

“Sunday words” and a worship service for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, April 25, 2021.....

Good morning from a chilly, but sunny hill in Rockport.... where the birds continue to sing us into a new day....

The focus in our worship service this morning is the 23rd Psalm. A psalm is “a sacred song or hymn.” The 23rd Psalm is one of the most well known texts of the Bible. It is my “go to” prayer in times of challenge or crisis or sadness. Here is a quote from Glenn Pemberton, minister turned professor of Old Testament turned writer, about the Psalms from his book, *Hurting with God, Learning to Lament with the Psalms*: “We live in a world that is beyond our control, and life is in a constant flux of change. So we have a decision to make: keep trying to control the storm that is not going to go away or start learning how to live within the rain.” How about personalizing those words to these: “I live in a world that is beyond my control, and life is in a constant flux of change. So I have a decision to make: I can keep trying to control the storm that is not going to go away or I can start learning how to live within the rain.”

What holy raincoat do you wear?

In these weeks following the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus on Easter we are called to examine *what* we believe, *why* we believe it, and *how* we believe it. Think about that this week.... Let me know how you answer these what, why and how questions of faith. Perhaps I can share them, anonymously of course, in a coming sermon or “Spring Meditation.”

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Blessings to each one this fourth Sunday of Easter morning.... Susan

p.s. I’ll copy below the worship bulletin from this morning’s service and following it, the text from Psalm 23 we’ll consider this morning, and my sermon. I will post the text and my sermon on my Facebook page, [freerangepastor](http://freerangepastor.org), and on the church’s Facebook page, the Federated Church of Thomaston later today.... And my amazing webmaster, Phil, also posts these complete “Sunday words” on my website www.freerangepastor.org under the sermon archives tab.

p.s.s.s. Let Alice or me know if you have suggestions for hymn choices or other music for our worship services.... We’ll do our best to meet your needs and desires....

Federated Church in Thomaston
United Church of Christ United Methodist Church

All Are Welcome

Sunday, April 25, 2021 – Fourth Sunday of Easter

Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet, Pastor Alice Billheimer, Organist/ Choir Director

Lector: Blair Clement

Please be respectfully silent once our worship service has begun.

An asterisk () indicates where you are invited to stand.*

***Bold print** indicates that the people speak these responses & prayers.*

GATHERING FOR WORSHIP

Welcome and Announcements

Prelude Day by Day -- Oscar Ahnfelt, arr. by Donald Busarow

Call to Worship

Leader: We come together this morning in the knowledge of God's love for us through Jesus' amazing grace.

People: We come together to give our thanks, to confess our failings, to learn more about the nature of God, to gather strength for the journey. We come together to be restored.

All: We come together because we are God's own. Let us worship God!

*Opening Hymn "Morning Has Broken" (see insert)

An Invocation....

A Prayer of Confession & Words of Affirmation

Loving God, today as we contemplate you as our shepherd

we acknowledge the limits we put on your goodness.

We recall times when we have hardened our hearts to those who don't belong to our fold.

We admit that we have seen suffering caused by unjust practice,

have seen brothers and sisters in need and yet we have refused our help.

We declare there have been times when we have been quick to condemn and slow to love.

We confess to sometimes being like hired help.

We see the wolf coming and run away because in essence

we do not care for what is not our own.

We are sorry. We will try to do better in your sight and in sight of one another.

May we hear and read these words of assurance:

God is greater than our hardened hearts.
When we are bold before God and are true to the commandment to love one another,
we receive the mercy we desire, and God comes and dwells in us. Amen.

A Moment of Silence

SERVICE OF THE WORD

Scripture Reading The 23rd Psalm, an interpretation by Eugene Peterson in *The Message*

***Gloria Patri**

Message “*The Lord is my shepherd.....*” Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet

***Hymn of Meditation** “Great Is Thy Faithfulness” (see insert)

RESPONDING IN FAITH

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns with God and Each Other

Pastoral Prayer followed by The Lord’s Prayer.....

Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, Amen.

Offertory Brother James' Air (The Lord's My Shepherd)
(Offering plates are placed in the back of the sanctuary. Thank you!)

***Doxology** No. 95 Blue

***Prayer of Dedication**

***Closing Hymn** “All Creatures of Our God and King” (see insert)

Benediction

Postlude Triumphal March -- Edvard Grieg

Revised Common Lectionary Readings for Sunday, May 2, 2021

The 5th Sunday of Easter

Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22:25-31; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

PRAYER LIST

Hold in your prayers all those affected by the corona virus and the families of those who have died from the virus.... And all those families affected by the use of addictive drugs and alcohol among their members.... And all those dealing with the ravages of cancer near and far..... And add to our prayers, from Blair a request for prayers her friend Judith on the passing of her daughter, Lani, 42, from brain cancer, from Jackie a request for prayers for Kyle Cloudier deep prayers for Hank and Lucy as Hank endures his cancer journey with the help of Hospice and for “Cody,” who doesn’t live locally but needs prayers for guidance; Enid, Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Fred Bagnall, Harriet Williams, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, Sally Harjula Elliot, Trish Perry, Helmut Steger, John Flaherty, Doug and BJ Thomson, Heather Van Buskirk, and Michael and Gail in southern Maine
Please feel free to contact Susan by phone (207)322-1948 or by email freerangepastor@gmail.com to add or drop the names from the prayer list.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Monday-4/26/21.....6:30-8:00 pm: Troop Meeting
 Tuesday-4/27/21.....4:00 -6:00 pm: Weight Watchers
 Thursday-4/29/21.....12:00 pm: Church Women Luncheon
 Sunday-5/2/21.....9:30 am: Worship Service
 Suggested Food Pantry
 Donation.....Toilet paper

The flowers this week are from Susan & Nance in memory of Rev. Dr. Audrey Philcox.

Deacon for May 2021: Dave Billheimer and Doug Schroeder

Reminders for next Sunday, 5/2/21
 Greeter/Usher: Doug Schroeder & Kurt Leidenroth
 Coffee
 Host:

Lector: Laci

DeVarney

Flowers: Lucy Carey

Collection Total for Sunday, April 18, 2021:

Pledges - \$156.00
Loose - \$ 31.00
Total - \$187.00

**Federated Church of Thomaston
United Church of Christ
&
United Methodist Church
Together Since 1929**

*“Christian faith is not holding on to a past that recedes ever farther into the distance,
but experiencing a living present in which everything is different
because of what once really happened and continues to
happen.”*

~ M. Eugene Boring and Fred. B. Craddock,
in *The People’s New Testament Commentary*

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**“The Lord is my shepherd.....”
A Sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston
Thomaston, Maine
Sunday, April 25, 2021
Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Scripture: The 23rd Psalm**

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.

He leadeth me beside still waters.
He restoreth my soul.
He leadeth me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I fear no evil, for thou art with me.
Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.
Thou anointest my head with oil.
My cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Pray with me. Shepherding God, some of us know the words to the 23rd Psalm so well we might take them for granted. Help us to step back this day to reconsider them again and renew their power and healing sustenance in our lives this day. Amen.

Trust is hope. I trust that you came to church this morning looking for something. I hope you're not here so someone else might be convinced you're a good "church-going" Christian. I hope you're here because you're hungry. That's why I'm here.

Trust is confidence. I trust you are here because you want to be. I'm confident that you have an interest in believing that God loves you and coming to church is one way to stimulate that interest and be fed with God's love.

Trust is expectation. I trust you will leave here after the service with at least a small sense of affirmation or reaffirmation of your faith. I expect you will come back again next week for another dose of the same – of God's nourishment and love.

Trust is NOT unity. I do not trust that you came here this morning having the same beliefs, the same desires, or even the same thoughts about how this church ought to be running. There hasn't been a church congregation since the time of Jesus that has existed in total unity!

But there are many, many church congregations that come together every Sunday morning because the members do share one thing in common – trust in God – trust in the hope and the confidence and the expectation that God does, indeed, watch out for us all in whatever ways we need for that to happen in our lives.

For those of us who are over the age of sixty, or maybe fifty, the 23rd Psalm holds a rich place in our Christian makeup. For many of us, this psalm reminds us that trust in God is paramount to trust in the goodness of life itself. The LORD is my shepherd, no matter what. This psalm appears four times in the three-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary which we follow for our reading and reflection in our Sunday morning services. That tells me the creators of the RCL, the Revised Common Lectionary, believed the message of the 23rd Psalm is not something to be taken lightly. We are to be reminded of its power, its beauty, its affirmation, its ability to bring people comfort, protection and hope –

in the darkest times of life,

in the most difficult of circumstances,

in those moments when we are exhausted from the daily grind of trying to make sense of what doesn't make sense at all in our personal and communal lives.

Blair read you an interpretative reading of the 23rd Psalm from Eugene Peterson's *The Message*. I want to read you another translation of it from the Traditional Hebrew Text by the Jewish Publication Society. Listen for the subtle differences from the translation we usually hear as Christians.

The Lord is my shepherd; I lack nothing.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;

He leads me to water in places of repose;

He renews my life;

He guides me in right paths as befits His name.

Though I walk through a valley of deepest darkness,

I fear no harm, for You are with me;

Your rod and your staff – they comfort me.

You spread a table for me in full view of my enemies;

You anoint my head with oil;

My drink is abundant.

Only goodness and steadfast love shall pursue me

all the days of my life,

and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord

for many long years.

I read you this version for three reasons. First, the 23rd Psalm is part of the Hebrew Scriptures, not the New Testament. It is a part of the Hebrew, the Jewish, response to God's actions in the world.

As Christians, we usually read “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” A Jew reads “The Lord is my shepherd; I lack nothing.” We put a *future* projection to those words. “I shall not want.” We hope to have God with us. A Jew hears them in the *here and now*. “I lack nothing.” God is with me now. Both perspectives are important, present and future.

We usually read “He restores my soul.” A Jew reads “He renews my life.” As Christians, we sometimes tend to *separate* our “souls” from our bodies, believing that somehow our souls are what really matter – not our bodies with all their daily aches and pains. A Jew makes *no distinction* between body and soul. They are intertwined in worship and in life. What happens in daily life IS the stuff of worship for a Jew. Both perspectives are important.

We usually read “He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.” A Jew reads “He guides me in right paths as befits His name.” The word righteousness sometimes takes on a negative connotation for us as Christians. Righteousness can imply a “holier than thou” attitude which isn’t always conducive to Christian fellowship for Jesus’ sake. From the Jewish perspective, *righteousness* is, indeed, *living in right and just relation* with God and with one another.

We usually read “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.” A Jew reads “Though I walk through a valley of deepest darkness.” As Christians, we most often associate the 23rd Psalm with *death*. It is very often recited at funerals and at a person’s bedside when they are dying. A Jew reads the Hebrew and sees that the word means not just physical death, but *all kinds of darkness* that invades our lives from childhood to old age. These words are of comfort at times of death, but they are an assurance of God’s presence at many other dark moments, too.

We usually read “I will fear no evil; for You are with me.” A Jew reads “I fear no harm, for You are with me.” Evil is a word of *sinful depravity* for Christians. It can seem bigger than life and sometimes totally unbelievable and unmanageable. *Harm* is easier to identify in one’s immediate life, I think.

But whether Christian or Jew, fear is a fact and feeling of life. Fear of death, even fear of life, can immobilize us so that we long for the assurance that “You, God, are with me,” whether Jew or Christian, man or woman, young or old, in agreement or in argument.

I read the Jewish version of the 23rd Psalm for a second reason. It is so familiar to us as Christians. It is as well memorized as the Lord’s Prayer. It is

perhaps better loved than the Lord's Prayer. But sometimes when we know something so well, we begin to take its meaning for granted. Just as when we know another person well, we can begin to take them for granted, too. Familiarity can breed contempt between people. Familiarity can breed boredom or lack of true and faithful attention, when we know something so well we have it memorized.

I read the Jewish version of the 23rd Psalm for a third reason. It relates to what we have in common with our Jewish brothers and sisters, and those who are of another faith, or no faith practice at all – *We all have fears and doubts*. We all mistrust and dislike some of the people in our lives. We have a hard time loving our neighbor more often than most of us would be willing to admit. And finally we all long for love, don't we, even though we might not be willing to admit that either?

The 23rd Psalm offers us the universal affirmation of a life of faith –
to believe in the face of doubt,
to trust in the face of deceit,
to love in the face of evil and harm and indifference,
to forgive in the face of the unforgivable.

Faith demands all of these actions from us – that we believe, trust, love and forgive in the face of the greatest odds and in the midst of our greatest fears.

I carry the words of the 23rd Psalm in the file in my heart that is labeled "when all else fails." When all else fails, the Lord is my shepherd, and I shall not want, now and into eternity....

Let the people say, "Amen."