

DECEMBER 21, 2025

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON “Who Are We: The Shepherds” Luke 2:16-20

Continuing our Advent Series, this week we are focusing on the shepherds in the Christmas story. The theme is reflecting on who we are and that up against who God calls us to be. Who we are is important to know, the gap between that and who God calls us to be is where we need to do the work to grow.

Last week the shepherds showed up connected to the angels. The angels remind us that we are all messengers. We receive and give them. What messaging we are responsible for differs from person to person. WE are all messengers regarding our families, workplaces, friend groups, things we are passionate about and so on. The messaging we have in common if we call ourselves Christians is to live and send a genuine message about God through Jesus.

This is evangelism and this is what the shepherds dial in on.

While some might argue that the Samaritan woman at the well was the first evangelist, I think a case can be made for the shepherds holding that position. Evangelism is simply sharing the good news of Jesus. Each person in the gospels connected to Jesus did that as best they understood Him at any given time. It wasn't until after His crucifixion and resurrection that anyone had a clue about what His identity as the Messiah actually meant. Nevertheless, people still shared the news of Jesus even beforehand.

The shepherds were quite literally the first to do so. They got their message from the angels, went to see Jesus, and it tells us that they then went through the town of Bethlehem praising and glorifying God AND telling people the news they received. Namely that the Savior, the Christ had been born.

What is interesting is that we are told that while people were “amazed” at their message, there isn't evidence they were persuaded that it was significant. Arguably this is speculation, but I think it is safe speculation.

If the shepherds had persuaded people to believe what had occurred, the response would have been much different. Bethlehem would have been turned inside out. Mary and Joseph would have been overwhelmed with visitors coming to see this new King, this Savior. There is no sense that they were.

The news would have been so big there's no way Herod would have missed it, much less took so long to act.

The question then is why wouldn't news that we see as so earth shaking be dismissed. I'd like to offer three thoughts that will hopefully also be useful for us living into our own call to spread the news of Jesus.

Credibility- the shepherds weren't exactly highly regarded in society. They weren't influential social figures. They weren't wealthy. They didn't have any religious or spiritual clout. Likely if they came straight from the fields they were filthy, and it would have been at night or early in the morning. We know nothing about if they even had a reputation in town, or if they did what the rep was. There was nothing about them that suggested such a wild report would have been reliable.

They were meeting people where they were themselves- this is as common situation when we are super excited about something. It's also common when we feel righteously moved and claiming a divine call to tell people what they need to believe. The way I read the story they are overcome with their own enthusiasm. More likely than not they weren't worried about what was happening with the people they spoke with. They just wanted to tell them their joyful news. When this happens, the receiver of the message is more a target than a person being engaged. It's not about where they are, what they need, how something can be presented in a hearable way. It's about our agenda. What we want to say. Rather than meet them where they are we try to drag them where we are. More and more this is not a successful way to get a point across.

The blindsided people- They come in the dark while everyone is just going about their business. They have agendas, responsibilities, etc. Think about walking through the store and a salesperson stops you with “do you own your own home?” Or when the Witnesses or Mormons come knocking at the door wanting to come in and tell you about Jesus. It's unexpected and rarely convenient. We're not prepared for whatever it is they are selling. Most times we either avoid the conversation or just try to get it over with. We may come back to the moment later when we have time, but then we're also factoring in the other two items. Was the person credible? Was this person speaking to something that I can relate to or connect with?

In modern America we have the exact same things happening when people are trying to pass along Christianity. There is an assumption of credibility because we believe our message is true and vital. It comes from the

Word of God. But that's self-credibility. If the person I'm speaking with doesn't believe in scripture or God for that matter, it doesn't matter how credible I think I am. They need something more to take me seriously. Too often now churches have traded a genuine gospel message for emotionally driven worship, and/or religion mixed with political and cultural messages.

"Personal faith" is a big thing, but the scriptures are far more about a faith that is lived out in community and love of God shown by love of neighbor. More and more people are looking for a place to stamp Jesus on their politics and cultural ideas than a place that calls for a genuine gospel. If the church doesn't match someone's politics or cultural ideas just move along until one is found that does.

That's not worship of God through Christ. That is making politics and culture a God and tarnishing the gospel message into something that might be comfortable but it's not Christ.

People can see through this kind of thing. When these modern influences creep in credibility is shot, and the message dismissed.

Keep in mind when we are surrounded by fellow Christians who believe similar to us it's relatively easy to get head nods, "amens", and persuade one another to a faith-based claim.

It isn't existing believers we're trying to reach. It's new souls who have missed out on God and the love that Christ both offers and calls us to.

We have to be careful not to fall into the trap of the shepherds. Amazed and persuaded are not the same thing. Lots of things amaze us without persuading us to something new or transforming. I'm amazed at the skill of a welder, a musician, and artist, and accountant, and many others who do things easily that I can't. I'm not persuaded to follow in their footsteps. I'm amazed at the skill of many speakers and their ability to move and create a following. In faith circles the ones who have corrupted the gospels in favor of more convenient interpretations to appeal to emotion or people's biases do not persuade me to offer the same kind of preaching. So if this is the caution of the shepherds, and ALL of us are called to be evangelists as we bear the name of Christ, what are the things TO DO?

Their excitement, while it can create some issues, is also a phenomenal gift. What is it about your faith that excites you? What keeps you believing? What would you want someone else to benefit from if they chose to come to faith as well?

Are we excited to live this out in a way that is both joyful and inspiring? Are we excited enough about what our faith has done for us to put it out to the world in a way that speaks into the lives of others rather than just firing a prescribed, scripted message at a target and moving on?

This is where credibility comes from. Being excited enough about what faith has done and what God calls us to be that we live it day in and day out with integrity. We light up when talking about our own experiences with another. We take joy in getting to know where the other person or people are coming from, finding common ground, learning where our faith and their lives genuinely intersect so that it makes sense not just to us but to them as well.

The shepherds were just passing along a message that they had heard. We have a much grander witness. We have lived experience, heartfelt relationships born of faith and the Holy Spirit. We have seen a faith in Christ make a difference not just in our hearts but in the world around us. We have felt the fulfillment and contentment that occurs when life is lived truly in the light of Jesus.

We have experienced the mercy of receiving and giving forgiveness. We have had those "God moments" where the inexplicable has guided, strengthened, comforted, and healed us. It's not just a heard "say so". If we are genuinely living into our faith we have stories and stories of seeing and feeling God at work.

If we don't have those stories we need to do some deeper searching in our hearts and lives, or we need to get more intentional about living our faith in meaningful ways.

Who are we? We are evangelists bearing the name of Jesus. Do we bear it well?

In the Christmas story the shepherds were called to spread incredible news that was hard to believe because there was no real reference point.

In our story we get to spread incredible news by the lives that we lead. We can enter relationships where our faith is evident in real time and real experience. Our evangelism has teeth that the shepherds didn't when we demonstrated the love and grace we proclaim by offering it ourselves in honest, active, knowable ways.

Take the time to be that presence and take the chance to get to know people you haven't met before. Let them be amazed not just at a fantastic story, but at a life that defies the world in how it reflects Jesus. And pray that not only will it amaze but it will persuade others to come join us in the Kingdom of God both here in our hearts and lives, and we trust one day in eternity.

BIBLE STUDY

Chapter 13 in Mark is an “end times” chapter. There are a lot of question marks here though some things seem pretty crystal clear. The question marks come because of the confusion about when these “end times” are to take place.

Christians today are indoctrinated to believe we are living in the end times. They cite passages like this chapter in Mark as evidence. Jesus’ words carry great authority and weight. This chapter is viewed in light of Revelation, though there is absolutely no evidence that Mark wrote this with that intention in mind. The point being that many believe Jesus was future forecasting to our present day and age. Because of course this must apply to us.

The hiccup we get is that every generation from the time of Jesus on has felt the same way. They’ve all thought they were living in the end times. They were all wrong. For us to make this a core and central message of our faith in this light doesn’t make sense. Why are we so convinced we are right when literally every other generation, including Jesus’, was wrong?

The reason that every generation including Jesus’ believed this was because of the words of Jesus Himself. He quite literally said “this generation (meaning the one of His lifetime) would not pass away before the end”. So Paul believed this and every generation after.

Fortunately we have an out. People clutch their pearls when someone suggests that Jesus may have been wrong. He wasn’t about most of what He said. And if He was wrong that’s alright because with everything Jesus said He offers a condition. With all the “signs” and such He makes a clarifying claim. No one, not even Himself knows the day or the hour when the end will arrive. If that singular statement was wrong, that’s not a big deal. He was preparing the disciples for what was on the way. That it didn’t culminate in their lifetimes isn’t a negative reflection on this one statement.

The temple WAS destroyed in their generation. The abomination of desolation happened in several possible ways. Caligula put a statue of himself on the temple property. When the temple was destroyed, the Roman troops stood on the ruins (the desolation) displaying the symbol of Rome, the eagle (the abomination as an image other than God). The abomination of desolation from Daniel happened well before when Antiochus sacrificed a pig on the temple altar.

There were Jewish revolts and rebellions that brought the wrath of Rome. Christians were persecuted by Jew and Gentile alike. Praying that this kind of harsh treatment wouldn’t happen in the winter or pregnancy, or fleeing when you see it coming happened in their lifetimes. There were false Messiahs that actually came after Jesus that believers had to be mindful of.

Quite literally people turned one another in to Roman authorities, including family members. Jewish and Gentile Christians were at odds and turned on one another. If believers are considered family, one of Jesus’ own, Judas literally betrayed Him within a week or so of Him speaking this. Jesus’ own family called him “crazy”. The life of Paul bears out more of Jesus’ words. He was literally brought before councils when his preaching stirred up riots. Jewish councils and synagogues turned on him. He asked to see the governor when he was falsely imprisoned and was on his way to Rome to see Caesar as a result. These are all literal events that bore out Jesus’ predictions.

It’s passages like this that make the Biblical literalist have to take a pause, at least in America. We’re not being brought before any “councils” for believing in Jesus. There are no synagogues flogging and beating people for choosing to believe in Christ. These are the literal words of Jesus.

To apply them more broadly we have to break away from the literal. We have to assume that the literal was a generalization for “authorities of any sort”. The literal is too limiting as modern times have changed power structure.

Those structure existed in the time of Jesus’ and the generation following, which is how we can see that His predictions for His disciples were absolutely and completely spot on.

This becomes important in understanding this idea of the “elect”. Through history there are strains of Christianity that have put this in the context of predestination. In other words some people are chosen by God to be saved and others chosen to be damned. And there’s nothing that can be done about it.

In the context of Mark 13 the elect are the people Jesus is talking to in the conversation Mark records. They are His disciples. All of their time was “cut short” through martyrdom. They are His closest followers, so they are a good marker for just how deceptive the world can be. Even they, His closest friends and believers run the risk of being led away from their faith.

Rather than a statement of who is “in” and who is “out” Jesus is warning them that the world and its punishments and pleasures are powerful in compromising faith. So be careful! Almost immediately after is Jesus’ instruction for them to “watch out!”

In the middle, however is poetic description of the cosmos falling apart when Jesus returns. The mes

sage? When it happens it will be a moment of epic, universe shaking proportions. His return is not something to be missed as it will shake up the core of all creation.

In my opinion, the last portion of this chapter is what is most significant as we sort out the vagueries and question marks of what all this means given that Jesus says it will come in the generation of the disciples and yet we are still waiting.

“No one knows when”.

So keep watch. What does this mean? It means to be about the business of our faith. To follow the example of Jesus day in and day out. We know that day is coming but we don't know when. The track record isn't good for predictions so stop predicting.

Instead simply live a life of authentic, genuine faith. Don't try to scare people into faith with an “end times” message that hasn't been accurate for thousands of years. Instead live and give the message that is at the center of a genuine faith.

Love God. Love one another. Suspend judgment in favor of inviting people into fellowship so they can experience the love and grace of Jesus. Eat with the ones Jesus ate with. Stand with the ones He stood with. Pursue goodness in compassion, service, and mercy. Let these be the markers of faith that inspire others. That's what inspired people in the Acts 2 church.

The end times aren't about fear and paranoia. In fact I'm pretty glad it didn't end in that first generation. Otherwise we all wouldn't exist. That it hasn't happened is truly good news for everyone that hasn't yet come to know God and come to faith. Every moment delayed is another moment to reach new hearts and souls. Every moment is a chance to be transformed and inspire transformation.

The things Jesus talks about like wars and rumors of wars, people turning on one another, earthquakes and the like happened then and have always happened ever since.

Our job isn't to wring our hands over predicting the end. Our job is to live each day to the fullest in the light and grace of Jesus, continually trying to draw the world to Him.