

DECEMBER 14, 2025

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON “Who Are We: The Angels” Luke 2:8-15, Matthew 2:9-12

This week we continue our Advent series “Who Are we?” This question is incredibly important for us to reflect on for a number of reasons. The hope is that who we are is Christlike and compelling. The second question attached is Who am I called to be? This is also important. Knowing who I am or who we are is good. Just knowing doesn’t mean everything we are is exactly right. Who am I called to be? This question asks who God is asking us to be. The gap between the two answer is where we have work to do.

This year we ask these questions using the figures in the birth story of Jesus as a lens. Last week we considered Mary and Joseph. Who are we called to be/who are we? We are both ordinary and in that ordinairiness we have the potential to be extraordinary. We also have all encountered Mary and Joseph in every person we meet. How we treat the must struggling and difficult is how we would have treated them as it is how we treat Jesus here and now.

This week we consider the angels.

The angels are very simple in purpose in the birth story of Jesus. They are messengers. Different messages each time, but that is their role. To Mary and the shepherds it seems the angels appear in recognizable, almost physical form. To Joseph and the Magi they appear in dreams.

The give messages of:

Calling to Mary as she is told she is to bear the Christ child

Comfort and instruction to Joseph as he is informed the Mary hasn’t been unfaithful and he should go on and marry her.

Announcement and information to the shepherds when they are told of the birth. As an aside, something that I noticed that made more sense than it had prior. I had always seen the angels here depicted as hanging out in the air with this giant, loud chorus. How did no one else hear or see this????!! Notice that nowhere in the scripture does it say they were up in the air, displayed for the world to see. The announcing angel is there with the shepherds, likely depicted just chatting with them. The rest then surrounded that angel. Likely just right there on the ground where the shepherds were for a very brief, private little concert. Point being that the message was direct for the shepherds, and while the larger scale depiction might make for flashy, impressive visuals, the way scripture states the incident is far less troublesome in terms of it being a relative secret that the world wasn’t yet let in on.

Warning and guidance to Joseph as Herod is plotting to kill Jesus, sending the family to Egypt.

Protection and guidance to the Magi as they are told to go home avoiding Herod so he wouldn’t press them for the location of Jesus.

All messages. Each different.

What is amazing is that each message was not only delivered, not only received, but also obeyed. Were any of them not obeyed the story could have gone any of a thousand different ways.

Who are we? We are all recipients of God’s messages. Who are we called to be? People who don’t just receive, but obey those messages.

Unfortunately we have some confusion. Angels are heavy in the birth story and do show up in the Old Testament as messengers. Other messengers include prophets, seers, and oracles. People went to them seeking God’s messages. There was a go between for people and God.

As scripture writes it, this was the pattern until Pentecost. Even in Acts, right before Pentecost they cast lots to figure out who would replace Judas as one of the twelve disciples. They needed an intermediary to get the message.

Pentecost changed things. The Holy Spirit came and really put the practical meaning to the temple veil being torn at the crucifixion. The need for a go between was gone. All we need to do is go to God and listen to the Spirit that is within us and around us. Messaging flows freely.

The confusion comes when we question whether what we are sensing/hearing is truly God’s messaging or if it is our own ideas, agendas, and desires. This leads to being paralyzed because we aren’t sure, disobeying because we don’t trust the message’s origin, or acting in self-interest and attributing it to God.

Lets’ face it, it would be easier if it came through a burning bush, an angel dropped in front of us, or a trusted prophet. The upside is that we don’t have to wait for some bolt from the blue or seek out someone when we are sorting out faith and life.

Nevertheless, we are always in contact with God through the Spirit. Messages are plentiful. Are we sensitive to them? Do we set aside our own sense of self to hear God fully? Do we obey when the message is genuine?

The second side is that not only do we all receive messages, we are all messengers as well. All of us.

Every day we tell the world who we are and what we believe. We do it with every word, every action. Everything and everyone we support and champion. Everything and everyone we reject and condemn. No matter where we are by action or inaction we tell the world a message about what we believe is right or wrong and to whom and what we should give our allegiances.

What message do we send? Is it the message of Christ? This is of absolute and supreme importance. If we are supposed to be the presence of Jesus in the world and we claim that, do we claim it legitimately? Some do, others claim it but what they represent is anything but the Jesus of the gospels.

Because God uses people as messengers far more than any angel seems to have ever been listed in scripture, as givers and receivers we must be diligent in sorting out whether or not what we are taking in and giving out is truly Christ centered.

One is what we are allowing the shape us. The other is us shaping others.

I'd like to share something I came across this past week in a shortened form. It's about a messenger that is nearly universally loved, Mr. Rogers.

Mr. Rogers was a republican, white, Christian, straight man. He was also a preacher. He prayed and read the Bible every day.

Through decades he created a television program that put the love of Christ into the world over and over again in a way that people from every race, color, and creed could access it. He never preached, but his message was clear. Love your neighbor.

He famously stood before congress to make a plea to fund his network. Through his efforts and compelling testimony that was simple, honest, compassionate, and gentle, he persuaded the government to keep appropriating funds.

It seems that everyone loved Mr. Rogers, and yet he taught the world the love of Jesus day in and day out. And when he passed, the entire world felt a sigh because we all knew a light had gone out of the world.

Somehow the kindness and love he presented everything with seemed to connect with and impact nearly everyone. His values were Christ. His message was love. He was nearly universally loved as a result.

SO. If my messaging is rejected, hated, offensive, or alienating people it might be a problem with the message itself. I might not be putting Jesus out there as Jesus was and is. I might be doing it in an insulting and disrespectful fashion. It might be a "me" problem rather than a Jesus or the other person problem. Keep in mind that it seemed in the gospels that the larger group of average people loved Him. It was the religious folks who had an issue and with whom He had conflict.

As we head into Christmas, the message God sent through the moment of Jesus' birth is loud and clear. The love of God is so vast, powerful, and unconditional that God would enter creation and walk with us, the created, to show us how to live and how to be redeemed. God's love is wide and offered to all with mercy and grace. It's ours to accept or reject of our own conscience.

Each and every day we have the ability to be like the angels. To receive messages from God and then also to offer the world a resounding message of God's love.

It can absolutely be a challenge sorting out what is what as we listen to the Spirit and sift through the Spirit revealed to us through others. The messages aren't always comfortable or popular. They may put us at odds with people we like and love. It might push us to take an uncomfortable stand.

The encouragement that we have is that whenever the people of God through scripture got the message right and gave the message obediently something good came from it. God was seen and heard. Lives were changed. Courses were corrected. A little heaven on earth was brought.

Each week we get to be in the company of one another. A congregation with people that live the faith they proclaim. People that serve God diligently and joyfully in the church and community.

This is why we need to encourage our families to consistently be here with younger generations and children. We aren't faceless in here. Anyone who wishes can both know others and be known themselves. There are powerful, formative messages in the examples of those who have walked their faith for a significant lifetime that we can behold up close, personal, and firsthand. It is unlike anything else because it is the marriage of faith and life in real time, with real stories and real experiences that we use to build one another up.

As a congregation the question "who are we?" is critical if we are inviting people into fellowship with us. Who we are is what we offer to add value to their faith and lives. The bulletin is almost a weekly newsletter that says what we do. But what we do isn't who we are.

The message of who we are is a congregation committed to loving God and to love God by loving our neighbor, our community. The message is evidenced by what we do, but it is experienced in the relationships and interac

tions with the people who do it.

Be a messenger. Be an angel. Be obedient to the messages from God you receive. You may be the message that gives a life a calling, a comfort, needed instruction, life saving caution, or guidance that steers someone a different road than the problems that would be created by the one they are on or planning.

The angels remind us that belonging to God also carries the beautiful privilege and honor or literally speaking the world closer and closer to Christ with the messaging of our lives.

BIBLE STUDY

Mark 12 is very much a chapter of confrontations. This is the last week of Jesus' life and here He encounters just about every level of religious leadership. Surprisingly one of these encounters reveals something new. There are some religious leaders that actually have some regard for Jesus and His teaching. The first four the religious comes after Jesus, the last Jesus goes after them.

First are priests and other teachers. He tells the "parable of the tenants". A man fits out a vineyard. He rents it and sends people to collect what he is due. The first many they beat and even killed. Jesus makes sure to note that one the "struck on the head." Running out of messengers the son of the owner is sent who is also killed. The wicked men think they will then inherit the field instead, only to find no only will they not, they will also be punished.

The messengers are the prophets whom the religious jailed, beat, and killed. Perhaps the religious leaders that felt accused recognized that the one "struck on the head" was a not so subtle nod to John the Baptist with whom they took issue. Unbeknownst to them, by the end of the week they would kill the Son. They were angry and all this did was fuel their desire to get rid of Jesus.

The allusion to the cornerstone would have been of particular note to those present at the time. The temple was still under construction. Naturally the religious leaders would have this in the front of their mind. A building reference would help them get the point that they were disregarding the most foundational piece in worship and connecting with God, Jesus.

Then came the Pharisees and Herodians. They got nice and cozy with Him. The flirted and complimented Jesus' integrity. Then they set the trap. "Should we pay taxes to Caesar?"

Recognize that at this point Judea was a relatively recently made Roman province. It happened years after Jesus had been born. Taxes are important to any empire. After all, everyone wants their money. If Jesus can be caught telling people to not pay taxes now His enemy isn't just Jewish leadership, it's Rome itself.

The coin Jesus asks for is telling. To keep this at the level of money and taxes is to miss the point. Jesus skirts that superficial issue nicely while making a much bigger point. The question isn't money. The question is image.

"Whose image is on the coin?" Kind of like writing a child's name on the waist of their underwear, we all know the image something bears indicates its owner. The coin has Caesar on it? Fine, it must be his. Give Caesar what belongs to him.

On the other hand... Go back to Genesis. We are created in God's image. Whose image is on us? God's. To whom do we belong? God. So give to God what is God's. Sure, Caesar can have his money, but he can't have the people. He can't have the ones on whom God has laid claim. Give yourself fully over to God. God's designs, desires, and purpose for your life.

Boom.. Pharisees and teachers handled. Next up? Sadducees.

The issue with the Sadducees was resurrection. This was a sticking point between them and the Pharisees. It was so deep that when Paul would later be brought to the Sanhedrin, which was made up of both, he would exploit this to get himself off the hook. Getting them arguing got the Pharisees on his side and thus freed up from the charges against him.

Like the tax question, the marriage question had nothing to do with marriage. It had to do with resurrection. First Jesus references scriptures that we don't access through the Bible. They are likely references to the Wisdom of Solomon and/or some texts from a place called Qumran. The Sadducees knew them even if we don't.

This is a good reminder that what we consider scripture and what they considered scripture weren't necessarily the same. They had other writings they considered authoritative that aren't in our Bible.

The bigger part at stake seems to be a grammar game Jesus plays. He cites a known and prominent event for Moses. When God references Godself as I Am, and then says "I Am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob", it is present tense. Not past even though those three were long dead. How can God be God of someone who doesn't exist? They then must be alive.

It seems Mark doesn't record their response if there was one at all. The response may have left crickets

chirping.

Finally one final teacher approaches Jesus with a different attitude. He seems to have a genuine question about the greatest commandment. Jesus references love of God and love of neighbor to which the teacher agrees and even places these commands higher than sacrifice and the like.

A breath of fresh air. He's not arguing. He's genuinely inquiring. He's listening and even agreeing. Jesus' response was to compliment him.

Then Jesus takes His turn.

The response of the people listening is delight. He explains something that must to them have seemed a mystery. Of course He is referring to Himself though they don't know it yet. If the Messiah is the son of David how can the son also be David's Lord?

Simple. It's not the "literal" son. Not the immediate son to one of David's wives or even concubines. It is an expression that the Messiah will be from the line of David. And of course there He stands before them teaching. This must have been a wonderful moment for the people who may have felt patronized or diminished by many religious leaders. Here was someone now making the teachers look a bit dim.

This also reminds us that taking everything literally can often make things confusing. There is so much in scripture that is turn of phrase, poetry, exaggeration, parable, myth, and more to make honest truths about God known. When we mix things up we miss the point and are often left with questionable interpretations.

After this Jesus warns them about the teachers. Why? Because their desire is prestige, fame, wealth, and the like. They want to be seen even if their words are hollow. The reference to the widows is likely a reference to a practice where religious leaders would put upon widows to give beyond their means in exchange for being "looked after". Not to be too blunt but we might call it an extortion racket.

It's no coincidence that the widow is the center of the next story. The message is clear that while offerings are valued, needed, and appreciated, the weight of them in God's eyes might not look like exactly what we see. What we see is the amount, and this isn't to be diminished. Beyond that God sees the sacrifice. "They gave out of their abundance, but I tell you she gave all she had."

What is an honest possibility is that she gave all that she had out of guilt imposed by the religious leaders.

We have similar issues today. Religious leaders happy to pull every dime they can from their people and live quite high on the hog while the rest live modestly. Quite comfortable applying "spiritual" pressure and guilt and empty promises in order to pick pockets deeper. Then having no answer that matters or holds water when the promises made for the giving never come to pass.

Shady religious folks have always been with us. Sadly they likely always will.

Here Jesus is coming full bore at them. If we wonder why this is the last week of Jesus' life we shouldn't. He is confronted by and also confronting all of the powers that have the ability to take Him out of the picture. The more He shows them up, the more He aggravates them, the more likely they will act on their anger, jealousy, and fear. And as we know, they do.