

NOVEMBER 2, 2025

# Marion weekly update

## FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON "Ghosts, Oh My!" 1 Samuel 18:3-20, Mark 6:45-52

This week our suggested message material is very appropriate to the season. The question was about supernatural experiences. By this I mean the sightings of spirits or ghosts, and others have added into it experiences that were more feelings or other inexplicable situations.

Some of the things offered are as follows:

Seeing a loved one who had passed driving the opposite way down the road, waving happily, and then disappearing.

Seeing a loved one appearing at Christmastime in the tree.

In a picture in the background was a photograph on the wall from the 1800s with the standard cranky 1800s photo expression. In the photograph the woman's face had a smile. Someone from the establishment where the photograph hung of the woman said it had to be a spirit. The place is known to be haunted.

Being awoken, prompted, or nudged by an unseen force.

Having gauges in a vehicle behave oddly on the way to a funeral only to have them return to normal function immediately after.

Seeing a passed loved one standing in a living room, or by a bedside.

Hearing a voice or receiving a message from a stranger that couldn't possibly be coming from anything known because it was so specific.

Uncommon experiences of uplifting, freedom, or having a burden lifted, even having the image of something rising from the body and dissipating into the air.

Feelings of dread or as if something is terribly wrong in the room. In one instance, having scriptural words come to mind and uttered even though scripture wasn't really a known or rehearsed part of the person's life.

Heading into a situation and having an unseen force grab the leg to stop moving forward. Had the person kept going they would have fallen to their death as the structure ahead of them gave way.

And this is just from our congregation!

The question being, "what about this stuff?" What does it mean? How do we interpret it?

When I asked last week if anyone had this kind of experience more hands than I expected went up. At least half of them went up sheepishly. So to begin I think we need to address part of why this likely happened.

Our faith in many parts of the tradition has demonized these experiences. They aren't quite understandable, or don't line up with our boxed in sense of God and spirituality so reasons are made to label them as from the devil. As such, many are afraid to openly talk about these moments.

The reality is that all throughout history people have experienced this sort of thing. We're going to find that the demonizing is more man-made than Biblical. We also find that there likely aren't any truly satisfactory answers.

Mystery is a significant part of faith. There are things we simply don't know and likely will never know. Labeling them evil just because we don't grasp what's happening isn't correct. At the same time embracing everything as holy isn't either. So we live in the mystery in between.

The overblown "spiritizing" of anything and everything is common in some parts of Christianity, though it isn't necessarily scriptural. Whatever doesn't line up with the preferred understanding of faith is some kind of devilish "spirit".

Of course scripture refers to spirits both good and bad. We are told that part of our battle is against the unseen spirits of this world, and they are understood to be evil or demonic. That said, it doesn't say that everything lumps into this category. In fact most things don't.

Over spiritizing things into a "demon" category mistakes a lot. Two simple things caution us against doing this. Believing that everything bad has its sole answer in "deliverance". Yes, prayer is important and prayer has power. That said all of us know circumstances where prayer alone isn't what worked.

Some put little faith in medicine or therapy because it's all "spirit". Mental health is a spirit to be prayed away. Physical ailments are spirits to be prayed away and other treatments are actually a problem because it "distracts us from God."

This is a dangerous and potentially deadly attitude. Yes, prayer. Prayer plus the treatments that God has inspired others to develop is a wiser and often more effective road to travel.

It removes personal accountability. An example illustrates this best. Recently I was privy to a comment that all of the gun violence in the country is a “spirit of murder” that is over the nation. Seeing it this way points the finger at an unseen spirit. So I don’t have to look in the mirror.

What we see more honestly is that people are afraid, hopeless, angry, and have illness both physical and mental. Loud voices leading our nation stoke the fire of hate daily. If I don’t point at some boogeyman I might actually have to ask myself what I am doing, saying, believing, and supporting that could be contributing to all of these things. I have to take personal responsibility.

Another aspect that gets tricky is that we use language to describe heaven and hell that is rooted in ancient understanding of the world. They described everything in terms of the world being physical layers. The earth was flat. The dead, and later hell, were the layer under the earth. So down. Heaven, where God dwells, was up beyond the clouds. So it was up.

As such, spirits that passed to the next life were either up or down, so how could we see them here on this level, the earth?

Of course we know that the earth is a globe, a sphere. We know that up is outer space, the galaxy, the universe. But because of tradition we still use terms in that old understanding.

In related viewpoints most, though not all, typically believe that when we pass our spirit leaves this world, goes to the next, and wherever that is stays there. Others believe that the spirit “sleeps” until judgment day and everyone is raised together. Either way, the idea that anyone comes back isn’t on the table.

Note that all of this is more people piecing the ideas together as opposed to being directly and explicitly stated scripturally.

Something that IS a scriptural reality is interesting. Please don’t take this as defining or exclusive but it’s worth a note. The only spirits or spiritual beings that people actually “see” as in see visibly are the good or Godly ones. People see angels. Balaam saw the angel standing in his path as he road his donkey. Elisha showed his servant all the angels surrounding the army the king had sent to arrest them. Abraham saw angels.

In the story of Saul bringing back Samuel, Samuel was a man of God. He was upset that Saul brought his spirit back. Some claim this was a demon because of their ideas about spirits. Scripture doesn’t support this. It was Samuel and he addressed Saul just as he had addressed him while he was still alive.

The problem wasn’t Samuel’s spirit. The problem was Saul’s heart, his faithlessness, his desire to get direction from a source other than God. It was the conjuring of Samuel rather than seeking God in prayer or through a living prophet.

At the transfiguration some describe the scene as if a “veil” separating the world of the spirit from the physical world was pulled back for a moment. Peter, James, and John saw not just a transformed Christ but also Moses, the lawgiver of God, and Elijah, the great prophet of God.

On the other hand, no one sees a demon. Ever. The only exception might be Jesus in His confrontation with the devil in the wilderness. Otherwise the only thing people see is how those influenced by demons responded. When the exorcisms happened, all they know is that the demon left. No record of seeing anything visibly. Just that the person’s behavior showed they had been liberated.

In scripture the good and Godly are seen, the devilish and demonic are not.

Remember too that the fear people try to impose on us about the devil and demons only has power if we allow it. In truth there’s nothing that can really be done. In the wilderness you’d think that the devil brought his biggest gun to defeat Jesus. That only makes sense. What was that gun? Temptation. That’s it.

In Peter the scripture that the “devil prowls about as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour” is used to scare folks that the devil is behind every door and under every bed. Read further and we get the weapon to remove the lion’s teeth, to cage it.

“Resist the devil and he will flee.” One two letter word is all you need to send the devil packing and disarm his biggest gun. “No”. The best evil has is temptation. Every temptation is just a choice. Nothing to be scared of.

The answer has always been a life lived in the light of Christ. The answer has always been the good and Godly choices. Jesus demonstrated this for us in His own wilderness temptations.

We also see that we’re not the only ones who have issues with ghosts. When Jesus was walking on the water the disciples said “look! A ghost!” No real value attached to it. They were frightened, as most of us would be. But they wouldn’t say such a thing if there wasn’t already the idea of ghosts around.

Through the ages stories of spirits and encounters have existed in every generation. So what do we do with them?

My first suggestion is recognize that from the time of Jesus people have struggled to understand what’s going on. The whole thing defies the neat and tidy theology most of us have learned.

The experiences reflect things that we do understand, even if the packaging is confusing. Some visions, visits, and experiences are incredibly comforting, assuring, loving, and good. Others are terrifying and dreadful. In spiritual terms. Some reflect the good and love of God. Others reflect the temptation and evil of the devil. Is it possible that sometimes the “veil” is parted even today? The barrier between physical and spiritual gives way for some unknown reason and we catch a glimpse into a different world? It seemed to happen at the transfiguration.

Is it possible that heaven is all around us in spirit? We already believe that spirit and flesh can occupy the same space. We all have bodies of flesh and there is no physical organ called the spirit. Nevertheless we believe that each of us has a spirit occupying this flesh and blood body until it’s released when we pass from this life.

Most of this is giving us something to chew on as we ponder the mystery of these experiences and reports. I would like to suggest a few things, however, that I believe are rock solid guides.

That these occur is a beautiful assurance. We are reminded that there is a spiritual world. Our faith is placed well. It is an evidence that something beyond this physical creation exists. We trust that the greatest experience and access to it lies in trusting God, following Jesus, and listening for and communing with the Holy Spirit. If you happen on something in your own life, look for meaning. What is God revealing to you? Is it comfort? Just a “wink” that there’s more to the world than meets the eye? Is there an affirmation? Is it a caution? Whatever it is, let it drive you TO God, not distract from God. The deepest, purest meaning is found in seeking God and God’s presence in everything, including these. This is also where knowing scripture is important. If the meaning perceived lines up with the God revealed in Christ, at least something is on the right track. If it is denying Christ then something is wrong and missing.

In situations that reveal the glory and goodness of God, give thanks. In situations that remind us that there is evil at play tempting us, ask for the wisdom and strength to “resist the devil so that he will flee”.

Many, maybe most, will never have a sighting of this nature. I would argue that most of us WILL have an experience that is spiritual in nature that we feel deep within.

What seems to be evident is that much of the meaning comes in the surprise of it all. Saul’s conjuring wasn’t the way to go. He was demanding something outside of God. On the other hand, the incidents that happened unexpectedly while startling and even frightening often carried great meaning as it drew people towards God.

Whether we understand something or not, these kinds of experiences are no different than other experiences we have in life. In all of it we are seekers of God. We can be distracted just as easily, perhaps moreso, by the people and things that exist in everyday life.

When the focus is on God, we can see the divine in most every and anything. And our perspective helps us find our way when temptation crosses our path. We can live in peace of mind, peace of heart and peace of spirit that overcomes whatever fear may come our way.

God reveals Godself in many ways. Your experience is your own. Find God in all things, and then whatever is good and Godly don’t keep it to yourself. Pass it along.

One day we’ll understand. It isn’t likely to be this day. The mystery is part of the adventure. The curiosity keeps us searching. And the one promise we have is that if we seek God, we will find God. Because God is seeking us as well.

## BIBLE STUDY

Mark 7 brings us back to a confrontation. Jesus gathered the 5,000 plus and fed them as He taught them. Here He is confronted by religious leaders criticizing His disciples for not washing properly before eating. The confrontation serves for Mark to communicate multiple layers of Jesus’ criticism and correction.

Jesus quotes Isaiah claiming that they are more interested in enforcing man made rules than in cultivating good and Godly faith. Their “hearts are far from” God even though they claim to be pushing some kind of intentional piety. The cleanliness and purity had gotten out of control and become problematic

If we are honest, man made rules are there to control. They want to make sure people do what we say, even if we’re well intentioned. In cases then and now the assumption is that a human, cultural, politically motivated understanding of God was correct and to be enforced. Therefore they could keep people in check.

Today people are told to not listen to certain music, avoid entertainment, avoid certain crowds of people. Why? Because they are “unclean”. They are wrong and might infect us with a devilish sensibility. Yet nowhere is this truly Biblical. Certainly not in this chapter of Mark. It separates us, controls us, and sets the “ins” and the “outs”. The division also gets in the way of authentic witness, which Jesus here is clearly all about.

Don’t mistake that there isn’t wisdom engaged in what we consume. Or what we encourage or allow our kids to consume. We know there are things just developmentally we’re not prepared for at different ages. As we grow however, the idea is to develop a lens of faith that allows us to discern and move even in circles that contain elements outside our faithful sensibilities. We can do this because our compass is set, we don’t fear temptation

because we have our values aligned with Christ, and it allows us to come alongside those who don't yet believe as witnesses of what a faith in Jesus Christ can accomplish.

The control in everything is to belong to God, not people. This is where things went askew. People always run the risk of alternative motives. Power and money have a way of corrupting them well. This was happening with the religious values then. It happens even now.

To make a stronger point Jesus uses the issue of caring for one's aging parents. The man made traditions had given a loophole to not give care for parents. They could vow that their resources were "devoted to God". As such they didn't have to give them up to help their needy parents. They hung onto wealth while ignoring the command to honor mother and father. Honoring mom and dad was a God given command. This other thing was a man made loophole.

Think about this in two different aspects, both plausible, neither any sense of decent.

In one devoting their resources to God helped the priests and religious leaders. That was more money in the Temple coffers. Nevermind parents were set aside to suffer. They encouraged ignoring familial need for the financial gain of their own institution. Today college funds are depleted, retirement funds hacked, and life savings squandered for pastors promising spiritual greatness if only that money would be given to their church. The promise rarely if ever delivers, suffering lies in the wake.

The other side is that a vow of "devoting" things to God is just a convenient excuse. Perhaps once the parents have passed on that vow isn't particularly important. Release the vow, and now the money can be used for whatever is desired. It's convenience at its finest. This, once again, is a here and now issue as well. I rarely hear anyone bold enough to question this kind of thing today. I surmise it was similar then.

The point being that religion had become a means to control in the name of human tradition while ignoring the actual intention of the Law. Bringing people together, justice, kindness, etc. was the intention. That was being abandoned in favor of selfish pursuits. And it was done with the encouragement, even enforcement of religion. Jesus calls out the religious folk as hypocrites.

As He unpacks this further Jesus talks about what "defiles". His message is that it isn't what we take into the body that defiles. It is what we do. What we produce. Our behaviors. Eating something doesn't make us "unclean". What we do does. Are we willfully sinful, hurting one another and engaging in things that God stands against? That's what matters!

What do we use today to determine who we are "allowed" to spend time with? What makes someone "clean"? Is it about smoking, drinking, tattoos, piercings, swearing? Apparently none of that holds sway over us if we are in Christ. It's not about what's around us, but what is within us.

It's understood that this has a larger implication. Mark is writing well after the church had formed. Paul's letters came before the gospels. So this gospel is to both Jew and Gentile. This idea of clean and unclean is important. Jew and Gentile are no longer separated by the laws of "cleanliness". Jesus is available and open to all.

So when Jesus goes to the leper, the sick, the Gentile, the possessed, whomever, He isn't defiling Himself by their presence. He does the opposite. By healing them and transforming them it is His presence that makes the situation "clean". He is the key to making wrong right.

What would we gain by grasping this? We don't correct the world by standing outside of it and criticizing. We help it along by being within it and building relationships that foster the love of God.

Almost as if to make this point, Mark's next story is with the Gentile woman with a demon possessed daughter. Jesus has gone to Gentile territory to rest and get away. He can't. Even there His reputation precedes Him. She come seeking deliverance.

Their interchange is interesting. He is very clearly addressing her with an insult as a "dog". This would be a very Jewish response to a Gentile. Further, scripture elsewhere reinforces the idea that salvation comes "first to the Jews". The vast majority of Jesus ministry is in Jerusalem and Galilee, Jewish territory. His front line is His own people, not these others.

At the same time we know from later scripture that salvation belongs to all. This woman has a sense of this. She replies with a returned snark that even the "lowly" deserve some degree of regard. She is more savvy than the disciples. She sees Jesus' ministry in a broader sense. She on some level recognizes that her faith is the deciding factor.

Jesus perceives this and grants her request. Why? Because of her response. He sees something in her and responds. His power is such that even from a distance the daughter is delivered. Which makes the next scene a bit confusing.

He returns to a more Jewish area. The Decapolis is where He encountered the possessed man in the tombs and cast the demons into the pigs. In this location He encounters a deaf and mute man. He heals him. Grossly.

In other instances Jesus doesn't need to even be present. Or someone can just touch his clothes and they are healed. Here He jams His fingers in the guy's ears, spits (where we don't know...gross), and touches the man's tongue. His ears are opened and his tongue is freed to speak.

This is odd given Jesus' power and authority. Why does He go to these measures? Is it theatrics? Is it symbolism? In the end it doesn't really matter. Jesus heals the man. The bigger statement is the response of the people.

"He does EVERYTHING WELL". This may seem like a throwaway comment. It isn't. People are witnessing Jesus' works and His words. They are noting that nothing He does is shoddy or without integrity. Everything He sets to He does properly, with right focus, and with right intent. He is different than others. He's not in it for Himself. He's not about power or fame or wealth. He is simply accomplishing what He is accomplishing. They are beginning to get a glimpse at who He is. They don't have the full picture yet. But in the wake of His interactions with hypocritical religious leaders, exorcisms, and healing they see that He isn't your normal teacher, exorcist, healer, or miracle worker. There's a little something waking up.