

MARCH 22, 2026

# Marion weekly update

## FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

*SERMON "Leading In Christ" Exodus 18:13-24, 1 Peter 2:9-10, Romans 12:4-8*

This week we are doing double duty in the message. I was asked to present something from the board that we'll need to vote on as a congregation. Rather than hold an additional meeting or eat up a lot of time before or after the service, we're going to merge it with a message.

This actually fits very well in our Lenten theme of renewal through reflection and change. We're going to ask you after this to reflect on whether we should change something in order to be renewed or if we discern together that we should hold steady where we are.

The subject matter is leadership. So let's look at leadership Biblically. First and foremost as we've seen so far, rarely are any firm, narrow hard and fast sensibilities completely reflected through all of scripture. Scripture thankfully has multiple views of the same matters, which balances things out. It reminds us that extremism is rarely if ever the result of full scriptural study.

When we think about leadership there are two fundamental notions that I believe are supported Biblically no matter what.

The first is that all of us are called to be leaders. Our scripture in Peter calls us all to be members of a "royal priesthood". In essence this is a call to remember that we are all representatives of Christ in the world. All of us.

Every one of us is called to lead by example. No matter where we are, what we are doing, who we are around we are called to be an image of Jesus Christ. Each life of a believer is intended to lead those who don't yet believe into a relationship with God. In church, home, work, play this is our common call and task.

I admit that I fail at this more often than I'd care to think. Still, that call remains. Everywhere and everywhen we are leading by example.

The other, seemingly ironic reality is that we can't lead unless we follow. The leading we are supposed to do happens because we follow Jesus closely and with intention. Every individual who amounts to anything as they lead I believe is also a follower. No matter how high we climb all of us have examples that inspire us and show us how to do whatever we are doing correctly.

For Christians in every area of life that is Jesus. He is the end and full stop answer to the question of who we are supposed to be.

That is the common leadership call of every Christian.

Then we have our community of faith. How does that look? What do we do when it's not just our individual selves but a whole congregation of people?

There are several different Biblical senses to this.

In Romans and elsewhere we see what we might call "offices" or "jobs" to lead or guide a community. Teachers, preachers, encouragers, and so on. In other words, there are duties in a church structure that need attended to. The one common quality of anyone filling those offices is to be faithful and true to Christ. Every job is important. And every job is done rightly when the one doing it is living into the example of Jesus.

There are the pastoral letters to Timothy and Titus. Titus begins at least with acknowledging that in Paul's absence communities of faith need to appoint leaders to watch over them. These are to be people of good Christian character, and trustworthy. Titus calls them "elders". The job though is pretty simple. Care for and oversee the community of faith.

This I think is important. Care for and oversee are not the same as rule and dominate. Leaders must be trusted, faithful, assertive, yet also humble and responsive to the needs at hand.

Acts reinforces this when we look at the story of Stephen as we did a few weeks ago. There was a need to make sure the widows were properly cared for. The apostles had their own jobs and so to meet the needs of the community they appointed people who could be trusted to oversee that part of their mission. In other words they had to be flexible to set things in place as needs arose.

This requires flexibility of leadership as well as a willingness of the community to step up when a need arises.

When we get to Exodus, we see this in action on a large scale. Moses was leading the people and getting burnt out. He was shouldering every decision and managing every conflict of the people. It was too much. He went to his father in law Jethro.

Jethro gave Moses some wise advice. "Appoint trusted people to oversee portions of the community. Give

them the authority to handle the smaller matters and then you handle only the big ticket items". This was sound advice. Moses took it and relieved himself of a heavy burden.

In the end I would suggest that the community was better off. Their leader, Moses, was more clear minded, rested, and able to manage those big items. Why? Because the community adapted and embraced a system that fit their needs.

Through the centuries churches, denominations and such have adopted many ways of leading the community of faith. All of them claim to be faithful. All of them would argue they are scripturally sound. And depending on which scriptures we weigh heavier all of them can make that claim with some legitimacy.

The two main systems that I'm aware of are top down and ground up.

Most of your charismatic, Pentecostal, and certainly the Catholic church tend to run top down. There is a lead figure. A Pope, bishop, or pastor, who calls the shots. They tell the church what to do, what to believe, and how to operate. The rest fall into line, or at least hang around agreeing to disagree but overall deferring to the leadership.

This has its benefits. Decisions are made quicker. When the larger part of the community falls into line it's efficient. It's kind of a "general and soldiers" approach to faith and ministry.

The downside is that if the head is wrong so are most of the rest who follow. Discernment isn't widespread, in some cases it's centralized on a single person. That can lead to a recipe for manipulation and abuse, claimed to be ordained by God.

It's interesting given last week's message about consumerist faith and "pick and choose" church. I literally listened to a pastor tell people that not congregant has any right to see the church's financial statements or records. That once the money goes into the plate it's out of their hands, into God's, and where it goes none of their business.

If they do get to talk to the pastor and don't like what the pastor says, they can just go elsewhere. Literally he said there are churches everywhere, even in strip malls, so just go find somewhere else.

The other side is ground up. This is Methodism and United Methodism. In this structure the person in the pew has the say. The discernment of the denomination or church is generated from the people up. There are leaders, but those leaders are subject to the believers in the pews. Rather than tell everyone what to believe and do, their job is to respond to the people on the ground and help the larger body of believers discern where God is calling in light of that feedback.

Changes in sensibilities, principles, leadership and more are governed by the body of believers. This was no more evident than in our own denomination. As the issue of same gender marriage has worked itself forward we had a shift. One portion was more conservative and kept everything more conservative in 2019. For whatever reason many of those clergy and lay voices decided to bail on the UMC shifting the weight of voice. So in 2024 the decision changed. Rather than forcing everyone to toe a singular line it allowed for congregations, clergy, and laity to follow their conscience on the matter.

The benefit of ground up is that it allows for a larger discernment. It asks what the Spirit is speaking to the larger body rather than just relying on a couple folks at the top. The hope is that it keeps us tethered closer to the Spirit.

The downside is that decisions take FOREVER to happen. When everyone has a chance to weigh in, and we have to meet in multiple committees in the church or in the larger sense multiple conferences, decisions can linger a long time. Urgent decisions can't be made with urgency. To be honest, in today's rapidly changing climate, this lag has caused many windows of opportunity to be missed.

In Methodism we at least can't fault the system completely. Back in the day many of you have heard of circuit riders. Preachers rode on horseback from congregation to congregation and might not visit the same congregation for weeks or months. They had to have structures in place to ensure that the ministry and business of the community of faith endured in the absence of the preacher. That's a lot of why we have the committee structure we have today.

In fact, and I hope those who have been on our present church board will echo this, that's why in many major decisions around the church I have abstained in voting on the board. I believe the congregation should have the absolute voice in the direction it goes. I will give information and perspective, but since this congregation was here long before me and I pray long after, the congregation needs to make and own those decisions.

It is in this light that I was asked to present the following information. What I want you to hear from this is that as we move forward, this idea of leadership isn't just about one individual, or about one board or committee. It's about all of us.

All of us have the privilege of leading in the name of Christ in every aspect of our lives. We also need to be responsible as we create a structure of leadership in our community of faith. And in the end, it is the congregation that must discern through the Spirit and prayer what that looks like.

## BIBLE STUDY

### Zechariah 8

As Chapter 7 recounts past issues between Israel and God, chapter 8 moves forward to a future of hope and promise.

While those who are left might feel it's impossible, God is promising to restore God's presence in the midst of the people, as well as a prosperity and peace for the people. They've endured a decades of want and submission. Now they will enjoy rich and good times as God comes back to them.

This is very much a sense that we don't grasp today. We understand God to be present in all things, at all times, and in all places. The notion that God might "depart" seems crazy to us. In the days of this prophecy this idea of God coming and going depending on the faithfulness of the people was common. It was actually expected. If you weren't faithful to God, don't expect God to stand in for you.

Now that Judah is returning, the city being rebuilt, and the Temple being restored there is a new era in store. The city of God, the people of God, and the full worship and ritual to honor God bring about the good will, protection, and blessing of God.

In the transition from the desolation of what has been to the promise of future is the notion of shalom. Shalom is the peace of God that isn't what folks typically think of when we "pass the peace" in church. It isn't just congeniality and courtesy amongst familiar faces.

Shalom is the fullness of goodness, peace, and God's desire for creation to be all it was created to be. It is genuine harmony among the people, full fruitfulness of the land, with no lack or want of any kind because all is as it should be. When the people rebelled against God, shalom couldn't prevail. With the people in step with God and God's blessing reigning shalom will be the order of the day.

Being a "curse" among the nations is referring to the exiles. Restoration is the hope of God. Vs. 14-17 give a summary reminder of what got them exiled and what is expected to foster the hope of their return.

Treating one another with wickedness, dishonesty, and abuse put them out of favor with God. To stay in God's favor do the opposite. Treat one another honestly, justly, kindly, mercifully, and compassionately.

The end of the chapter fills this out with promise of their place in the world. The fasts that were observed as a time of mourning will flip. They will be holidays of celebration because the LORD has returned. The nations will be jealous of Israel and send their own representatives to gain their favor. They will recognize the goodness of God, see Israel as God's people, and look to Israel to seek God's blessing.

In all of this we must remember that the blessing and promise of God rests directly in relation to how the people treat one another. The destruction of Israel and Judah happened because they mistreated one another and were grossly divided. Yes, their faith was not strong or rightly placed. But the evidence of this was in how they treated one another.

The good fortune then or now of any nation is directly connected to this practice. People caring for one another with passion, intention, and love. As the way people love one another goes, so goes the nation. As the unity, or division, of a people goes, so goes the nation.

### Zechariah 9

Following the blessing of chapter 8, chapter 9 is a promise of how the blessing might occur.

Something that is a little confusing is that "all Israel" is mentioned. At this point, it is only the Kingdom of Judah that has returned to their homes and to Jerusalem. Israel otherwise has been scattered after being exiled to Assyria. How can this be? There might be two suggestions depending on how one chooses to read it.

On one hand, there is the sense that Israel will be once again gathered home. Perhaps this is talking about restoring all of Israel to prominence. All the tribes mean all the tribes. How this happens would be a mystery since almost all of them are abroad. Have they come to a sense of the LORD outside of their homeland and Jerusalem? Have they kept tabs on the homeland? Are they still practicing as they would have at home (minus the Temple)? We don't know.

On the other hand, is this referring to Jerusalem itself? Some argue so. All those that have returned to Jerusalem represent all of Israel. Every tribe. Perhaps it is referring to those that have returned and returned to a full sense of worship in every sense including ritual as the Temple is restored.

Either way, the promise is that God will handle all opposition to God's people as they come back to a sense of power.

The description of what happens is the fall of Israel's enemies in order from north to south, one after the other. Tyre is one of the first. Even the name "Tyre" means rampart, or defense. If the rampart falls, whatever stands behind it is in danger of being overrun. The downfall of these kingdoms will be at the hand of God. As we've seen so far, while Judah and Jerusalem are the beneficiaries of conquest, God seems to be the prime mover in accomplishing it. Their return to faithfulness is a return to God's power acting on their behalf.

The longtime enemy of Israel, the Philistines will not only be overcome but will become a subject of Israel. A “clan” in Judah. Ekron will be “like the Jebusites”. This is a throwback to Joshua who never fully pushed the Jebusites out of Canaan.

At the end of the day, this victory is a promise, and as verse 8 finishes it is an assurance that if God handles it, it will be complete and utter.

The next verses are famous in the New Testament as prophetic to Palm Sunday. The image of the King riding in “on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” As we read this, it is understandable why people would have been confused at Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

In this prophecy, it takes place after God has already done the work of conquering all of Israel’s enemy. Even in these verses surrounding the image the setting is that of a complete victory over all, peace to the nations, and “His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth”. All of this is conquering imagery in the physical, political world.

The idea of this being some kind of spiritual victory over sin would not have been anywhere near the radar of people just returning from exile in Babylon. It is hope that this once defeated Kingdom and Nation would ride to victory and rule on the back of God.

This spiritual aspect of it couldn’t arrive until the painful task of reinterpreting it in light of Jesus. Only after a different Messiah than expected came could this tradition be seen differently. Making this a truth to people entrenched in their faith and history is a long, arduous, and for many impossible task.

The covenant of blood is likely a reference to Nebuchadnezzar swearing an oath to take Judah and God swearing to take up their cause. Again, this is might against might. Military against military, All of it, though, is hope for Judah and Israel. God is their defense. God will overcome for them. There is promise they will double in size. “Ephraim”, “rousing Zion’s sons”, and going against Greece are all about God returning Jews from lands off back home.

The chapter ends with more images of victory. If God is to use Judah as an instrument there is promise that Judah will be protected and empowered. For the readers there would be stories familiar to this imagery. They knew the tales of the conquered Assyrians and Babylonians. Both of them the enemies and captors of Israel and Judah.

Prophecies like these beg questions. They are intended to be hopeful to those that read them. They are to be predictive of victory not far removed from those hearing them. Yet history tells a different story.

If victory is complete how do we reconcile the Holocaust and the Roman overcoming of the Jews? What is our role? If this is a victory in the long time making, are we looking to battle or do we reinterpret all of the military in spiritual terms?

If the Jews are to be gathered to their homeland, is that God’s task or ours? How do we understand the Zionist movement in Christianity to push all the Jews back into Israel? Is this noble or crude? How do we reconcile it when the intention is less about restoring Israel and more about trying to trigger the end of times? When it talks about the return of Israel is this talking about bloodlines or is this talking about those who are spiritually in tune with their Jewish faith? Or is it like Paul talks about in Galatians about the Israel that is spiritual according to those who believe in the “seed”(Jesus) of Abraham?

I leave you in this chapter with these questions. They are questions not everyone asks yet in many ways the answers shape how we understand God, Christ, and the connection between the Old and New Testaments. Answering them thoughtfully forces a painstaking necessity. That necessity is to make our faith congruent with a constant line of understanding drawn through all of it.