

JANUARY 10, 2021

# Marion

## weekly update

### FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

*“Connecting people with Jesus Christ so all can experience his love and joy.”*



SERMON Jan 3 : 'A New Year' Acts 14:8-20, Revelation 21:1-7

The calendar a few days ago ticked over to the new year. Each time this happens we have a window of time that is encouraged to be a time of reflection and projection. We reflect on what has transpired in the previous year and use that reflection to project where we want to see the next year take us. This is the time of year we hear resolutions abound and commitments to new habits and attitudes. An important aspect of all of this work that goes on in our heads and hearts is that what gives teeth to our reflections and traction to what we are looking forward to is how we act in the present. If we want to see a different result in the new year, it requires that something change in the way we act, speak, and treat one another.

I saw a good cartoon earlier this week that represents this well. It had two guys, one smiling and snoozing, the other heading out the door of the house. It said “each morning we have two choices, turn off the alarm and go back to sleep and our dreaming, or get up, head out, and go catch those dreams.”

Something I'd like to share is that for the better part of my life I didn't give a whole lot of credence to this New Year's stuff. I saw it as really no big deal, just an excuse to have a party when in reality it's just one day rolling into the next, and the promise of a few weeks of messing up filling the date out on things. As I've thought about it more recently, I've had a shift in thinking, and have come to appreciate the potential power in this time of year if we embrace it properly.

First, if we are honest, each of our individual “new years” doesn't begin on January 1, unless of course that's your birthday. Our individual new year occurs on the day we were born. That is the official start of the next year of our lives. In this, there is its own power if we embrace the day properly. There is power in a focused, personal reflection of our individual lives and charting some expectations for ourselves as we enter that next year of living.

Yet on New Year's there is another kind of power, and I believe a power that has even greater potential to change the world.

If our birthday is an individual moment, the turning over from one year to the next is a corporate moment. All around the world people celebrate the event, and many see it as that clean slate on which to write the next chapter. They see it as a mark in time to make positive changes in the course of their journey. There is power in this common attitude shared among so many. The greater whole joining together, if we do it in the same direction and in keeping with a Godly perspective, can truly change the world. This time of year is that moment. The key is to focus the resolutions and commitments we are planning beyond just ourselves. We consider the next year in the context of not just how I can make my life better, but also how my life can make the lives around me better. As the world joins in the celebration, to see myself as part of that greater whole, and reflect and project on how I can make that whole more like the Kingdom of God.

In that regard, I'd like to reflect for a moment on 2020. Hang with me, because it's going to sound like a bit of a downer in the beginning, but we are heading to one of the precise attitudes we need to make this next year better than the last: hope.

2020 has been tough. I think a lot of us have shared in some way similar feelings throughout the year. The callousness, unfairness, injustice, selfishness, and division has been often disheartening. There has been great stress in trying to sort out how to navigate the circumstances surrounding covid, the inconsistent messages, and having to make adjustments as expectations changed sometimes month to month, sometimes week to week, and sometimes even day to day. There has been the tension, particularly as the leadership in our congregation has had to tackle the question of what our congregation should do while juggling rules set out by the government, health organization, our conference, and the myriad different perspectives on what has been going on. That has been frustration knowing that no matter what people decide, someone won't be happy about it. In fact, when compromise is required, rarely is anyone fully satisfied. The inability to celebrate the lives of those we've lost as we typically would has been tragic. For many, the loss of livelihood, health, broken relationships, and the emotional and mental toll from our common experience has been crushing.

I have to confess that my attitude at times needed adjusting. There have been times when the answer to “is it well with your soul?” has been “no, absolutely not.” I've experienced the range of sadness, anger, and wanting to throw my hands up and say “to heck with it all.” I've not always handled those feelings well. In fact, I think I can say with fair certainty that in some form or fashion, I have failed on a daily basis.

But in this honesty, there is a great hope. The hope is that even if I fail on a daily basis, I am not a failure. How can this be? It is true because we are not solely the product of where we fail. All of us are a complicated combination of failure and success. And just as there has been plenty to reflect on on the downside of things, there has also been a lot to be grateful for and impressed by.

We have seen amazing outpouring of generosity and charity through the past year. We have seen miracles of innovation and creativity. The people charged with protecting us, caring for and healing us, and serving us have displayed supernatural reservoirs of endurance, patience, and grace. Who have dealt with people's nastiness and anger with professionalism and even a compassion that is unbelievable. We have seen flexibility of attitude and spirit in many ways. This in our congregation has been displayed in the embrace of different ways of doing things, and in our leadership holding together and largely being able to get along and get through the hard decisions of how to respond and when to changing circumstances. Yes, some families have had conflict, but others have found a new appreciation for one another, whether it's due to being apart, or being forced to spend more time together. People have reached out to check on one another even if just over the phone so that the separateness if a little more bearable. We as a church have seen resolve to continue in ministry, no matter what is occurring even if ministry looks a little different than we'd like or are used to.

Even in a hard year, there has been the brightness shined by those who refused to let circumstances define their attitude, and have demonstrated the love and grace of Christ in our midst. I would suggest that for whatever failings we've had, all of us have been part of that brightness as well. This is hope for tomorrow and beyond.

In fact, that we are this complicated blend of the good and the bad puts us in the company of the disciples themselves. We've often noted their imperfections and failings even as they walked side by side with Jesus Himself. God worked through them not because they were perfect, but despite their imperfections. God still works through disciples of Jesus with all of our gifts and goodness and our faults and flaws. And remember, even after Jesus had been crucified, raised, and glorified, they still didn't completely have their act together. Peter and Paul butted heads, there were disagreements within the church about what was and was not correct in forging ahead, and we even see breaking relationships as Paul and John mark parted paths over a dispute.

Yet God still perseveres. God still loves us. There is always the hope of Christ in our hearts.

Consider our scriptures this morning. Paul is left for dead outside of town after being stoned. When he comes to what does he do? He gets right back at the ministry he was called to. Even that harsh, aggressive treatment would not dissuade him from continuing his mission to spread the gospel. Where does that kind of resolve come from? It comes from hope. He had the hope and trust that even when he met with persecution, the message of the gospel had the power to change lives and redeem the world. His hope wasn't in the people, it was FOR the people. His hope was IN God. The God who redeems and desires communion with creation. Hope in this life, in this world.

And what about Revelation? Revelation reminds us that there is hope not only on this side of the grave, but the other as well. That one day all of the ugly of this world will pass away and all that will be left is the peace and love of God throughout all creation. Even when we see life heading in a direction that is difficult and even impossible, we have assurance that those times don't have the final word. Rather we trust that God has the final word, and the redemption of Jesus promises us the Kingdom of God.

Hope.

This morning, we celebrate the event that really punctuates this redeeming hope. The cross. If there is any doubt about whether or not God love us, about just how far God will go to reconcile us, the cross puts it to rest. God would rather go to the excruciating death of the cross than be separated from us. God would rather do the unthinkable that have us lost. Why is the cross unthinkable? Because it flies in the face of so many sensibilities about the nature of the divine. Why would the God allow Himself to be murdered by creation? That creation can kill Creator is nonsensical. Yet this is what happened on the cross. The abundant love of God is demonstrated in the crucifixion, the power of God is demonstrated in the resurrection. In this combination of absolute power and infinite love, there is hope.

## BIBLE STUDY John 12

Chapter 12 in John brings us into the final week of Jesus' life. We get the familiar, though briefly stated, moment of Palm Sunday, the triumphal entry. Before that, however, this chapter sets up what is to come very clearly.

Jesus is back with Mary and Martha. We know from a previous chapter that Mary had previously anointed Jesus, and now anoints Him again. There is significance here. Luke reports the anointing at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. As she anoints Him we get a sense that she is both setting Him apart for His Messianic ministry as well as casting forward to this moment as well. In other words, He is anointed to kick off His earthly mission. Here, she anoints Him once more as His earthly mission comes to an end. Jesus Himself acknowledges that He is about to die as He claims that this moment and the perfume were set aside for the day of His burial. John is setting us up to expect Jesus' imminent death. Judas is now also clearly cast for what is to come. John indicates directly that he will have a clear role to play in what is to come as the betrayer. To further solidify the shadiness of Judas, John communicates his dishonesty as a thief, using the anointing as a vehicle to pass this along. Finally, we see John ramp up once more the desperation of the Jewish leadership. Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead, prompting many to follow Him as a result. Not only do they plan to kill Jesus, they also now plot to kill Lazarus. One might suspect that this is a kind of "removing the evidence" of the miracle. Aside from those who witnessed the event, to have a dead Lazarus gives ammunition to deny the miracle pointing to a clearly dead body. In fact, they show their frustration and desperation when they say "see, the whole world has gone after Him." John has set the stage for what is about to unfold with foreshadowing the burial, identifying the betrayer, and communicating the state of Jesus' enemies.

A note about a verse in this passage. Jesus in contradiction to Judas' criticism about the value of the perfume and what it could fetch to care for the poor says "you will always have the poor with you." Some even today take this to mean that we don't need to worry about the poor, but rather should focus all our attention on worship and adoration of Jesus. This is a gross misunderstanding of the passage.

Jesus makes this statement applicable to this moment, not as a blanket statement for future behavior, particularly thousands of years later. It is clear that Jesus intends us, significantly AS acts of worship and adoration, to care for those who are in need as He describes in Matthew 25. Then comes the triumphal entry. There are layers to this display well worth noting.

If we consider John's narrative along with the other gospel accounts, we see a somewhat big scene being made here. The scope and preparedness of it indicates that this was likely not impromptu. Word of Jesus' arrival in the city must have been put out. Indeed it is likely that the preparedness of the colt retrieved by the disciples was arranged beforehand. The entry has all the signs of what we might call a "demonstration"

today. The demonstration was of not just who Jesus was, but also what He was bringing about, the Kingdom of God. The entry, as Jesus quoted, was a throwback to Zechariah. The style of the entry, on the colt, was a sign of a king in the line of David. That the colt was unriden demonstrates a sense of purity. That it was a donkey, rather than some grand stallion or chariot, demonstrates humility. That Jesus comes essentially alone with a ragtag group of simple followers demonstrates that He comes in peace, not might and show of force. He is, after all, the Prince of Peace. That He is the Messiah demonstrates that He has come to fulfill His mission, which is nothing less than the redemption of creation.

The timing is also significant. During Jewish festivals, the governor, in this case Pontius Pilate, would come in a show of force to establish a presence in Jerusalem. The population of Jewish people swelled during these times and they were known to be a bit rebellious having had several uprisings over the years. Especially during the Passover, the celebration of liberation from oppressors, the Roman show of force as significant so the Jewish populace didn't get any ideas to stage another revolt. Chariots, troops, horses, weapons, all of this served to demonstrate a very different message than that of Christ entering through a different gate of the city. This was the message of the world. The emperor was the son of god. Might made right. Strength was the order to keep order. Pride and oppression kept the peace, not humility and sacrifice.

We also see this moment showing us another instance where the people mistook Jesus' mission despite His efforts to symbolically inform them of who He is and what He is about. The people cheer for Him. They are excited and celebratory. Here comes the Messiah! The Messiah whom they understood would overthrow the Roman order, would put them back on top, and would reign forever.

How does this make sense? Consider their plight. They had been kept under thumb and under foot for generations. They were victimized by Rome. They had been victimized for centuries. Now was their chance to see "justice" done. Now was their chance for retribution and, in their own lifetime, to participate in God's "cleanup" of the world. If Jesus had come in directly and told them, "by the way, I'm not here to clean up Rome, but to clean up YOU, your spirit, your sin. And my call is for you to love your enemies and live at peace and grace with one another," I think their response may have been far less enthusiastic.

We see this evidenced later in the chapter when they are confused at His prediction of His death. They literally say that they understand that the Messiah will reign forever. The idea that this Messiah could possibly die was inconceivable to them.

The disciples also miss the message. Like so many times before it tells us that they didn't grasp Jesus words or actions until later, in hindsight.

In this we are reminded that the prophecies we take for granted were not taken for granted by these early Jews (remember, the disciples were Jews, Christianity hadn't been established yet). They had been entrenched and indoctrinated at how the Messiah would look. Mighty, conquering, an overthrower of oppressors. They couldn't get their heads around this idea that Jesus was something different, a healer of souls rather than a conqueror of kings.

Before we get too surprised by this inability to grasp what was happening, we need to remember that after 2,000 years of history, Christianity isn't any different. Most of us have been indoctrinated in some way or fashion. We've been told what the Bible says or means, and for many years have believed what we've been told.....even if what we've been told is wrong. In those places where we believe what is incorrect, even if we are shown what is correct, it's difficult to let go. Our beliefs are comfortable and often convenient. Challenging that, even if our beliefs aren't based in actual scripture or Christ, is hard. Often change is resisted, sadly to our detriment and the detriment of the gospel.

As Isaiah is quoted, we have an opportunity to briefly unpack something often uncomfortable to us. The sense that God has "hardened a heart" seems inconsistent with God's character. Why would God intentionally choose to make someone hold an attitude that is sinful? God does not. Rather, this may well be a more euphemistic expression that reminds us that we can turn a willful blind eye to who God is and what God is calling us to, and God will allow us to go our own way. Sadly this is even when it leads to a harmful conclusion.

Still, we have the opportunity to grasp truth if we allow ourselves to follow the example of the disciples. If we look back and see how reality plays itself out, and how God reveals Himself through it, we can be led through the powerful, if difficult, process of changing and coming more into line with Christ.

We then see Jesus moving into discussion that directs attention to where the week will end, to His death. There is a strange interlude before this in three verses, 20-22. Some Greeks, we assume Gentiles, ask to see Jesus. Phillip checks with Andrew, and the two of them tell Jesus. Perhaps because Jesus' message for the most part was being spread to the Jews they were uncertain as to whether or not to bring them, we don't know. We also don't know if they ever got to Jesus. The next verse, 23, Jesus simply launches into essentially saying that while up to this point His hour had "not yet come", finally the hour was here.

I suggest that perhaps this is simply a recognition that while Jesus was primarily going to the Jews, word of His deeds and teaching couldn't be restrained. We say that "word of mouth" is the best advertising, and we've seen this occur previously in the gospel as crowds follow and flock to Him. It isn't a stretch that Gentiles would have heard as well, and perhaps this is an early glimpse of what would later come as after His ascension the gospel would go to Jew and Gentile alike.

As He uses the illustration of a grain of wheat needing to die so that more will be produced, we are reminded that Jesus' death would be the catalyst that mobilizes the disciples to multiply His message throughout the world. Similarly, we are called to be willing to sacrifice as well. Sometimes we are put on the line in big ways, sometimes small, however in whatever fashion this happens when we are obedient through the discomfort and perhaps sometimes even destruction that witness speaks volumes. It is a witness of authenticity, and when that authenticity is love, grace, compassion, and kindness, it inspires.

There is then to punctuate this the statement about saving our lives yet losing it, and hating our lives to inherit eternal life.

This is a clear reference to being willing to turn over our physical, material life to Christ in order that eternal life may be our reward. The "hatred" piece is a sense of exaggeration. Of course we aren't to literally "hate", but rather there is the real sense that by comparison, anything that we embrace to serve our lives here on earth should pale in comparison to what we are called to do in service to Christ.

We also see a comforting reality in Jesus' response to what is to come. He confesses that His soul is "troubled". How could it not be? He is being called to an agonizing death on cross. For us, this is so relatable. Our callings are not always comfortable and rarely convenient. They can be fearful and troubling. Knowing that even Christ Himself experienced this kind of feeling is affirming. He understands. He also sets the example. Even though He is troubled, He will see His calling through.

Once again, we see an important lesson. Before the hard situation came to actually pass, Jesus made His mind up that He would do what needed done. He would fulfill His call. He confronted His fear and steadied His resolve. In our own experiences, making the choice to follow Jesus and our calling before the challenges come makes all the difference. If we are wishy washy and wait until it gets hard, there is no telling how we will react. If we are steeled from the beginning, the likelihood that we follow through with God's design increases significantly.

As Jesus gives this commitment the affirming voice of God thunders. Some hear it, others mistake it for thunder. Jesus gives a remarkable statement. "This is for your benefit, not mine." Naturally it is not. Jesus is God. Jesus is divine. He needs no such affirmation. People, we, on the

other hand, do. Some suggest that this insinuates something broader, which to be honest makes some sense of some of Jesus' actions and words. If Jesus is God, why does He pray to Himself? Perhaps, at least on one level among many others, He is wise enough to know we need an example of what it looks like to both live faithfully as well as have the humility to talk to and listen for God. In some ways this is another extent to what lengths Jesus goes for our benefit. It's not about Him, it's about us when it comes to His mission and ministry during His earthly journey.

As the chapter finishes, Jesus offers what I would argue is a compassionate heads up. The light will be with them only a little while longer. Embrace it. Do not walk in darkness. Learn to walk in the light.

He also restates in a different way what He has stated multiple times now. HIS role is to save the world, not judge it. Yet there is one who will judge us based on whether or not we have embraced Jesus. While Jesus does not condemn, His example and teaching does. It does this not because He wants to slam us down, but because once His example and teaching is out there, we have an understanding of who we are supposed to be. It is then our choice as to whether or not we will receive Him and allow Him to transform us. If not, God holds the authority to render judgment upon us. It bears communicating that Jesus throughout the gospel of John has never been that salvation is either state that He is the Son of God and our Redeemer, OR do the right thing. Nor is it only one of the two. It is the marriage of receiving Him AND allowing Him to transform us so that our works reflect that we have been redeemed. Our fruit matters, and if there is no fruit then there is a question as to whether or not we have been redeemed. While this is may sound potentially judgmental, remember that this isn't saying we have to have it all figured out at once. We don't and we can't. It is saying that when we are in Christ, we are not satisfied with standing still, but rather are constantly seeking Jesus and striving to transform, even if it is only one baby step at a time.

Not only does Jesus remind folks what knowing Him and serving Him means in practice, He also continues to up His boldness in equating Himself with God. His statements alluding to being sent from and on par with God have gotten Him into trouble continually. He continues to dare to offend and upset as He states, once again, that to truly see Him is to see God, and to know God is to embrace Him for who He is. At the beginning of the chapter we see the desperation of the Jewish leadership plotting to kill Him. To speak this clearly and boldly is to incite them further and invite their wrath. Jesus is setting the stage for what is to come in the week.

John has themes that continue to crop up time and again. Open your hearts. Receive Jesus for who He is, sent from, the Son of, and equivalent to God. Know He came to save us. Know being saved is the product of belief and transformation. Stand firm before God. Follow your call, knowing that ultimately God will use it to change the world.



January 10, 2021

9:30 service

Prelude

Greeting and Announcements

Opening Prayer

Hymns  
#529 How Firm A Foundation  
#133 Leaning on The Everlasting Arms

Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer

Scripture  
Psalm 91  
Psalm 34

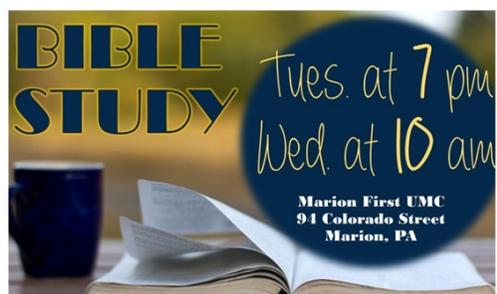
Sermon  
Many Watchful Eyes

Closing Hymn  
#672 God Be With You Til We Meet Again

Benediction



Marion  
First United Methodist Church



BIBLE STUDY

Tues. at 7 pm  
Wed. at 10 am

Marion First UMC  
94 Colorado Street  
Marion, PA

For the moment we are continuing to hold Bible Study virtually. Check back week to week as we respond to circumstances as they unfold. For now, Tuesdays I will post a link to the Google Meet for the evening 7:00 study. Wednesdays I will also post a study on the Facebook Page. Hope we can get back face to face soon!  
-Pastor Brent

### Special Offerings

1st Sundays: Improvement Fund  
2nd Sundays: Building Fund  
4th Sundays: Missions

On these Sundays, the Sunday School offering will go toward these collections, and folks are encouraged to make a special donation to these ongoing needs.



Marion  
COMMUNITY  
meals

January 9  
Pulled Pork  
February 9  
Quarter Chicken  
March 9  
Ham & Cheese Sandwich