

Sowing Seeds of Faith and Blessing for 175 Years

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Genesis 12:1-4a; Luke 8:4-15
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
Dedication Sunday – January 9, 2022

On January 3, 1847, the original church building for Lewinsville Presbyterian Church was dedicated on this property. For 175 years, the congregation of Lewinsville Presbyterian – through thick times and thin times – has been on a “Shared Journey of Faith,” engaged in sowing seeds of faith and blessing in this neighborhood and community, and in the hearts... and souls... and lives of many, many people. Sowing seeds of faith and blessing is a metaphor that can gently draw us forward into our mission and ministry in this next chapter of Lewinsville’s life. In a sermon he preached in this pulpit on the occasion of Lewinsville’s 140th anniversary in 1986, Rev. Franklin Gillespie - who served this congregation from 1940-1948 – quoted the words that are inscribed beside the steps of the National Archives in DC: “*The heritage of the past is the seed that brings forth the harvest of the future.*” During this year, we are regularly reflecting on the history of this congregation, including some of the remarkable people who have come before us in this place – each week, there is a “175th Anniversary Notebook” entry in the bulletin, describing events and people from our past; I encourage you to check these brief entries out – and we’re doing this not only to become acquainted with our ancestors here, but to sink our roots down into the mission and life that has already been brought forth from this congregation, in order that we can draw vision for the mission to which God is calling us in our time.

Some of you may know this word already, but it was a new one for me. The term for a 175th anniversary is ... demisemiseptcentennial. Say that with me where you are: demisemiseptcentennial. Now I’ll leave it to wiser minds whether that term will fit nicely on a banner or a website, but at the very least, it is a term that some of your neighbors will not know.

The original church structure here at Lewinsville was described by one local person as being “severely plain.” The focus in that original structure was to be on God, and not on fancy ornamentation. I am told that the original structure would actually fit inside of this sanctuary. The back wall of the church would have been near the rear of the choir loft, and the front wall would have gone to about the 9th or 10th row of the church. So when you sit towards the front of the sanctuary, you would have been seated within the original building, and if you sit in the back of the sanctuary, you would have been outside! And that general structure served Lewinsville until 1955. The cross in our front yard, that faces Chain Bridge, contains pieces of wood trim from that original building. We are quite literally moving in the spaces of our ancestors.

The more I read and learn about the history of this congregation, what really stands out about the DNA of Lewinsville is its persevering spirit. There is a tenacity that is deep in the marrow of this congregation. At several points during its life, especially during the early decades, the financial life of the congregation was very tight. The presbytery provided the necessary financial support to keep this congregation going. There were significant disagreements within the congregation – those who came before us in this congregation did not all see eye-to-eye about the Civil War or about secession from the Union, about the role of women in church leadership. They had to work their way through those issues. And through all of that, the church continued to engage in its mission, including planting multiple new congregations. In the 19th century, in the midst of tight budgets and differences of opinion, Lewinsville planted Vienna Presbyterian, planted Falls Church Presbyterian, planted First Presbyterian Church of Arlington. This is astonishing, for it would be easy to imagine a congregation either turning inward and becoming consumed with its own divided life, or breaking apart at the seams in irreconcilable ways. I do not want to overstate this, but I think it is a remarkable part of the DNA of this congregation that internal challenges did not derail this congregation's commitment to growing the kingdom of God. Later on, of course, in the 20th century, Lewinsville started the Lewinsville Retirement Residence and was part of the team that started Chesterbrook Residences. Sowing seeds of faith and blessing is part of this congregation's DNA.

In this, Lewinsville Presbyterian Church has simply been living out the life that is laid out by our two Scripture passages that Linda read for us this morning. Genesis 12 and Luke 8 lay out a life of responsiveness to God's voice, a life of conveying blessing to the world, a life of sowing seeds of faith, starting new things, launching new experiments – without any guarantee that they are all going to work out! - all of which seeds are sown with hope and the knowledge that God is deeply at work through us and in us.

When I read the story of the Sower in the New Testament gospels, what stands out is the reckless nature of the sower. This sower does not appear to be excessively careful about where the seeds are sown. Some seed gets sown on the hard path, where it will get eaten up by the birds of the air. Other seed is sown on the rocks, where it cannot get any moisture. Others is sown among the thorns, which choke the plant out. But some falls into good soil, where it grows a hundredfold.

Now, many of you know that I'm not a master gardener. But even I know that the likelihood of a good crop growing in a bunch of rocks is small. But this sower does not care. This sower is extravagant. Every piece of ground gets the seed. There is no sense of being stingy, no sense of "we've never done it that way before," no sense of "that'll never work." The sower just throws the seed with reckless, graceful abandon.

What someone observed this past Wednesday is that, when we make the interpretive move to the church's mission and outreach, you can never know for sure

who is going to be the good soil, and who is going to be the rocky, thorny soil. Some people may start out being thorny, but the seed of the gospel's grace gets into them, and years later, it begins to bloom. That's how the sower works. The sower works by trust and by faith, and by letting go of control.

You could say much the same about our ancestor Abraham, who is known by his original name of Abram in our text from Genesis 12. Genesis 12 is an exceedingly important text for the church's life. These four little verses contain so much life for us. Genesis 12 is governed by two words – a word of action and a word of purpose. The first word is "Go." That one word drives the rest of the Bible. Do not stay where you are. The condition of your life and your heart *now* is not where God wants you to end up. God has plans for you. God has dreams for you. And those divine plans will require us to leave certain things behind. "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." Abram could have been sitting at home, eating a nice piece of pie, when the Lord summoned him to get up and go.

Before, when I have read this passage, I have mostly been struck by the sense of adventure and newness that God is launching with Abraham. But for some reason, this week I have realized that, alongside the missional adventure, there is a *significant amount of loss* that is involved in following God's voice. Leaving your comfort zone, your homeland, the way you grew up, the way you have thought the world worked, the safety and security of your habits. When we respond to God's voice, we will always find ourselves stepping into new spaces, new patterns of life, new relationships. This does not mean that we need to change everything. But it does mean that we always need to submit our own comfort and the familiar patterns of life to the sovereign call of God on our life.

Which brings us to the second word that governs Genesis 12, which is 'blessing.' The purpose of all this change is not simply for the sake of doing something different. The reason God calls Abram to leave his country and his father's house is so that Abram could bless the families of the earth. "I will bless you, so that you will be a blessing." God's blessings are never for us to keep to ourselves. When we follow God's voice, we receive God's blessings into our hearts, and then we must open our hearts so that they flow out into the lives of others. Sowing seeds of faith and blessing is all about that flow.

Where is God's voice calling Lewinsville now? In our world of alienation and hostility and division, what will it look like to cultivate a community where people know that they *belong*? It is my very strong sense that people in our community are longing to be connected to a community that "loves and serves God by responding to human need," as Lewinsville's WHY statement of purpose says. Centering *human need* and *human pain* can be a real guiding focus for us. We all have pain. We've all got a bag of hurt that we are lugging around with us. And we need a community to help us acknowledge that hurt, and turn it over to Jesus Christ, to allow him and his cross to

gather up our pain, and that of our neighbor, and that of our enemy, so that it can all be healed and transformed. That will bring great blessing to this community. The cross of Jesus Christ can help us to do that. There is an old Latin saying, *Crux est mundi medicina*. "The cross is the medicine of the world."

Where is Jesus calling Lewinsville to go during the coming months and years? How is God using the different pains of our time to summon Lewinsville to engagement and to prayer? What parts of the world's pain is God calling us to respond to? How can we do that in ways that build up, strengthen, and serve the common good, which has become so frayed in our time?

For 175 years, Lewinsville has been on a 'Shared Journey of Faith,' sowing seeds of faith and blessing. In times of division and times of unity, in times of abundance and times that were lean, in times of clarity and in times where the path forward was more clouded, Lewinsville Presbyterian has been responding to human need – never doing this perfectly, but doing this with humility and perseverance and hope, reaching out into the community and the world, in response to the sovereign voice of the living God. To God and to God alone be all the glory, now and forever. Amen.