

JANUARY 18, 2026

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON "Commit...or Don't?" Luke 14:25-34, James 4:13-17

Heading into the new year is always a good time to talk about resolutions. Goals might be a better way to frame it actually. It's interesting. Some people are very adamant about making a goal or resolution for the new year. Others are adamant about NOT making a goal or resolution.

In terms of faith, which one is more holy? Which one is better?

The answer is a simple "yes". Like so many things, there is a circumstance and situation aspect to even this kind of simple question. Some will tell you that you need goals to succeed. Others that flying by the seat of your pants and going with the flow is the right way to conduct life.

Scripture has some things to say about goal setting. The problem is that different writers seem to have differing ideas on the matter. This doesn't make scripture disagreeable. Rather I see it as a reality that life and life situations aren't often if ever cut and dried with a "one size fits all" solution.

One of the great Christian cliches is that if our goal or idea is something we can accomplish on our own then God isn't in it. Nowhere does the Bible say this. The idea is people cherry picking a few verses, putting their own interpretive spin on it, and then using it to guilt people if they are thinking practically.

Note a lot of those same churches and preachers that teach this idea behind the scenes are working strategies and some even using consulting firms to figure out how to raise the resources for the project they aren't "trying to do on their own". Depending on how far down the rabbit hole the church is willing to go every tactic can be absent genuine Christian motivation and even sway towards manipulation.

The point being that even those pushing the line don't fully believe it themselves.

Luke is a great example of where scripture itself points to wisdom in not only setting a goal, but also determining if we can see it through.

The passage is about discipleship. Do we really have what it takes to commit to Jesus with the whole of our lives? We should sort this out before making promises we can't keep. Commitments to God shouldn't be taken lightly.

The illustrations Jesus uses are real life instances. A building project. Going to battle. In any endeavor there is wisdom in looking ahead to see if we are on a fool's errand. These examples aren't being belittled by Jesus. They are positive models for making decisions including decisions regarding our faith and relationship with Jesus.

Our congregation exemplified this with the addition to our building that was completed in 2018. The decisions weren't knee jerk. It was years of meeting and planning. We did a feasibility study. What is that? It's asking this very question about the goal. Is it reasonable? Can it be done?

Of course there is the aspect of trusting God in the midst of it. Pledges and resources were made up front. There was still a large sum to be accounted for. That is the faith part. But that faith isn't based in foolishness. It isn't just making a decision to do something big and then asking God to pick up the slack.

That combination of faith mixed with goal setting and forward thinking yielded the building we have as well as it being paid off in what has to be some kind of record time. It wasn't faith without a reality. It was looking at reality and mixing with faith that produced an incredible result.

Luke 14 would tell us to set goals. To chart a course to see if we can make good on our commitments. Then work hand in hand with God as we pursue whatever end we have faithfully discerned.

A resolution can be an incredibly holy endeavor. It focuses us. Keeps us tethered to a course of action. When our perspective is correct it is done hand partnering with God and elevating the faith in our lives.

On the other hand, for some a resolution can be binding to a fault. For some laser focus on an outcome can work against faith rather than with it. In some way this may be what James is getting at.

James comes at it from a more noncommittal standpoint. Don't get too caught up in plans down the road when we don't even know what tomorrow will bring. The goals we set can actually interfere with us doing what God wants us to do if we're not flexible.

We get so caught up in our own plans that God's calling gets sidelined or we deafen ourselves to the Holy Spirit. Notice the end of the passage says "If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them."

In other words is God is speaking and we are so taken with our own ambition that we don't listen, that is sin. If there is something we neglect because of our own plans, and God is calling us to it, that is itself sin.

For some, making a goal is holy because it keeps focus on God and there is an ability to flex if and when God may call us go.

For others, not making a fixed plan is also holy. It is their way of staying open to the steering of the Holy Spirit and available for whatever God may have for them.

Which is correct, to plan or not to plan? Well perhaps the answer I can't give you. Where are you in life? Where are you in your relationship with God? What is doing to help you be most faithful to Christ in the coming year?

Could that change? Of course it could. I could dive into a hard and fast plan and get called to something entirely different down the road. I could also start out very open and free and then something makes itself known that is a clear path demanding rigorous planning and attention.

The reality of this world we're in and the lives we're given is that it is unpredictable and yet predictable.

It looks different at different phases of life but all of us plan. All of us set goals. All of us have said "this is where'd I'd like to be in such and such amount of time." Sometimes it's worked out.

Sometimes life has gotten in the way or God has redirected us and things don't end up the way we hoped.

In all of it there is one constant to keep in mind. Being open to and following the direction of the Holy Spirit.

If we goal set and plan we do it in conjunction with God. If we are open and less focused we do that also in conjunction with God.

Last week we talked about a common goal together as a congregation. To go and find those that church has left out, forgot, set aside, or those who just haven't found a place to worship. Bring them in.

The question for each of us is the same and also very unique to the individual. How will we do it? Where is God calling me to serve and to love people into a community of faith? Who will I meet that is seeking a place to serve and love their neighbor?

Do you need a plan and a goal? Do you just need to be more open to what God is doing day by day?

That's an answer only you can find and give. What I encourage is this. Let the process be tied to attentiveness to the Holy Spirit. Let whatever the means of fulfilling your 2026 call be rooted in modeling the love of Christ. Stay connected together as a church family and let everything be done with a spirit of the holy. Knowing that the adventure of faith is a textured combination of God using you in your uniqueness and wonder, all the while moving us to common purpose of inviting the world around us into a genuine life and connection with the authentic Christ of scripture.

BIBLE STUDY mark 15

We've seen to this point that Mark seems to move much faster than other gospels in a variety of ways. His points are made abruptly. The trial and crucifixion are no exception. Where the other gospels offer many other details Mark is much more skeletal. The core elements are there. Pilate. Mocking. Flogging. Barrabas. Sign King of the Jews. Carrying cross through Jerusalem. Dying. Buried.

The more I read Mark, the more I am reminded how much we try to synthesize all the gospels into one molded story. The crucifixion makes this very apparent with the details not included. What is included then is significant. Mark is making Mark's statement. Not Matthew's, Luke's, or John's. Mark's.

The pace is rushed. Everything pre-crucifixion takes place before 9am. What does this tell us? The religious leaders were moving fast. Don't let people know what's going on. Get it done early and quickly. Even Jesus' conversation with Pilate is fast. A couple questions with largely little to no response. The outcome is already decided. Why bother prolonging it?

One of the questions that comes up is the idea of "crowd". Who was in it? How big was it? Many say the "same ones who welcomed Him Palm Sunday shouted 'crucify!' on Friday." Says who? Not Mark. There is no indication of the size of the "crowd" or who was in it.

What we do know is they were sympathetic to the religious leaders. To me this makes sense. Who else could they round up last minute and early in the morning? Whoever was present was willing to cosign on the idea that Jesus needed to die, whatever the rest of the people might have wanted. And we know from the religious leaders that Jesus was popular.

Releasing a prisoner contrary to what we often think was NOT a common occurrence. This piece of the story is an outlier to history. Rome didn't just release an insurrectionist on a whim or a request from some second or third class citizens. Yet here we are with Barrabas.

What might be at play?

Perhaps it's Pilate's attempt at some measure of crowd control. A bold leader willing to stand up to Rome might have had some standing. Someone brave enough to act on what everyone else was thinking often

would. Was Barrabas a good balance to also calming the leadership who wanted Jesus dead? Perhaps. Let go of a “hero” and quietly “dispose of” a “heel”. Whatever the motive it didn’t seem to be drawn out.

Quickly we move to the mocking. The soldiers mock Jesus as “King” after a flogging. Mark hasn’t forgotten that Jesus indicated His suffering that needed to occur. Here it is leading up to the crucifixion itself.

Once again we move fast. The journey to Golgotha takes up little space. Simon is introduced helping Jesus to bear the cross on the walk from trial to execution. Why this detail? One reason might be credibility. None of Jesus’ followers were present for any of this. Simon may well have been a reputed person in the early Christian communities. He would have been known. This puts a credible witness into the account for reference.

It also brings up another matter. Why do so many Christians make such a big deal that Jesus carried His cross the entire way from Pilate to Golgotha? It’s not scriptural! He had help from Simon.

I suggest that modern Christianity has succumbed to a flair for entertainment and the dramatic. A visual of a nearly dead Jesus hefting a full cross through the streets is dramatic. It’s one more thing to use as an illustration to make some point about suffering and dedication. It’s also unnecessary. It gives in to the modern willingness to change the story for the sake of some other agenda.

Simon’s service may be even more noteworthy than having Jesus dragging a full on cross (in fact it’s more likely He only would have carried the cross bar, not the full post). In any event, the story is compelling, horrific, and dramatic on its own. No need to muddy the waters.

The wine and myrrh would have been intended to dull Jesus’ senses. This detail matters. Rather than let Himself wade through what’s next addled He ensures He is aware and present.

The division of clothes paints the beginning of a very stark picture. Notice that Mark doesn’t make any references to “prophecies” fulfilled. This event is associated with Psalm 22. That doesn’t seem to be relevant to note for Mark. Instead it begins to paint a picture of absolute abandonment and desolation. The ones crucifying Him are so careless and nonchalant about this event that while He is beginning His death ordeal after a horrific flogging they are rolling dice for His clothes.

The time stamp of 9am emphasizes our early point that this is a rushed event. The label is the charge against Him. Unlike other gospels there isn’t any conversation between priests and Pilate about the validity of the claim. It’s merely a detail of the accusation worthy of execution.

Then quite literally everyone is calling Jesus out. Unlike Luke’s account, both of those crucified with Jesus insult Him. Passersby insult Him. Their familiarity with Jesus’ own words suggest they may have had a fonder sense of Him prior. Jesus followers have deserted Him and everyone has turned on Him.

In a spirit of grace, though, let’s consider their perspective. If they were seeing Jesus as a hero and Messiah this moment would have felt like a betrayal. He’d led them to believe He was one thing but heroes and Messiah’s don’t die. They conquer. His hanging on a cross made Him a deceiving liar.

Even His death was filled with misunderstanding and mocking. The words translated “My God, My God why have You forsaken Me?” were misunderstood as Jesus calling on Elijah. That became one more sticking point for jabbing at Him as He hung there dying.

The expression about being forsaken in some circles is seen as God truly and genuinely turning God’s back on Jesus because He “became sin” and “God can’t look on sin”. Thus God abandoned Jesus in this moment. There are a few issues with this.

We are sinful, unavoidably so. If God can’t look on sin, according to this understanding, God turns God’s back on us constantly. If God forsakes the sin and sinful then God forsakes each and every one of us.

Instead, we understand that this moment on the cross wasn’t God turning from us but rather God sacrificing for us specifically because God sees our sinfulness, takes pity on our powerlessness, and makes up the difference in grace for what we can’t do ourselves. Nevermind that if Jesus IS God, then it makes no sense for God to be able to forsake Godself, particularly when the outcome was foregone.

I would like to offer something else. Mark paints for us a picture of absolute despair. Jesus is completely and utterly alone and abandoned. Every ounce of the scene is written to demonstrate an unfair and dishonest conviction rushed to execution in the absence of any sympathy, grace, mercy, or compassion. This moment is intimately human. The humanity of Jesus is on full display here.

How many of us have felt this way under far less extreme circumstances? It seems all is lost and hope is gone. We cry out to God and it feels like we’re talking to the ceiling with no answer. Help isn’t coming. Relief seems impossible. The despair to our core feels as if God has forsaken us and in our own words we utter our own version of Jesus’ cry on the cross.

As He dies the temple curtain tears. Mark gives us no reason. He gives us no theological explanation. He merely reports. Interpreting it is up to us. The centurion seems to recognize that Jesus is the Son of God. We don’t know why. Something about this moment spoke to Him but we aren’t told what. Again, that is up to us to figure out.

Then Mark details that while immediate to Jesus was no one He knew, there were some women who were a distance off. Not His inner group of disciples, some others. What do we take from this? Sometimes the ones we think are further from us are in reality much closer than we realize? When we think we are alone often we are not?

What comes next is another anomaly. Joseph secures Jesus' body for burial. This is unusual. Rome did not take bodies down. They left them there to be picked by animals and rot. The placard identifying the charge for their execution had a purpose. Tell passers by "if you commit this crime this will be you." The whole point was a deterrent. Leave the destroyed body on display as a warning.

Perhaps it was Joseph's standing. Perhaps his wealth. We don't know. Whatever the reason Pilate responded positively. Jesus is buried. There are two details important here. With the quick pace of the chapter and the brevity of detail, that Mark includes these things matters.

First, there is a necessity for Jesus' body to be taken down and buried. Without this, the resurrection doesn't occur. Not in any fashion that we understand it. To move from crucifixion to resurrection, Jesus must be buried.

Second, Mark gives the names of two women who see where Jesus is buried. Why? How can they know where to go to discover the resurrection otherwise?

Mark's brevity paints a picture of a Redeemer willing to sacrifice even in the face of complete and utter abandonment and mercilessness. At the same time, details are offered where needed.