

JANUARY 4, 2026

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON “What Happens Next?” Matthew 2:19-23, Luke 2:22-40

There is a question that we ask yet don't fully ask in the context of the Nativity story each year after Christmas. The question is this: “What happens next?” Of course we do this passively. What's next? Cleaning up after the holiday. Catching up after the holiday in life and work. Getting into the new year with some kind of new commitment. That sort of thing. But do we do it in light of the birth of Jesus?

Joseph and Mary had to figure out what happens next for the next several decades. They took Jesus to be presented at the temple. They fled to Egypt in Matthew. In all of it at the end of the birth story they did what every family does. They settled down. They settled in Nazareth where they lived and Jesus was raised. Jesus didn't do anything Himself in the birth story other than be born. Everything else was done by other folks. Including getting Him to Nazareth.

In fact scripture doesn't record anything beyond the birth story until His baptism and ministry except an incident in the temple after Passover. Mary and Joseph somehow forgot Him and had to return days later to fetch Him. He was in the temple with the famous, if a little snotty, response to their searching “where did you think I'd be? In my Father's house.” People were amazed at the questions He was asking and how He responded to questions asked to Him.

Other than that, nothing. In other words, for nearly three decades Jesus was in the average, ordinary, routine, mundane life. Mary and Joseph were in the average, ordinary, routine, mundane business of raising a child. And by accounts of His own hometown He wasn't anything special.

I know this offends some. People want to think that somehow Jesus was perfectly perfect, knew everything, and was the model and ideal child because of His divinity. Scripture says nothing of the sort.

In fact, if He had it all easy we couldn't say what we say about Him. We couldn't say He was fully human. We couldn't say He faced the same frustrations and temptations and all of that that we do. We couldn't say He fully understands our situation.

People pull out the divinity and humanity cards when it's convenient. Unfortunately it doesn't paint the most Biblically accurate or congruent picture or theology of Jesus. It seems that where Jesus fully stepped into His destiny and divinity was after His baptism. This doesn't erase His divinity from birth. It just textures the already impossible understanding of what it would be to be both human and divine at once.

Obviously He had some insights into scripture and faith. Yet at the temple He was still ASKING QUESTIONS. He had to learn to walk, read, do math, speak, have table manners, and what it meant to be a solid, observantly Jewish boy and man.

Ultimately He came into the purpose for which He came and then it seems that something in His divinity exploded into the world.

But no one in His hometown seemed to think anything special about Him. When He returns home in the gospels even His own family thinks He is crazy in the gospel of Mark. This wasn't just protective, it was also confused. If they thought He was really who He was and is they would have likely defended Him, not try to draw Him away from the crowds.

Someone remarks “isn't this the son of the carpenter?” This is a statement of disbelief. It's akin to “what's up with this guy? We knew Him when He was growing up. How on earth is He saying this stuff, and doing this stuff, and why are people listening?”

Even Jesus says “a prophet is not without honor except in his hometown.” In other words, when the prophet leaves to become who he is to become, the people who raised him still see him as the child they knew. They don't see who he becomes, they see who he was. Average.

If you're clutching your pearls at the idea of an average Jesus, sit tight. It's actually a good thing. First, scripture bears this out. Second, once His ministry picks up it's obvious He is anything but average. Still, it seems through most of His life the ones who knew Him best saw Him that way.

This is important, comforting, and inspiring.

Mary and Joseph had the question “what do we do with Jesus?” They were given Jesus, now what? What do they do with Him? There is responsibility, duty, and privilege in their task. And so it is with our own.

What they did was simply engage the routine. They cultivated a young man. They built a foundation of faith for Him. They taught Him what it was to be faithful. I am speculating, but it seems they did the consistent work

to build a good, solid faithful man.

And it paid off.

When the time came for Jesus to step up He did it. He stepped into His purpose and calling boldly. In His humanity He was prepared. It wasn't all divinity. It was training provided by His parents and family that set Him up for the extraordinary mission before Him.

This is the question for us now. What do we do with the Jesus we have?

Our world is filled with distraction. People want to be entertained constantly. That's the marketing of church. How do we make it exciting? Entertaining? Trendy? Fun? How do we tap into the wants and desires of the people we are seeking?

This isn't faith. It isn't Jesus. It isn't Joseph and Mary.

We don't move from extraordinary moment to extraordinary moment daily, weekly, monthly, or even yearly most times. A pastor I respect once talked about gimmick based ministry. He said that if you rely on entertaining you always have to find a "different rabbit to pull out of the hat." Ministry has to be consistent and solid. It has to have meaning even in the mundane because that's most of life.

The most inspiring people of faith I have met haven't been the loudest, most explosive folks. They have been the humble, quiet, consistent people who live faith day in and day out. They have a solidness about them. They are free from judgment, steadfast in love, and committed to serving wherever they are and go. Faith for them is routine.

What do we do with our Jesus?

We are called to imitate Him and cultivate His example in all that we do. Do we love the ones He loved? Do we reach out to the ones He reached out to? Do we ignore the judgment of the judgmental in order to live and love with the ones Jesus did? Do we do more than pray and read the Bible? Do we put His radical love into action day by day?

This is what comes next. Because we can all get better at doing just that. Making humble, steady loving faith the day to day.

It's so easy to get unfocused with everything at our fingertips. Our jobs. Our lives. Our hobbies. Our freaking phones! There is nowhere that distraction, entertainment, and having our desires fed can't reach. In all of it, we can let our faith shine through.

How we treat people. How we engage every circumstance has the potential to embody Jesus. And most of it isn't some kind of major fireworks moment, It's quiet. But in the quiet the Holy Spirit comes and works powerfully.

It's the routine, mundane, consistent practice and pursuit of faith in Christ that builds the foundation for the big moments. Like high performance athletes, what makes for the medal winning moment isn't just jumping in in the moment. It's the endless hours of quiet preparation beforehand.

That's what's always next for all of us. Living into faith in the routine of life. It's not easy with all of the things pulling at us. Living for Jesus is hard. It's also worth it. It's how the world has been changed and can continue to change for the better.

As we go forward into what's next, allow me to offer something from Jesus that I can only assume Mary and Joseph instilled in Him. Because it was evidenced in His willingness to do everything He did from the moment of His baptism onward.

The point of fellowship and worshipping together before God has become flipped in much of Christianity today. Jesus understood it. He entered His fullness with the following. He went forward to serve God with a "not My will but Thine" attitude. He went out to serve the community around Him, NOT to be served. In other words His whole Spirit was and is what can I do for God and others.

The desire for entertainment, excitement, and having our itches scratched is about wanting God, faith, and church to do for US.

Faith in Christ is about the grit, the grime, and faith in the midst of life. How can we give Jesus away in a manner that is more than words? How do we make Jesus PRESENT in the world and lives around us?

This is what's next. Loving Jesus. Worshipping Jesus. Following Jesus. And perhaps most of all embodying Him in every moment of life with our grace, compassion and mercy.

As we head into the new year this is my prayer for all of us. Focus outward rather than inward. Look more and more where we can give of ourselves so that others can feel and see Jesus in their lives.

It's in this that we find our fullest, happiest, most contented selves. It's in this we find that daily connection to God and the Holy Spirit that brings us the peace that surpasses understanding and makes us more and more the presence of Christ in any room we find ourselves. It's the most significant key to making the coming year more than the one behind us and our faith more impacting than ever.

BIBLE STUDY

Mark 14 brings us into the fullness of what we refer to as Holy Week. Jesus has confronted the religious leaders and they have purposed to kill Him. What's left is for it all to unfold.

There are some interesting pieces in Mark's account that are helpful to view in their own light and on their own merit. Other accounts provide other information that is often read into each other. Yet each one records what they record for a reason.

Notably in Mark's gospel Judas isn't villainized the way he is in John's gospel. He isn't accused of being a thief of the disciples' treasury. He isn't pointed out specifically at the last supper. For the most part once he makes the deal with the religious leaders to sell out Jesus he's left alone until he shows up in the garden of Gethsemane.

At Simon's house he is anointed by a seemingly wealthy woman. She anoints his head with expensive perfume worth a year's wages. When the disciples disagree, Jesus chides them that she's doing something good. This differs from John's account in that she anoints his feet in that gospel.

Here there is a double intention. Anointing the head is a sign of kingship. Mark wants us to be sure that she recognizes (as should we) Jesus as king. Jesus also points out that she is preparing for His burial. He foreshadows what is to come. In this moment is yet one more instance where the ones closest to Him, His disciples, miss His mission and identity. A nameless woman sees what they do not and responds with extravagance.

Immediately after this Judas betrays Him for an unnamed sum of money. There is a stark contrast here. In honoring Jesus this woman is made timeless as a reward of honor. Judas sells Him out for a relative pittance and will be remembered eternally as a heel.

Isn't this often the case? When we sell our faith we typically sell it cheap. For something that is fleeting and has no eternal value. When we honor Jesus it is typically in love. That love is the heart of God and like God eternal. Perhaps the reward for us is an eternal legacy from that love.

14 Now the Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread were only two days away, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were scheming to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him. 2 "But not during the festival," they said, "or the people may riot."

3 While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head.

4 Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, "Why this waste of perfume? 5 It could have been sold for more than a year's wages[a] and the money given to the poor." And they rebuked her harshly.

6 "Leave her alone," said Jesus. "Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. 7 The poor you will always have with you,[b] and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. 8 She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. 9 Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."

Next comes the last supper, the Passover meal. The upper room wasn't something gleaned out of divine mojo. Mark's telling makes it fairly clear that Jesus had already commissioned the place where they would eat. He sends a few ahead and they find the room and prepare the meal.

Announcing that He would betrayed the responses are expected. "Surely it's not me!!!" Judas would have been among those denying they had any part in it. Isn't this common? Shakespeare writes "thou dost protest too much."

Often the heightened protest is an indicator of guilt. I wonder what Judas's response sounded like. How much was he trying to play the convincing role? Frequently, particularly with certain personality types, the best way to know what they are up to is to hear what they accuse someone else of doing. Judas certainly falls into this category.

As Jesus symbolizes the bread and wine we do well to note that everyone was served. Including Judas. Jesus' offer wasn't only for those who were loyal. It was also, maybe more desperately so, for those who were His enemies. His offer of salvation is for everyone no matter how far they are from Him.

For us this begs a question. Do we have that same love? Can we sit even with those that are polar opposite of us for the greater cause of showing them the kind of love Jesus showed Judas?

Mark also doesn't mention that the covenant is for forgiveness of sins. This is something we get from other gospels and the later letters of the New Testament. The observation isn't questioning the meaning. Though it does help us understand if they are still a bit dim in grasping Jesus' meaning. The nature of the covenant isn't made clear.

As they leave for the garden it isn't noted but it can be assumed that this was Judas's moment. As they went to the garden, Judas made way to the ones he'd betrayed Jesus to.

10 Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them. 11 They were delighted to hear this and promised to give him money. So he watched for an opportunity to hand him over. The objections of the disciples also makes for a heightened sense of the interactions while Jesus is praying. They all swear up and down they will go to the death for Jesus. Peter is quoted, but Mark notes that all of them swear along with him. Jesus says to the first and most outspoken that not only will he abandon Him, he will deny Him. It's almost like Jesus is saying it would be better to run than endure the shame of denying. When they get to the garden Jesus separates the disciples out. This makes me wonder if He returned to all of them or just the three that went further to find them sleeping. As with the Transfiguration, Jesus culls out James, John, and Peter to come with Him further into the garden. The sense is that within the close twelve there were a closer three. These three would go on to become essential pillars in the early church, though not to disregard the others and their missionary work as well.

Famously Jesus prays for the task to be taken but relinquishes to God's will. Twice He takes a break and goes back to the ones He'd told to 'keep watch'. They are sleeping each time.

Here is the significance of this in relation to their protesting abandoning Him. They pledged to face death on His behalf, but staying awake was too tall a bill... No wonder His frustration. With their mouths they committed to ultimate sacrifice and devotion. With their actions they couldn't even stay conscious in Jesus' dark hour of need.

This is a lesson for us all. We need to be careful what we speak and ask if we can really follow through. There may be people we let down that are depending on us. Words matter little in the face of action or inaction. The statement that the spirit is willing but the flesh weak is a reminder to them to not forego prayer. Prayer focuses. It helps us keep the course.

When Judas arrives he takes a common symbol of intimate friendship, a kiss, and turns it into a sign of betrayal. The scuffle that happens next is different in Mark than other gospels. The one who slices off the servant's ear is nameless as opposed to other accounts naming Peter. Why does this matter?

In Mark's account, the fear of the priests is important. They say they can't arrest Him publicly because there would be outrage and revolt. Here, in the dead of night, an unnamed bystander witnesses the arrest. He is so incensed that he draws his sword and lops off an ear. Mark puts the exclamation point on that sentiment. Imagine if this is what happened in the middle of the night how it would have happened in the middle of the day in a crowded courtyard.

Perhaps the intensity is ramped up by Jesus pointing out this very thing to those arresting Him. In essence He is calling them all cowards.

The naked young man is a confusing figure. There have been theories over who this guy was through the ages. What makes the most sense rather than trying to detective out his identity is to let Mark use the incident as another exclamation point. The scene was so dire, the flight of the disciples and other so extreme that this young man ran out of his clothes. Likely he was wearing a simple tunic that would unravel. Haste was utmost. The trial is short and complicated yet simple. In order to charge and convict they need people to agree on the accusation. They can't get that to happen. Jesus is quiet. Why? There's no need to defend Himself when they can't even get their own act together to force a conviction.

In the end, He makes a statement that He knows will get Him punished. Not for their satisfaction, but so that He could satisfy His purpose and mission.

Meanwhile Peter is following behind. The story is familiar. As Jesus predicted He would deny Him three times before the rooster crows twice so it comes to pass. Each denial Peter is moving further away from Jesus.

Finally the rooster crows and Peter weeps.

There is something in this that is worth noting. Of course we don't want to deny Jesus. We want to stay strong by His side no matter what. All of that is assumed I think. That said, we should be a little gracious with Peter. In some manuscripts and translation, the rooster crows that first time as Peter has his first denial. One might think this would be enough to wake him up and pay attention to not repeat the mistake. It doesn't. It continues two more times.

How many times have I done the same thing? How many times have I been warned and seen that first red flag? How many times have I ignored it? How many times have I faced consequences because of it?

Too many.

Peter's mouth wrote checks he couldn't cash in actions. All of us are guilty of the same.

So what do we do? Do we wallow? Do we give up? No. We regroup and carry on. If we know the rest of the story that's what Peter did. In the end he became one of the greatest of the apostles.

Our big mistakes aren't the end of our stories. Sometimes they are hiccups on the way to something much greater.