

FEBRUARY 15, 2026

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON "It Begins In the Pew" Acts 6:1-7, Hebrews 10:19-25

This week we are getting into a very back to basics sense of things. As we consider the idea that things begin in the pew we need to remember a few things.

The pew is just a symbol of the community of faith. We are all aware that the church is the people. The building is called the church, but what it really is is a tool. The community needs a place to gather together, to fellowship, worship, study, serve, and grow together. The building is a tool to provide space for that to happen. The church, however, is the people. We do well to remember that most of our faith isn't lived in the walls of the church. It's lived in the world where we are called to be a witness to the love of God revealed in Christ. The community of faith is the place where we find the guidance to do precisely this.

Unfortunately we live in a world where many have decided that participating in a community of faith isn't necessary to be a Christian. Or that participation isn't a priority but rather is just a here and again thing people do when it suits.

Let's be honest, it is true that sitting in a pew every Sunday doesn't make someone a Christian any more than standing in a flower pot with dirt around our ankles makes us rose bushes. That said, there are some things to unpack.

First we have to remember that the community of faith has always been integral to faith itself. There are reasons why we'll get to. But consider the early church. Paul didn't just make individual converts and send them on their way. He began his ministry in a town in what we might call the "Jewish church", the synagogue. A community. After he'd persuaded all the Jews he was going to accept Christ as Savior he'd typically find a hub in a gentile home or some building offered up by a gentile convert. Then he'd be about the work of building a community of believers that could grow together, support one another, and serve together in a Christ centered love that intended to bring more and more people to faith.

If we are successful, as Paul was, at some point the intention is for our community to grow beyond a size that can meet in a living room. When this happens we need to find a bigger place to house the community of faith. A place to gather together.

The church isn't evil or bad, despite what some people associate it with. Though evil and bad things are done by the church.

Most people who say they don't need a church at times forget that without a community of faith they likely wouldn't have the faith that they want to live outside the community of faith. The community is frequently where the gospel gets put into the world. Even podcasts, television worship services, online experiences and such are most frequently supported or put out by existing communities of faith.

Some see faith as consumer oriented like much of the world. They want to get whatever "fix" they need but don't feel the need to participate or actively engage in the ministry that they enjoy. It's about receiving but active involvement isn't desired. This misses the critical aspect that all of us are called to the great commission, to make disciples of others.

I can believe that Jesus is my Savior on my own, yes, The gospels and the New Testament don't support that this on its own is the kind of faith Jesus requires. Faith isn't passive. It is active. There is doing, growing and serving that are the signs that a faith is genuine.

Others have been hurt by the church. If you've heard of deconstruction that's this. Folks have spent their lives or a good portion of it being indoctrinated by a community of faith. As the mature and start to move past just swallowing what they are taught they find that they have been misinformed, manipulated, outright lied to, and in too many cases abused in a variety of ways.

They move away from the church to take time to ask the questions and do the work needed to deconstruct the incorrect and damaging things they were taught and experienced. For some they never find their way back to faith. For others they reconstruct an honest faith that has integrity and find a community of faith that they can connect with. For others still they are victim to the reality that often theology is regional. They try to find a congregation that falls outside the hurtful things they lived through but time after time walk back into the same problems. They tire and settle to live their faith on their own.

The problem is that too often churches and pastors victim blame. "They just don't like being told about sin." "They got caught up in some worldly philosophy that's driven them away from the truth." Unfortunately

these are both typically far off base.

They are smokescreens to blame the people hurt rather than take an honest look in the mirror and do the work to root out the problems. Sadly the problems are often what give the church control and a steady income. And people are hard pressed to let go of money and power.

The thing is that all of this, the good and the bad, begin in the pews. The wonderful teaching that grows us, the community that nurtures us, the relationship cultivated with God, the opportunities to serve more effectively together than we can alone, all of it begins in the pews. So does the damaging and harmful teaching that deceives people to worship a God that isn't God, believe in a savior that isn't Jesus, and embrace values that would make Jesus cringe and talk about a "brood of vipers".

Our job here is to ensure that what is happening in the pew is to the good.

The community of faith should be indispensable for us and for the world. The intent was never to do harm, but only to grow the presence of the Spirit of Christ in the world through His followers. When we are rightly focused, we do it far better together than alone. Not only is our reach further, but we give a more consistent and reliable place for a believer to get support, accountability, strength, comfort, and loving compassion rooted in an authentic imitation of the Jesus of the gospels.

But it begins in the pews. Then it carries out to every other area of life.

The story of Steven is a great example of this. At the time Christianity was largely a Jewish movement. In their community were Jews from Greece, or Hellenistic Jews, in addition to their own homegrown folks. Part of the community responsibility was caring for widows and it came about that the Greek widows were being neglected.

The community recognized the apostles were already over busy with teaching and preaching. What to do? Find some people trustworthy in the community to handle the situation. Stephen was one of those people.

Without the community, needs would be unmet. Something that makes for a strong faith would suffer. Community is necessary to care for one another.

We do this caring for one another each and every week in different ways. The one place where we are able to reliably have a place for it is on Sunday mornings. In this short time Sunday morning we fellowship, worship, study, pray, and work towards those missions where we serve together through the week. It is where we find the family that keeps us grounded. Keeping a strong faith unshaken by the world around us also begins in the pew.

Often the Hebrews passage we read is used as a guiltning tactic to get people to show up. "Don't forsake the assembling". Instead I find it more significant to remember WHY it says to come together. Hebrews gives us one of the purposes for coming together, "to spur one another on toward love and good deeds."

We come together to make sure our faith is not just a passive idea but an active force changing the world.

. In finding our faith and coming together we also ask the greater question. When I look at the congregation I ask "what can I do for God?" "How can I serve?" "What love and good deeds am I being spurred on towards?"

Wouldn't that be refreshing? When you see a social media post from someone looking for a congregation to have their main question be "where can I find a church with plenty of opportunities to serve God by loving my neighbor?"

All of this begins in the pew. The fellowship. The growing. The serving. The place where we get renewed. The place where we can gather to make a Kingdom of God impact on our little slice of the world.

Our present culture and climate can daily seek to lead our words, deeds, and certainly values and attitudes far away from Jesus. There is hate, violence, callousness, as well permission to dehumanize groups of people and see them as less than confronting us too frequently.

None of this reflects the grace and love of the Christ who calls us to lead the world to a relationship with God. The ugliness and harshness only break our witness down. Too often there are people raising their hands on Sunday morning, or preaching from the pulpit that justify these things and even attribute them to Christ. Sadly sometimes these senses begin in the pew or at least can be approved or championed while sitting in the pew.

Our task together, as we are called in Hebrews, is to be a community that reminds one another who we are and who we are called to be.

This week I have a challenge. For everyone here and everyone watching from home. If we want people to see the value in coming together as a community of faith, the first thing we have to do is make that commitment ourselves. So here's your task.

Each week look around the sanctuary on Sunday morning. Take notice of who you know that isn't here. You might know why they aren't. They might be sick, on vacation, working, or some other reason. Or you might

not know. You might wonder if they are okay, or just miss seeing them. Missing one another is part of community.

So each week, if you wonder, if you miss someone who isn't here, pick up the phone and call them. Ask how they're doing. Let them know they were missed and they matter. Not in a guilt-inducing way. In the way that we're intended to be glued together as brothers and sisters in Christ. In love.

If we want to see us grow in 2026, it starts with those who are already part of our congregation. Connecting together and coming together often. We want to reach those outside our walls for Jesus, but like many things, it begins in the pew with us.

BIBLE STUDY Zechariah 1

Zechariah is written at the same time as Haggai. The people have returned from Babylon. In Haggai they are held accountable for leaving the Temple in ruins and called to rebuild. Zechariah's tone is different yet equally necessary. Where Haggai had direct messages, Zechariah has visions in this first chapter.

While Zechariah is held in a similar tradition to prophets like Jeremiah and Isaiah, his context is entirely different. They were prophesying in accusation against kings and the conduct of the people. They warned of a coming calamity and punishment by God for their disobedience.

Zechariah is on the other end. The people and kings didn't listen. They were punished. The people suffered. Now they've served their "time" and are back in their homeland. This is about what comes next. If they've learned their lesson restoration and rebuilding is now the order of the day.

The first six verses highlight this. It is a reminder that their ancestors messed up and were held accountable. Now they are returned and in a time to move forward.

There is an interesting sense in this opening passage. God says that God will "return to you if you return to me." This is an important distinction of where they understood God then as to where we understand God now. Now we understand that God never leaves us or turns God's back on us. This is a clear statement that God turned God's back on them and is now turning towards them as a result of their repentance.

My point isn't to dispute scripture. It is to keep us honest in our communicating it. The people of Israel had an evolving understanding of God. Our sense is that they got closer and closer to the truth of it. Jesus says things like "I am with you to the end of the age" and "I will never leave you nor forsake you." This gives us the idea that God is ever present with us and the story of the prodigal son that God never turns from us. God just waits for us to return when we run away.

Here they clearly have the notion that God can and does ignore them. That was their understanding and that it was conditional on their obedience.

I think we've come closer to the truth of God's presence and closeness to us. I'm simply suggesting that to say that God never turning away as being conveyed in all of scripture isn't accurate. We don't have to lean away from our understanding. We just need to be honest that the understanding of God's people, even and especially in scripture, gets more tuned in with experience, time, and seeing how God works in the world.

This is also present in the idea of the "Lord of hosts". In David and Saul's time the understanding was that each nation had their own God. That God's power was mightiest and even limited to the territory they reigned over. Israel's God reigned in Israel and the Philistine God reigned in Philistia. This is why nations warring attributed victory to whose God was stronger. It is also why the Philistines were so confused when the statue of their god, Dagon, was toppled by the God of Israel in Dagon's own temple and the territory over which Dagon reigned.

Israel's God was seen as one of many equal gods in some divine council.

This changed. It kind of had to. In Babylon we have the stories of Daniel and the lions' den and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace. Clearly God was active in this foreign land delivering God's faithful servants. God must be more than a God confined to the borders of Israel. God was the Lord of all the earth.

In other words, God is the God over all the hosts. If there is a divine council of gods, God rules over them all. If we want another sense of how these early folks believed, keep in mind that one of the ten commandments is "thou shall have no other gods before me." They clearly believed that there were other gods around (even if we now disagree) but that the God of Israel was superior above all the others.

The first vision sets Zechariah in a place between heaven and earth. The darkness around the myrtles suggest that this vision is in a place where the borders of heaven and earth are blurred. As the people are returning from exile into a renewed sense of relationship with God, even the vision is a place where the world is coming into a connection with the divine.

Zechariah is never in direct contact with God. Perhaps it would be too much, even deadly? Whatever the case the interaction has an angelic intermediary to pass along messages. The horses represent God seeing the status

of the world around them at the time.

The world is at “peace”, it is “quiet”. A better term might be “complacent”. Judah is complacent having returned home. Other nations were also returned home by the Persians and allowed to rebuild their own temples, cities, and homes. I suppose they too were complacent. Everyone was good with the status quo. Exiles home. Persia satisfied that they’d found a way to gain peace and cooperation in their empire. All was “well”. The problem is that Judah was self satisfied and lackluster reconnecting with God and the other nations fine with their power, rule and control. Specifically up against the Israel. Haggai helps correct his in his prophecy getting them to rebuild the temple.

For Zechariah evidently God has seen this work and here is looking to comfort Judah. “When will your judgement relent?” is the question. “Now!” is God’s response. Everything in these two visions is dependent on God. Where Haggai calls for action on the part of the people, God is taking charge and willing to restore His nation and people.

God will choose them again. God will bring prosperity . God will comfort them. God will bring judgement on those that have harmed Israel.

My question was “why will God bring judgement?” Didn’t God command the foreign nations as instruments of God’s punishment? Didn’t God tell them to give Israel and Judah a spanking? How is it then fair to punish them?

I believe that verse 15 helps this. God claims to have been angry but that the nations went too far in punishment. Yes, there was consequence ordained however perhaps in human error that consequence was issued to harshly. Therefore consequence on those nations is merited.

This is the sense of the second vision. Four horns is four kingdoms that tormented Israel and Judah. Four blacksmiths are responsible for settling those kingdoms down. Judah will have peace and prosperity because God will act and lay down a consequence for these kingdoms.

It doesn’t say which kingdoms. It doesn’t say what the blacksmiths will be. We don’t know. That doesn’t matter.

What we get from these visions is rather simple. Before concluding one more thing is present and helpful. There is symbolism of a red horse, a white horse and such. There is temptation when we see these things to take other understandings and impose them. The horses can draw our minds to revelation and the symbolism of the colors there with the “four horsemen of the apocalypse”.

We need to resist this temptation. Zechariah here isn’t concerned with Revelation. At all. To confuse the two books and force one to inform the other isn’t honest. It also draws away from Zechariah’s intention and meaning. Jumping to the end times here is a gross mistake. Zechariah isn’t about judging and consequence to Judah, it’s about their hope. It’s not even about destruction of other nations. It’s about pacifying them for the benefit of Judah.

The horses are just a means to let us know that God has seen what’s going on in the world.

What these visions remind Judah of is that God is with them. Despite the last seventy years of punishment, they are home. They are repentant and on the way to getting things back on track (as we saw in Haggai with the rebuilding of the Temple). And God is on their side. Not only will the people act, but God will be actively present in restoring them. They can move forward knowing that they are seen, loved, and supported by the God to whom they have returned.

This message is beautiful and necessary in our present day. No matter how far we might stray from God, God is ready for our return. When we faithfully live into what life might hand us, particularly in our mistakes, God can restore us. God will be with us as we rebuild. In other words, God isn’t done with us. We can always move forward knowing that when we are faithful to God, God is faithful to us.