

MARCH 1, 2026

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON "Lighter Than You Think" Romans 3:9-19. Romans 8:5-12

The season of Lent is one of reflection and preparation for the remembering of Good Friday and the celebration of Easter. Many times it is painted as an almost somber season in our Christian year. In Christian history there is no shortage of guilt that is laid on believers for the cost of our redemption.

There are always those who have painted humanity is nothing but worthless, depraved, unable to make even the slightest good choice, unable to love, and more. The idea is that our worthless hides deserve nothing but punishment and so it's only by God that we even have a shot of escaping eternal torment.

You can hear these messages often from pulpits around the world. Our own language reflects this when we almost reflexively repeat this message.

But is it accurate? Is it truly Biblical? Do we honestly believe it?

There are scriptures that certainly point to problems with our human judgment and desires. Paul cites many of them in Romans 3. He is quoting Psalms and at times quoting prophets. Jeremiahs talks about the heart being constantly deceitful. Genesis talks about every thought of the people's heart was evil.

Cherry picking these verses to the exclusion of others the case for what John Calvin called total depravity can be made.

Making people feel worthless and guilty serves a very real purpose. If I can convince you that you mean nothing and the only place you find it is with what I have to offer you, then I've got you. I become the source that points you to value and some kind of escape from being punished for something you didn't even ask for. To be born sinful.

The thing is that most of us don't fully buy into this line. Christians can be worried about saying what I'm about to say because we're afraid of what someone else might say. That maybe we don't have the faith or we're not Biblical.

The truth, however, is that we don't look at one another as worthless. We don't look at one another as incapable of making a good choice. We don't look at one another as evil to the core.

We don't because we've seen the good that people have chosen.

When a friend, partner, or child makes a mistake we don't look at them and say "well of course you did, you're evil at your core. You have no decency in your heart whatsoever. It's a miracle that's all you did. And don't get me started on what you really deserve for your rottenness."

We don't do that because we don't believe it in real time, real relationship, and real space. We question it because while we attribute so much to our faith, we've also all seen people who have no faith at all still be loving, merciful, compassionate, kind, generous, and gracious.

How can this be?

It's because we do well to remember what the rest of the Bible also says. It says you are fearfully and wonderfully made. It talks about your great value and worth in the sight of God. In fact you are so valuable that God came sacrificially for your redemption. There are the stories of Noah, Joseph, Daniel, and more. Hebrews talks about those in the Old Testament that made good and right decision and it was counted to them as righteousness.

In the midst of long lists of kings who did wickedly in God's sight, there are also those who did right in God's sight.

Keep in mind as well the context of much of those extreme statements. They were often in the midst of referring to extreme wickedness done in a particular time and place. They are poems of passion and frustration at how much bad people have done. They are comparisons such as our "righteousness being as filthy rags". Of course they are compared to the goodness of God.

Romans 8 also reminds us that we are capable of making a choice about what to dwell on. Do we dwell on things of the flesh, of the world? Our own agendas and selfish desires? Or do we dwell on the things of the Spirit? Do we dwell on Christ and His desires for us?

This is a choice. Offered to us. It's not a choice if we're not capable of making it.

That doesn't mean the statements about wickedness don't have their place. Of course they do! Every person has the potential for incredible evil. All of us pushed far enough could do things that in this moment when we're in our right mind and things are safe and stable we couldn't imagine. We all have temptations. We have

impulses and urges.

We should be wary of the dark parts of our hearts. That's how we improve our chances of not giving into them. The other side of the coin also exists. You have the Spirit of God in you. You were created in God's image. You can make the good and right choices. In fact according to Paul we are called to grow in faith day by day so that the things of the Spirit grow in our lives to the point that we don't have the time, space, or desire to indulge the things of the flesh. Ephesians 2:10 reminds us that God has good works we're intended to do. Hebrews calls us together to encourage one another to loving hearts and good works.

Beyond our redemption, faith in Christ holds another value. It goes with repentance. If I have no reference point for what is correct and right, I don't know fully when I make those mistakes and need to change.

Jesus gives us that model and reference. We have His Spirit to ping us when we make mistakes. We have His sacrifice that forgives. We have His example to strive towards in practical day to day living.

This combination of graces we receive through Jesus reminds us of our worth before God. It reminds us that we have the potential to do good in the sight of God. There's a reason Jesus tells us to long for hearing the words "well done good and faithful servant." You can be that good and faithful servant. I can be that good and faithful servant.

Yes, all of us have a dark side, but many times we are also filled with more light than we realize. The world around us continues to be dark and sometimes feels like it's getting darker. As children of God and followers of Jesus we have a responsibility to be the light the world needs.

Take the witness of scripture to heart that you and I are textured beings sorting through the bad in us as we continue revealing all the good that God has placed within. Scripture calls us new creations. We have the potential to be renewed each and every day.

Go into your week knowing you are loved. You are cherished. You have a purpose and a mission. With the help of God you can push back the dark to make way for all the goodness and light the Spirit of God inside of you is calling you to live into the world.

There's plenty around us to tell us what we aren't. Keep in mind who we are. If we get out of the way and let God work in us, we shine brighter than we think and when we do we free ourselves from embracing the dark. And that makes life and living it a little lighter of a burden than we might have thought is has to be.

BIBLE STUDY Zechariah 4-5

Zechariah 4

As we go through this book we have to continue to be honest. Some of this is strange in the visions. So strange that even Zechariah doesn't know exactly what he's seeing. Unfortunately the angel isn't exactly forthcoming with interpretation. In the end we do our best to grasp the overall message.

In this vision we seen lampstands, a bowl, olive trees, and oil. The second part of the chapter is very much about Zerubbabel and his mission. Let's take a little space to try and identify these symbols.

Lamps are often symbols of illumination. God is going to make things clear. God sees what is going on.

The bowls likely references the bowls atop the pillars Solomon erected at the entrance of the Temple. We are reminded that while the Temple is in ruins, that's not the end of the story. God has a vision to rebuild it and for those gates to communion between God and God's people will be open once again.

The olive trees represent fertility. Judah will once again have fertile ground. Remember in Haggai that they were struggling because they hadn't repaired God's House. Now they are in that process and things will improve.

The olive branches are the "anointed ones". Who is this? Some suggest it is Zerubbabel and Joshua. One is the anointed to take over civil authority and the other spiritual authority. Some suggest these two figures are more heavenly. They could be members of God's heavenly court assigned to watch over God's land and people.

The golden oil, like the trees, is prosperity. Once again God's people and land will thrive because they are renewing their devotion to God and God's designs.

Zerubbabel has a "mountain" before him to "level". He is also reminded that the energy and strength to do this isn't his own. It will come from God. The "mountain" is the rubble of ruins the Temple now lies in. His job is to level this property and rebuild the Temple into glory befitting God's House. And according to Zechariah he will be the one to do it.

The ones who "despise" aren't unfamiliar. Anytime something begins small, particularly after a time of inaction there are naysayers. There are always people who will try to tear down while others build up. They will be put to shame when Zerubbabel is successful and God's place restored in the eyes of the people and through the Temple.

As strange as some of the imagery may be, the message seems fairly clear.

Judah's return and the restoring of the Temple ushers in a renewed era of relationship between God and God's people. In their faithfulness they will reap prosperity and blessing. Zerubbabel will be the instrument God uses for the building project and if there are doubters their doubt will be put to rest.

For us this is a great reminder that even when we fall away we can come back to God. The relationship can be repaired. When it is our faith and lives return to the place of depth and richness that were gone when we estranged ourselves from God. We can always return.

Zechariah 5

In this next vision we see more odd imagery. Flying scrolls that are enormous. A basket, women, winged women, and a lead lid for the basket.

The scroll is simply a proclamation from God that extends over the entire land and people.

The message is both past reference and present promise. The curse is an oath. People thieved from each other, they mistreated one another grossly. The "swore falsely" when they tried to have it both ways in following idols but claiming to also follow God.

The banishing has already occurred. The people were exiled to Babylon for their sin. Now they have returned. If there are any who might choose to continue in the sinful pattern they will be purged out of the community. That nonsense will not be permitted again.

There is also the reminder, as we saw in an earlier chapter, that those executing God's justice had gone too far. They have taken what wasn't theirs to take. Persia, whom now ruled, also had it's problems. They had false gods to tempt God's people. They also had dishonest leadership that might tempt them to fall back into their mistreatment of one another.

This vision serves as reminder and warning. "Do not allow the sins of the past to infect the present and destroy the future." God will not tolerate it.

The vision of the basket and the wicked woman is similar. The basket was a measuring basket, taking account of the sin of God's people. The woman simply personifies it.

The lead lid may have dual meaning.

The metal lid was similar to a pan used to bake cakes as an offering to foreign gods. That is part of the wickedness, idolatry. This is no longer part of their experience and values.

It also represented "talents", or money. Once again, this was part of their wickedness. Cheating, stealing from, and manipulating each other for financial gain was a significant issue that got them sent into exile. This wickedness isn't tolerated anymore.

That wickedness had been packed up and sent to Babylon. It needs to stay there.

If chapter four is promise and instruction to rebuild the Temple, this chapter is caution and warning. Don't let those sins that got them in trouble return. They were banished to Babylon. Let them stay there.

This reminds me today of a friend of mine's analogy. He said that God throws our sins into a lake of forgetfulness and puts up a "no fishing" sign. The problem is that we often grab our poles and go reclaim the sin that's been forgiven and forgotten. We return to the same wickedness that we'd confessed before.

This shouldn't be our pattern or habit. We have the wonderful grace of salvation and forgiveness. Our sincere desire is to not repeat the mistakes of the past. Let them stay in the past where they belong. Let them be teachers and wisdom for how we live into our todays and tomorrows.