

NOVEMBER 16, 2025

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON “Daniel” Daniel 6: 6-14 Daniel 12: 1-13

This morning we return to responding to suggestions from the congregation. I encourage you to continue jotting down what's on your heart to come from the pulpit and drop the slip in the offering plate, my box, or the office box. What is on your heart is very much a priority that should be respected.

Today the request was a little heavy. “Explain the book of Daniel”.

There are a lot of ways to interpret scripture. Verse by verse, chapter by chapter, or even looking at the fullness of a book for the major themes and lessons. Certainly we could spend months working through Daniel. For this morning we'll look at it from a broader perspective.

First some sense of the book itself. The Jewish people consider it a “writing” while Christians consider it a book of prophecy. All this means is that the weight of significance is heavier for Christians.

The story is set in the exile of the kingdom of Judah to Babylon. There is a few important details about this exile.

Israel had split into two kingdoms. Ten tribes were the Kingdom of Israel while Judah and Benjamin were the Kingdom of Judah. Much earlier the kingdom of Israel had been taken into exile by the Assyrian empire. This exile was the vast majority of the population. They were taken and not allowed to return. When we hear about the “lost tribes of Israel” this is what we're talking about. They were taken away and scattered.

In Daniel, the Babylonians had become the empire of the day. This exile was different. Many were actually allowed to remain in their homeland. The ones taken away were largely the upper class. The influential, the educated, the wealthy, the powerful. Which reminds us that Daniel and his friends were likely from a privileged class. Eventually there was also the opportunity for the exiles to return to their home. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are all about this. Waves of people were given permission to go home and rebuild with the blessing of the king.

Two entirely different situations.

The book of Daniel has some truly beloved stories in it. Daniel and the lions' den is arguably the most popular. Daniel and his friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the early part of the book are depicted as having an iron clad faith. To the point that they are willing to be executed for it. Knowing the story of the exile is important here.

They knew that unfaithfulness on their part and the part of their people was what got them exiled. That's a pretty big motivation to get things in order. If exile was this consequence, surely the next would be worse. They learned and they transformed in mind, heart, and spirit.

Daniel had a particular gift to be able to interpret dreams. He was also a tremendous administrator. This got him a lot of praise from the king and caused him to rise in popularity, influence, and position. His success was a product of living out his faith. Even the kings respected that. When they asked him to interpret a dream Daniel was clear that what they would receive was the truth and only the truth. He wasn't interested in stroking egos.

The result was predictable. People in the king's court got jealous that this exile was receiving such good treatment. The problem was that he was too good. His faith not only pushed him to excellence in his work, it made him blameless in everything he did. They couldn't find any dirt on him.

They knew the only weakness was his faith. He prayed every day three times with his windows wide open. So they persuaded the king to make a law that anyone praying to anyone other than the king would be fed to the lions. Daniel of course continued his routine and was quickly brought up on charges.

As much as the king wanted to spare Daniel, he couldn't violate his own law. Daniel was thrown to the lions and as most of us know when they checked on him later he was untouched. He was saved.

His buddies Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego faced a similar issue when they refused to bend their knee to anyone but God. They were tossed into a furnace to be burned alive. They emerged unharmed and not even smelling like smoke.

One correction to make is regarding the fourth person in the furnace. Scripture says that as people looked into the furnace they saw for people, not three. Some claim that the fourth person was Jesus. This is an case of imprinting ourselves onto a story. Scripture itself tells us that what they saw as an “angel of the Lord”. Jesus stands on His own merits without us falsely slamming Him into stories like this.

We see the king Nebuchadnezzar changing his heart towards God after being humbled. He was struck with an

affliction that made him behave like a wild animal for years. Ultimately he came around and began to regard the God of Daniel. This also happened with his successor Belshazzar. In fact because of the faithfulness and heart of different Judahites, kings were persuaded ultimately to allow people to return home from exile. The last piece to address is the prophecies in the second half of the book. The language sounds very Revelation. The reason is that they are both written in the same style. The style is called Jewish Apocalyptic Literature. The similarity in style has led many to assume the prophecies are about end times. Especially since end times theology has become popular this part of Daniel has been, in my opinion, misunderstood. The prophecies of Daniel have actually already been fulfilled. He is talking about empires and kingdoms that followed his time and were actually risen and fallen before Jesus was even born. The desecration he predicts was fulfilled by a ruler named Antiochus in the Seleucid kingdom. That this is now history actually is important as we'll see in a moment.

So what do we do with all of this? What is Daniel telling us?

First and foremost it is about faithfulness. The faithfulness of Daniel and his friends and the way that can change hearts and circumstances. It is recognizing that when our own unfaithfulness causes problems there is a call to genuine transformation of heart before God.

Many note that when there is a major crisis churches see an uptick in attendance. That uptick is short lived because it was an emotional reaction. Not for Daniel. Daniel experiences a genuine transformation to his core that established a faith that was unshakeable and unwilling to bend.

With the kings we also see that there is an impact on others to our faithfulness. Even the hardest hearts can bend and melt when they encounter a faith that is authentic. There is something moving and compelling about a faith that is steadfast, and most importantly, leads a life to integrity, compassion, and unconditional and uncompromising love.

Unfortunately, like with Daniel, not everyone will be happy with us if we live a life filled with faith. There will be times when we are ridiculed. Sabotaged. Undercut. Taken advantage of. The stories of the lions' den and the fiery furnace are reminders that God is with us even when those around us are against us. There is not guarantee we'll be delivered as Daniel was. If it was guaranteed we'd have no stories of martyrs, people jailed for their faith, or lives damaged because someone dared to hold a line because of their integrity.

Even so, we know that we aren't alone in our journey and struggles. God is ever present. And what comes next is ultimately comforting.

The prophecies in Daniel being our history rather than something we haven't seen yet is incredibly encouraging. It reminds us that the faith we have is well placed.

What Daniel is talking about is empires rising and falling. These empires in the end don't reflect that goodness of God. They don't reflect God's way of being and doing things. So what is the message?

Ultimately any empire that doesn't work in a Godly fashion won't last. It exists for a time, but whatever their brand of wicked is, it has a shelf life. Nations and empires that are built on might and ungodly practice can't last forever. Either someone stronger comes along or they collapse under the weight of their own evil.

Whatever evil we see in the world, it won't last forever.

Ultimately, one day, things will be made right. We will either learn to love one another and build peace through faithfulness and justice, or God will return and set things right once and for all. In other words, God and good will win in the end.

And that's the side we want to be on.

Let the lessons from Daniel be a comfort and a guide. Make transformation and faithfulness a way of life. Dig in. Trust that even when things get dark God is by our side. Know that your faith matters to someone. Your example matters. It can change the course of a heart. And be reminded daily that no matter what chaos seems to be going on around us, one day it will draw to an end. The Creator of all will make things right and we, as faithful servants, will enjoy the lasting peace and contentment that will reign when all things are made new.

BIBLE STUDY

Chapter nine crosses the halfway point in Mark. The tone shifts. Mark becomes longer in his explanations of events. The disciples become more reserved in their questioning of Jesus. Perhaps they are picking up on His frustration at their constant lack of understanding and are trying to figure it out amongst themselves.

If the first half was setting up Jesus identity and ministry, the second is setting the stage for the pinnacle event of the crucifixion. Things need set in order.

Keep in mind that Mark isn't writing this as the events are happening. It is written after the fact for an audience, telling the gospel story to affirm believers and perhaps compel some nonbelievers. This is important. It's much easier to reinforce those who already have a faith or even a sliver of faith than to compel those who have no faith in Christ at all.

This first verse itself sparks a lot of thought and conversation. “Won’t taste death until...”, “Kingdom of God comes in power...”, what is this getting at? There are different thoughts, some with more sense than others.

We have to consider Kingdom of God. What does it mean? Here are some possibilities:

It equals heaven. They will not taste death until heaven comes.

It is about the second coming.

It is a state of being in the heart.

It is the realization of God’s reign in moments or seasons of actual time in this world.

The first two have some problems. In hindsight if that’s what it meant then there are people wandering around the world that are literally thousands of years old. We know this isn’t the case. What next?

Jesus says in other gospels that the Kingdom is “at hand” or has “come near”. The Lord’s Prayer asks the “Kingdom come” and God’s “will be done on earth as it is in heaven”. This is supposing that in some way, shape, or form we can bring heaven to earth even if just for a perfect moment. The beginning of this happens in the individual heart and spills out around into the world.

We also know that often “power” is referring to fullness and the Holy Spirit. The fullness of Jesus’ ministry isn’t realized until the resurrection and the power arrives at Pentecost. It is certainly likely that once the disciples have fully understood His Messianic mission and the Kingdom of God’s intent, and received the Holy Spirit that the Kingdom had arrived in power.

The point after that moment was then to spread it across the world!

So perhaps this is talking less about some long off end time and more about a moment that we know many of even the twelve would live to see and participate in.

Next is the well known event of the transfiguration. Three chosen disciples accompany Jesus up a mountain. They see the glory of Jesus revealed and in His presence are Moses and Elijah. The voice from heaven that booms down identifies Jesus as the Son of God and tells them to “listen to Him.”

Understandably they are frightened and confused. Peter’s outburst is nonsensical. When the Law giver and the great Prophet vanish Jesus is left alone. They are to be silent until Jesus rises from the dead. As is typical they don’t grasp this whole “risen” thing. Here, however, they keep quiet about it rather than challenge Jesus or ask a question that might draw a scolding.

The question that they do ask is about being told that “Elijah must come first”. In direct form Jesus essentially says “well, Elijah has already been here, so that’s not an issue anymore!”

This is a reminder that sometimes we don’t see what is right in front of us because we’re looking for a sign. In truth many signs may have been given, we just haven’t paid attention. Or we forgot. Or we don’t want what is needed or what we need to do, so it’s convenient to “not see” signs.

Mark is giving a very direct message to us. Jesus is clearly divine and glorious. He also has authority and position over the two great figures of Moses and Elijah. There is the foreshadowing of resurrection, which foreshadows death. We are given a lot of firm identity markers for Jesus.

The disciples are still confused. That said at least they seem to be getting more aware that they need to do some reconsidering.

The next scene I’ve often heard confused. A boy has been brought for healing, more specifically exorcism of a demon. A crowd is arguing with the disciples when Jesus arrives. As He hears the predicament His response is to the “unbelieving generation”. Notice this is not at the disciples. It is at the crowd. The crowd is unbelieving.

What have we seen so far in Mark? One of the key components of miracles is faith/belief. Jesus echoes this when he discusses with the father of the child one on one. “Everything is possible for those who believe”. The response? “I believe, help my unbelief.”

What a curious statement.

Think about it though. You bring your kid in faith. The whole crowd starts questioning whether it can be done. They question the disciples. Perhaps even question Jesus. Have you been a fool? Are you misplacing your trust and faith? Surely this can raise doubts.

Rather than scold, Jesus encourages. He heals the boy. The crowd is still in some state of disbelief. He can’t be cured, he must be dead! Instead Jesus helps the boy to his feet free from his affliction.

The disciples are curious why they couldn’t do it. One of the first senses should be obvious. They aren’t Jesus. Jesus has a relation with God and a power they do not. The demons react to Him as divine. The disciples don’t have that distinction. It’s also different than the healings it seems. Faith was all that was required for the healing. Here it apparently in the absence of faith prayer is the order of the day for the disciples to do their work when it comes to exorcism.

Whatever the case there is a glaring point. The disciples haven’t figured out how to pray. At least they haven’t figured out its significance as Jesus wants them to. Which brings another point in Mark. To this point Jesus

has shown them how to heal, exorcise, teach, command, etc. He has NOT modeled prayer.

Every time we read that Jesus went to pray it's that He went off alone. This is very consistent with His statement in Matthew that prayer should be done in private, apart from any crowd, and is between the individual and God. The issue is that people can't learn what they don't have modeled. This is the disciples.

Jesus' response to their question isn't translated as a scold, rebuke, or anything frustrated. It's simply a reply. I wonder if perhaps Jesus recognized that part of their ignorance was due to His lack of demonstrating for them. Regardless, now they are aware. Hopefully they will make the adjustment.

What follows are two more incidents where the disciples demonstrate they are restraining their chatter. The first is another instance where Jesus talks about His fate. They didn't get it, but they didn't challenge it as Peter had before. That resulted in a solid scolding. Perhaps they didn't want another one of those? Or maybe they just were growing and recognizing they had more to learn and more to pay attention to.

The second involves their argument over who was greatest. Again, they kept it to themselves. Why? Likely they recognized it was inappropriate. Don't bother Jesus with such trivial concerns. Even so, the next verses show that Jesus clearly had an idea what they were talking about.

There is this great reversal of what constitutes greatness. It isn't power or authority. It isn't wealth or fame. It isn't being served. This was all the values and priorities of the world, but not Jesus. The greatest lowers themselves to humility and serving others.

This is emphasized by the example of welcoming a child. We may associate children with great worth, hope, innocence, and promise but this wasn't the case then. Children were the lowest rung on the social ladder. They could be dismissed and disregarded. Jesus didn't do that. In fact He used them as an example of service and communing with God. To welcome the child, the lowest of the low, was to welcome Him. To welcome Him is to welcome God.

This is comparable to Matthew 25 when Jesus answers the question "when did you feed the hungry, visit the sick and in prison, clothe the naked, help the needy?" "When you saw them you saw me. When you helped them you helped me." Jesus is everyone. The greatest begins by serving the lowest along with the greatest, and isn't seeking recognition or fame for it.

Though there is a story separating the two, we remember that the disciples just came off of a failure to be able to cast out a demon. Now they are talking about a man who isn't part of their circle who was successful. John asks if they should tell him to stop. We aren't told why. Perhaps feeling lackluster after a failure? Jealous? Jesus' response once again doesn't come off as harsh. He simply acknowledges that they should let the man do his thing. Clearly there is faith and power at work. Clearly the man is doing it in Jesus' name. Something is going right. Let it go as this is not an enemy to stop.

I see the follow up as a softer encouragement. Jesus tells His disciples that if someone recognizes Him as Messiah, and the disciples as belonging to Him, they will be rewarded for simply bringing even a disciple a drink of water. In the midst of their bumbling and missing the opportunity to cast out the demon, Jesus loves them still. They are still unique and special among everyone else. If this was about jealousy or feeling inadequate, there was no need to wonder about Jesus' affection or their place in His ministry.

Mark then finishes with the famous passage about "stumbling". The "little ones" that many interpret as children (in my experience because we've just read the illustration using children) isn't intended to children at all. It is even stated directly in the passage that this is referring to people who believe in Jesus. No matter who is believing at this point, their faith is in a child like infancy. The ministry is relatively young.

The stumbling is more than making a mistake or committing a sin. All of us do that, it's inevitable. This is about doing things that would derail someone from their faith. If we are acting in a way that is not only sinful, but encourages others to lose faith or pushes them away there is consequence.

Cutting off isn't literal in a surgical sense. It is significant and sobering in a disciplining sense. If we have something in our life that draws us away from our faith, carve it out. It's better to do without a job, a relationship, a hobby, etc. than to do without Christ. Particularly in the eternal timeframe. The images of fire and the worm were to the people of that time very common expressions of punishment for offenses that carried a lot of weight to them.

Finally we get to salt and fire. These terms meant different things to them than to us. Salt was a preservative, a flavoring, even a symbol of breaking bread together. What do we flavor our meals with? Salt. Fire is a tempering force. It strengthens iron. So how does this connect?

Our lives become "flavored" with the message and impact of Jesus when they are tempered by enduring the temptations that would lead us away from Him. All of the "stumbling" we are tempted to do makes us stronger people of faith when we choose Jesus over all of these other things. Our lives are "salted by fire".

Then the salt becomes a flavor for the world. Be the salt of the earth and don't lose that flavor. Don't lose that

faith. If the point of life is to bring the world to Jesus, what good is it if the things that inspire others to faith don't exist in us? Especially tragic is when we've had that seasoning in us and abandon it.

Then the salt is a sign of covenant. Have salt among yourselves. Commune together. Break bread. Be a tight knit group and be at peace with each other. This is how we stay strong in personal life and in ministry together. We have strong bonds that hold each other accountable. We keep things peaceful among us so that our relationships remain strong. In this we grow in relation to God and witness to the world.

Perhaps this is part of what Mark is getting at in this chapter. The witness of Jesus revealed in the transfiguration, conversations, and exorcism. The witness of the disciples being forged as they keep struggling to understand, learn, and ultimately get instruction on greatness meaning servanthood and that we are interconnected in helping each other rise or fall in our faith.