

MARCH 8, 2026

# Marion weekly update

## FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

*SERMON "Fear and Faith" Matt 25:45-46, Rev 20:11-15, Matt 11:28-30, John 14:1-3, 25-27*

So far we've been having a theme of reflect, repent, and renew during Lent. While repent is most often used to focus on changing bad behavior to good after confession and a transformation of the heart, the definition can be broader. It simply means to change direction. Sometimes we change sharply, others just a little bit depending on what we're dealing with.

The last two weeks have been considering common Christian notions that tend to be heavy handed one way or another. We've found that most often scripture has a more balanced sense of things, and looked biblically to form a more centered and honest perspective.

This is significant because people of faith can speak without thinking things through. We hear those things and sometimes speak them ourselves. Awareness and thoughtfulness helps keep us honest, which tends to make a better and more genuine witness for the gospel.

Today we are looking at fear. Fear is something that Christians have used for a long time as a tool of control and conversion. Yet at the same time Christians have talked about the freedom and lightness that should free us from fear. Which is it?

Fear of hell is often used as a means of scaring someone to make a confession of faith. While that confession might grow to a more genuine sense of Christ, if it doesn't what remains is superficial and I would argue questionable. Because faith and love out of fear and being forced aren't genuine. They are a survival response. The whole idea of faith is to be transformed into the image of Jesus. He was selfless and sacrificial. He didn't let fear rule Him or inform His actions. He chose to act in love because it is correct. Because it is God's way. That's faith. It comes because we've accepted the love poured out on the cross. We love and transform out of gratitude for the gift we've been given. Fear isn't in the ultimate equation.

Unfortunately once someone believes that's not all. Many Christians today have faith "plus". Believe, but only the way I tell you. And then I give you a list of behaviors that if you happen to engage in any of them you are likely bound for hell. So do as I say and believe what I say and you are now in the "in" club and safe from punishment. And don't think about that church down the street because they don't believe like we do. Which means they might, or even are likely, to be hellbound.

It's a convenient, and cheap, way to scare people into sticking close and following my rules.

The "end times" is the second fear tactic. It's similar but different. Jesus is coming any day so you better believe the way I tell you. Otherwise if you're not ready you'll burn or at least suffer a horrible tribulation.

This isn't exactly workable for the critical thinker. Literally since Jesus walked the earth every generation has said the same thing. Jesus is coming in our lifetime! All of them have been wrong. At this point it carries as much weight as saying the sun won't rise tomorrow.

This isn't saying He won't return. It's just not a useful fear tactic unless people have already been conditioned to buy into it. Fear is easier than calling people to a life of Christ centered faith and love because it's correct. Because self giving love is what builds a Godly world. And of course, if Jesus happens to return we're found doing exactly what we're supposed to be doing.

Our job is the same as the disciples. Continue His work of transforming all creation by bringing it into relationship with God and engaging the Holy Spirit.

This makes the end times or the return of Christ an event of hope, not fear! It means that our work isn't in vain. Our work builds on what came before with a certainty that it will be completed one day.

Another too common idea that draws us back to fear is that if you're in the midst of a sin when Jesus returns you're going to roast. You don't have time to confess or repent. It doesn't matter what life or faith you've lived to that point, one mistake at that wrong moment and you're toast.

If I can get you scared Jesus is coming tomorrow and that one wrong move damns you, again I have all the reason to keep you coming back. I also have you paranoid that you might be breaking a rule I gave you.

This isn't light. It's heavy. It's manipulation. Unfortunately it also works and leads people into faith that is oppressive and misses the whole point of living hand in hand with Jesus.

As another counter, this fear is senseless of we are in Jesus. Everyone will die with unconfessed and unrepented sin. I guarantee at some point in our lives every one of us has sinned without realizing it. Or we've sinned thinking we were doing the right thing. Can't confess or repent what we don't know or don't believe to be

wrong. If confession and repentance of every sin we've done is required for heaven no one has or ever will make it.

We know that's not the case, because we know that the grace of God is bigger than that. We know that Christ died to redeem us and isn't looking to condemn us on a loophole. Particularly one that's rooted in rules made by man.

This doesn't mean that understanding consequences doesn't have its place. It does. Scripture itself has two versions of the duration of hell. Matthew suggests it's eternal. Revelation suggests that the end is being erased from existence. This is the second death. One is forever. The other has a shelf life.

People argue over this and make nonsense arguments trying to reconcile the two. Doing this misses the point. The point is that what we do in this life has consequences in the next. Where we place our faith and how our lives play that faith out matters. It matters to us and to the world we leave behind.

What happens next is up to the life I live here and now. Understanding the fullness of faith also recognizes that what I do to others will echo in this world after I'm gone. Did I leave this world better or worse for my role in it? Consequences.

On the other hand there is so much more to faith than just fearing what might happen when I die. Jesus talks about a light yoke. He talks about a peace that isn't of this world He gives to those who follow Him. He promises if we give ourselves to Him that He will bring us into His Kingdom. He says to "come to Him and He will give us rest." He literally tells His disciples to NOT be afraid.

It's ironic that so many preachers, teachers, and churches that tell folks that fear cancels faith are the very ones instilling and using fear to control the faith of their churches. It makes no honest sense.

What does make sense is that Jesus' desire is for us to live free from fear. Free from the tension inside that comes from holding values and making choices that are contrary to God's desires and will. We aren't just free from the penalty of sin, we are free to live our lives actively in the Spirit. We can experience a taste of heaven here on earth when we live in step with Christ and follow His example.

Of course we won't be perfect. We know this and importantly, so does He. The journey of faith and life is to get closer and closer to who we are called to be each and every day. When will the work be complete? When we meet Him face to face in His Kingdom.

Are there things we will be afraid of? Again, of course. The key is to not allow that fear to overwhelm us. To fall into our faith and find the guidance and strength that was part of Jesus' promise when He said He would send us the Holy Spirit.

If we love God, and are truly in Christ, there is no reason to fear God. As we journey through life seeking God we do well to remember that God's desire is to greet us with "well done, good and faithful servant."

Wesley's Aldersgate experience.

## BIBLE STUDY Zechariah 6-7

### Zachariah 6

This chapter continues the visions to Zachariah. Where we've had focus on Zerubbabel to this point, here it shifts to Joshua as High Priest. It begins with an encouragement from God.

In the East there are brilliant mountains from where the sun rises. This is where God is found. The horses and chariots represent the spirits of God whose job is to search out the earth and bring back reports. This is similar to the horses shown in an earlier vision.

They go North, South, and West. Nothing is said about South and West. We only hear about the North. This is the only place that really matters. What does the spirit find? It finds peace. Things are settled. In other words there is a rest and no threat of war.

It's important to keep in mind the symbol of these horses. Many times people have become obsessed with Revelation. They see horses and immediately that imagery comes to mind. The problem is that associating these horses with those means we completely miss the point.

The horses of Revelation are part of destruction and ruin. This the opposite of what is communicated in this vision. This vision is actually an encouragement of peace. It is hopeful. In fact we also do well to keep in mind that whatever these visions, the overarching message is that God is returned to God's people in their land. What was destroyed is being rebuilt. The temple, the priesthood, even civil government.

Then we turn to the returning exiles. There is a group that returns and their job is to craft silver and gold into a crown. Interestingly the returning exiles were receiving better attention than those who had remained behind. In many ways this makes sense. The Babylonians didn't grab everyone. The largely grabbed the educated, wealthy, powerful, and influential. The rest were left.

Perhaps the ones who remained had neither the ability nor resources to do the work of repairing the land. Perhaps they were simply hanging on themselves and making the most of a bad situation to survive. The returning ones had the clout and resources. They also had the backing of the Persian empire to do the necessary work. The crown that was made was intended to be a symbol. Placed for a moment on Joshua's head it signaled him as the restored High Priest. The rest is a bit vague.

What is clear is that God is restoring leadership to the people. This leadership is anointed by God for the task. The Branch to come in this instance is clearly someone in their own time and place. The job is clear and has a time stamp. Rebuild the temple. It could be Zerubbabel though he isn't named specifically. It's not likely to be Joshua though Joshua will work in "harmony" with this leader.

Many take the Branch to be Jesus. That doesn't track with the immediate nature of the Branch's mission in that time. The language given our sense of Jesus does seem very similar. In that regard the two options are that either 1) this vision has a dual meaning, one for their time and another for later or 2) we are imprinting Jesus on the vision in hindsight.

The crown set in the temple is to be a memorial. In other words, it is a reminder of what has occurred. The people's actions brought destruction and ruin. Upon return from exile these people rebuilt what was broken. With God's strength, blessing, and help the people and the kingdom was restored. The crown would call them back to this moment hopefully in appreciation as well as a continual call to not repeat the mistakes of the past.

To me this is reminiscent of displays many churches have in their entry spaces. Old mementos from many years in the congregation's past. Items, literature, records and such are a memorial. They remind the congregation today that their present is the result of faithfulness in the past. Because of the faithfulness of believers who came before and God's faithfulness to their work we have the church we do today. It is our responsibility to steward it faithfully so there is a church of tomorrow.

## Zachariah 7

Chapter 7 is very simple. It is a rhetorical point and a caution anchored in remembering the past.

The people asking are wondering about observing two different fasts. The fast of the fifth month was done to mourn the destruction of the Temple. The fast of the seventh month commemorated a governor named Gedaliah. Gedaliah was a governor over Judah after Babylon had exiled the others. He was assassinated. I supposed we can trust that he was of some reputation as this fast was instituted in his memory.

While scripture doesn't say, these questions make sense. The Temple is being rebuilt, do we still need to mourn its destruction? We have a new governor over us, do we still need to mourn the old?

The response doesn't really answer. It calls to question their intention for observing feasts and fasting at all. Were they ever really doing it for God? Were they only doing it for themselves?

This is such an important point in every age. Why do we do what we do? For many things it's because someone told us to. Or not to. Someone else's rule is imposed as a practice of being faithful. So we do it without much question or thought.

Even routine prayers and sung responses have this issue. We can recite them without thought. They are automatic and reflexive. We don't think about the connection between what we're saying and what we're doing. It can become ritual for ritual's sake.

The same with celebrations. The same celebration over and over, year after year can still be enjoyable. It can be connecting and fun. The question isn't about enjoyment. It's whether the celebration holds the meaning for which it's intended.

Are Thanksgiving dinners fully intentional about crafting a spirit of gratitude? Is the Lord's Prayer said with thoughtfulness, taking time to really process through each part for its intention? Is our benediction a heartfelt, prayerful parting of the ways intending to keep us connected as we are separate? Is communion more than just waiting for everyone else to get their elements before the pastor invites us to consume them together?

This is important as we engage our worship and practices of faith.

The reminder is that while fasting is good, treating one another in a way that's pleasing to God is better and more desired. The vision lists what the prophets of old had said to the people was missing. "Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. 10 Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other."

The refusal to do these things resulted in God turning God's back on them and allowing them to reap the consequences of their stubbornness. The land and people becoming desolate is a warning to the returned exiles to not repeat that mistake. Desolation is the only inevitable result of people mistreating one another. Essentially it's

destruction from within. We tear ourselves apart.

This is never more necessary than in America today. Christians should be leading the way to genuine justice, to mercy and compassion, to watching over widows, children, the foreigner, and the poor. In not only refusing to plot evil but calling out those that do.

We are presently in a day where the division is stark and deep. There is very real bitterness and even hate. There is callousness. There is a wide gap in how, when, and to whom justice is rendered. If we don't correct our situation, we run the risk of Judah and Israel. Even Abraham Lincoln famously noted that if America is destroyed it will be because we've done it to ourselves.

The warnings then resound now. The call to the people in the day of Zachariah cries out to us today. Follow the genuineness of God. The blessings are great. The consequences are dire.