary but honestly, when you compare that with Abraham and Sarah in the middle of their trek toward some, hoped-for-but-not-yet-seen Promised Land, with no heirs or, old as they were, likely to be any heirs, \$150,000 looks easy.

Belief is long-term trust, a committed, continuous response to the promises of God – much like many of the marriages in this congregation. We are flawed, wondrous creatures. We bring real doubts and deep questions into all of our endeavors. Abraham and Sarah choose to go forth, they have their doubts, but they don't let them stand in the way of stumbling on behind God into God's future.

The ultimate question regarding our giving campaign for 2016 is not 'is everybody in?' or 'did we reach our goal?' – but 'will we finally have what we need to do what God calls us to do?'

As I listen to Genesis today, and as I consider our ancestors of faith who built and then gathered in this beautiful sanctuary...

my answer to that question, is not only will we have what we need to do what God wants us to do, there's a good chance we will have leftovers – like the baskets of fish and bread that were never touched when Jesus and his disciples fed 5,000 hungry people. When faith is involved, abundance is always the result.

Of course the PS to this sermon is the question of what God has asked you to do with your life today, this week, or this year.

If you don't have an answer to that question then it's probably time to listen. But if you do have an answer and if what you think it is you are called to do is beyond your capacity – remember Abraham and Sarah. Their story is not just for the church. It's for you and me. Amen.