Earlier this summer, 17 middle schoolers and 6 adult leaders from Westminster headed to Fergus Falls, Minnesota and Fargo, North Dakota for our 2022 junior high mission trip. This was our first mission trip away from home since 2019, and it was such a joy to be with our young people for that week of service and fellowship. There were some things I knew to expect about the week. I knew that we’d work hard, and that our youth would blow our partner organizations away with how hard they worked. I knew that we’d enjoy Laura Lee’s famous grilled cheese, and that we’d enjoy amazing hospitality from the churches that hosted us. I knew that we’d play many nighttime games of sardines in a can and that the junior highs might struggle with the high schoolers’ favorite late-night game, Hogwarts, but that they’d do their best and have fun. I knew that we’d learn together and grow together.

The surprise from the trip was the spiritual theme that emerged from our time away. Day after day, the same
theme kept coming up as we worked with partner organizations for our service and learning projects. It was the theme of dreams. Of God giving someone a dream and then helping bring the dream to life in community. It was so astounding that by Wednesday of that week, one of our adult leaders stopped me to ask if I’d noticed – did you hear how often we’re hearing about people’s dreams? Yes, I’d noticed. It was hard not to.

Midweek, we worked with an amazing guy named Jason who leads a community garden in Fergus Falls. We spent all morning weeding and planting, watering and organizing the shed out back. It’s an amazing garden, and all of the produce goes to families in the community who need food. We even got to harvest some fresh kohlrabi and eat it with our lunch! I might’ve liked that part more than the middle schoolers.

As we ate our lunch in the shade, Jason told us the story of how God gave him a dream of a community garden. Jason was in a profession that he knew wouldn’t produce the kind of wealth it would take to contribute a lot financially to his community. But what he could do was create a garden that would benefit the community. Over time, the dream became clearer. He shared the dream with friends and colleagues and found that he wasn’t the only one with
a vision of a community garden. Eventually he gathered the resources to give it a go – a small plot of land connected to the local health system, some seeds, and the belief in the dream. Over the years, Westminster’s middle schoolers have gotten to see Jason’s dream continue to grow so large that it’s no longer his dream – it’s the community’s dream. Two of our adult leaders had been there several times before, and they noticed how much bigger, more beautiful, and fuller the garden was. This time around, we saw the plots teeming with produce – kohlrabi and broccoli, lettuce and squash, a pergola and a storage shed.

We listened with rapt attention as Jason told us about his dream from God and how it came to be. The dream is producing fruit now – literally and figuratively. It was amazing to see.

Throughout the rest of the week, we heard about other dreams that are now producing fruit in the community. We heard about the Fargo YWCA and its dream of an emergency shelter for women and children who needed a safe place to stay. The week we were there, they were purchasing a whole new building to expand that shelter. The fruits of that vision were even bigger than the original dream.
We visited the historical society in Moorhead and heard about the dream of the Hjemkomst Expedition of the 1980s. A group of hardy Minnesotans wanted to experience what their Norwegian ancestors had experienced, sailing across oceans in Viking ships. They built a functioning replica Viking ship and sailed all the way from the US to Norway. I’ll readily admit that the dream of the Hjemkomst Expedition was the dream from that week that I understood the least. But nevertheless, it was a dream that came to pass and it inspired countless people across continents and oceans.

One night towards the end of the week, I mentioned in passing to some of our 6th graders that the theme of dreams seemed to be emerging. They agreed – evidence that I wasn’t just theologizing, as I’m sometimes wont to do. They helped me think of the many bible stories where dreams and visions take center stage. The dreams in the Older Testament where Joseph receives a word from God that shapes the future of his family and community. The dreams of New Testament Joseph, telling him that Mary would bear a child. The dreams of the Magi, who were warned to take a different road home to avoid the violence of King Herod.
Dreams are all over the Bible. One of the most vivid dream stories is the one we heard a few moments ago – the dream of Jacob’s ladder. Jacob receives that dream from God – a literal dream, the kind you dream when you’re asleep. The blessing in that dream helps to shape his future and the future of the Hebrew people.

If you’re not up to speed on the entire Jacob saga, I commend to you the second half of Genesis. It is quite the story. Jacob is the grandson of Abraham – the second born son of Isaac and Rebekah. He tricks his aging father into receiving the family blessing, effectively robbing his brother Esau of his birthright. When Esau finds out, he vows to make his brother pay. At his mother’s encouragement, Jacob flees to stay with a family member, fearing for his life.

This is where we find ourselves in today’s story. Jacob is fleeing for his life, dealing with the consequences of his own actions and the repercussions they’ve had on his family. He goes to sleep, stone pillow under head, and dreams.

The dream that God gives Jacob is wild and unexpected. You can see it illustrated beautifully in the piece of art on this week’s bulletin cover – if you’re worshiping via the
livestream, you can access the bulletin on the livestream page. Jacob sees a ladder all the way up to heaven, with angels going up and down up and down. I love the way artist John August Swanson images this dream, with a beam of light that the angels are following in their ascent and descent. And it might be hard to see, but there are little animals hidden within the green space around Jacob as he sleeps. Elements of the ordinary, interspersed with the extraordinary.

This is a profound dream, partly because Jacob is in such a vulnerable place in his life. He’s on the run, and he’s dealing with the fallout from his own poor choices. But it is here, in this midst of his own personal mess, that God shows up. It is here in the middle of his fleeing that God reminds him that the promises his ancestors received are for him, too. No matter what.

This is a dream of great closeness with God. If before Jacob had felt far away from God’s promises to his ancestors, this dream proves that God is indeed close at hand. That ladder to and from heaven is for Jacob – no matter where he’s been or where he’s headed, God is there. Even in the midst of his ordinary life, even when things are hard and he’s on the run, even when he forgets God’s promises in the midst of life’s messiness. God is
there with God’s enduring promise of blessing for generations to come.

This dream of God continues to journey with Jacob as he moves toward his family member’s home. It journeys with him through the fortunes and misfortunes that will follow. He has received a dream – land and descendants and blessing. It moves him, however imperfectly, to participate in God’s work in the world. To bring that dream to fruition through the generations.

Throughout the Bible, God grants people dreams. Sometimes they’re the kind of dreams that come during sleep, like Jacob’s dream. Other times, they’re daydreams or visions, inklings of something that could come to pass one day. Sometimes they require some interpretation; other times they’re clear as day. Always, the dreams in the Bible are helping the recipient to participate in God’s dreams for the world. And we know from the story of God and God’s people that God’s dream for the world is that all creation would flourish.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote a beautiful children’s book called “God’s Dream” that helps to share with children what it looks like for God’s dream for the world
to come true. As is usually the case, it’s just as relevant for grown-ups as it is for children.

Tutu begins, “Do you know what God dreams about? If you close your eyes and look with your heart, I am sure, dear child, that you will find out. God dreams about people sharing. God dreams about people caring. God dreams that we reach out and hold one another’s hand and play one another’s games and laugh with one another’s hearts. Each of us carries a piece of God’s heart with us. And when we love one another, the pieces of God’s heart are made whole.”

God’s dream for the world is that all people would have what they need to live abundantly, and that communities could live together in peace – real peace. God’s dream for the world is that people would not live with the terror of violence, the fear of hunger or unstable housing, the constant weighing toll of oppression.

The organizations we partnered with during middle school mission week were partnering in the work of bringing God’s dream for the world to life. When our friend Jason grows food and shares it with his neighbors, he’s participating in God’s dream for the world. When our friends at the Fargo YWCA offer temporary housing to
their neighbors, they’re participating in God’s dream for the world. When any one of us follows the movement of the Spirit to bring forth justice and love, we are participating in God’s dream for the world.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu ends his children’s book “God’s Dream” with a question.

“Dear child of God, do you know how to make God’s dreams come true?” He answers, “It is really quite easy. As easy as sharing, loving, caring. As easy as holding, playing, laughing. As easy as knowing we are family because we are all God’s children. Will you help God’s dream come true?”

This is the question for all of us: will you help God’s dream come true? We may not receive a dream from God in the night, like Jacob did. We probably won’t see a vision or hear God’s voice in our ears, like some of the prophets did. But we are invited to listen for the movement of the Spirit in the world around us.

At the end of our worship service this morning, those of us in the sanctuary are all invited to move to the chapel for a brief service of baptism of one of our young ones. In the baptismal liturgy, the congregation gets to make a
statement of welcome: We promise to love, encourage, and support you, to share the good news of the gospel with you, to serve that gospel alongside you, and to help you know and follow Christ. When we make this promise, we’re promising to help this young one learn how to participate in God’s dream for the world. We are promising that as they grow up, we’ll continue to help them find their place of usefulness both here at Westminster and out in the world. We’re helping them grow up an answer the question for themselves: Will you help God’s dream come true?
As the FYC pastor, I have the great honor of having a front row seat to the amazing ways that our youth are answering that question. They are helping God’s dream come true by working on the political campaigns of city council members whose platforms they believe in. They are volunteering with gender justice organizations and working on climate change initiatives. They are caring for friends and neighbors by making impromptu care packages for sick youth leaders, showing up for friends’ sporting events, encouraging younger students to get involved at church, and challenging the adults in their lives to pay attention to how God’s world is changing before us. As usual, this Westminster summer has brought me renewed hope because it’s so full of time with our young people. They are dreaming dreams and catching visions of God’s love at work around us, and I am grateful for how they teach me and help me grow alongside them.

If your summer rhythms have allowed you the space to slow down a bit, I hope you take some of that space to think about what dreams God is invited you to be a part of. You may be the one who dreams the dream – who thinks of some way to bring forth love and justice in your neighborhood. You may be the one who encourages the dream – who sees a neighbor doing something amazing and gives of your resources, your time or money, to help
them make it happen. You may be the one who participates in the dream – who follows the path of a visionary leader in your community who is doing something to help neighbors flourish. However we’re called to take part in God’s vision for creation, I hope we can each learn to answer the question: Will you help God’s dream come true?

Amen.