

**A simple online worship service for Sunday, March 22, 2020  
as prepared by Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet  
Pastor of the Federated Church of Thomaston**



**Opening Prayer**

Creator of us all, God of many names,  
be among us as we are separated from one another  
in body, but not in spirit.  
Guide us into this new time with hope and courage,  
stamina and strength,  
that in the days and weeks to come  
we might be stronger and more compassionate  
than ever before.

We begin in the name of the One, and the many,  
You have sent to show us the way to new life in You.  
Amen.

**A Reading of Scripture – the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm  
according to the traditional Hebrew text,  
by The Jewish Publication Society**



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.

## A sermon based on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm – “What Do We Have in Common?”



Will you pray with me. Patient and comforting God, help us to consider again, as if for the first time, the words of the Psalmist who wrote the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. Help us to remember that when we call on you in times of need, you have called upon us since the beginning of time and have pursued us in ways beyond our comprehension and understanding. Hear our longing for your care and sustenance in these challenging days before us. Amen.

Trust is hope. I trust that all who are reading these words, rather than hearing them in church this morning, are looking for something. I hope you're reading these words because you are hungry for some spiritual sustenance to help you get through these coming days and weeks, and possibly months as this coronavirus spreads and is not yet contained.

Trust is confidence. I trust you are reading these words because you want to be reading them. I'm confident that you have an interest in believing that God loves you, and coming to church – whether it be in person or as you read these words at home – is one way to stimulate that interest and be fed with God's love.

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

Trust is NOT unity. I do not trust that you all came to this online worship service this morning having the same beliefs, the same desires, or even the same thought about how church ought to be done. 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.

I typed out a slightly different version of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm than you're used to reading or hearing. I offer you this morning a different version for three reasons. First, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is part of the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament to Christians), not the New Testament. It is a part of the Hebrew, the Jewish, response to God's actions in the world. So I thought it would be helpful to reflect this morning on the words many of us know so well from a different perspective than ours.

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 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 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm with death.** It is very often recited at funerals and at a person’s bedside as 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.

But whether Christian or Jew, fear is a fact and feeling of life. Fear of death, ever fear of life, can immobilize us. 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 offered a different version of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm for a second reason. It is SO familiar to us as Christians (at least if you’re over the age of 65!). It is as well memorized as the Lord’s Prayer (again if you’re over the age of 65!). 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 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. *“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.”* What DO those words really mean to you?

I know a story about a shepherd's son in Australia who helped his father get "Midge" and her fellow sheep into the sheep-shearing pen. **Sheep DO have a kind of "blind faith."** They go where they hear a familiar voice, not where they see a familiar face – much like Jesus says in John 10:27, 'My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.' I don't know about you, but sometimes I long for some "blind faith," rather than my seminary-educated, unchild-like faith. And then I remember that what I've memorized, what is familiar, is what I REALLY need to pay attention to. *"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."*

I offered a different version of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm for a third reason. It relates to the title I chose for this sermon, "What Do We Have in Common?" I will make a gross assumption and say we have in common, most if not all of us sharing in worship on line today, a love for the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm – for its words, for its images, for its comfort, for its depth of meaning, for its assurance of God's care for us in body and in soul, against all evil and all harm, and in life's deepest darknesses and in death.

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 we would like to admit. Mother Teresa of Calcutta once said, *"Love until it hurts."* Loving is dangerous, though. There is danger in that the people we love may not necessarily love us back. They might wonder what we want, or why we're being so nice to them. They might not think they are worthy of our love, so they respond with indifference or even hatred. But does that mean we shouldn't love them anyway? Jesus didn't withhold love. He presses us not to withhold love either. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm affirms that God loves us, all of us, and that *"surely goodness and mercy will follow [us] all the days of [our lives]."*

Herein lies the true test of faith, I suppose – 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.

Let the people, each one of you reading these words at home, say, "Amen."

**A Pastoral Prayer for Sunday, March 22, 2020  
from Bishop Sudarshana Devadhar,  
New England Conference of the United Methodist Church**



Ever present God  
we find ourselves awakened to a new reality –  
our daily routines disrupted

our loved ones at risk  
our health in jeopardy  
our faith tested.

We find ourselves  
cut off from family and friends  
restricted in our mobility  
missing the services we have taken for granted  
living with anxiety and unanswered questions.

We find ourselves  
touched by a virus that is crossing all boundaries  
sharing a fight for life with people we do not know  
staying connected by love and fear  
praying for the common good which is our good.

We find ourselves  
frustrated  
critical,  
looking to blame  
wanting a quick fix.

Ever loving God

we thank you

for Jesus who did the messy work of loving  
who made mud from saliva and dirt  
spread it on a blind man's eyes  
and healed his sight.

We thank you

for public officials and health professionals,  
researchers, neighbors, caregivers,  
a thousand volunteer medical workers in NY,  
and all who embody your love in the midst of this crisis.

Ever merciful God,

keep us in your love.

Help us to see what is ours to do.

Give us courage and calm.

Gather us into one

and lead us through these challenging days.

In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

**To hold in our prayers this day.....**



From our bulletin this past Sunday and more....

Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Fred Bagnall, Harriet Williams, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, Sally Harjula, Elliot, Trish Perry, April DeVarney, Helmut Steger, John Flaherty, George Ng, Eve Anderson, Mimi's Uncle Doug and Aunt BJ, Heather Van Buskirk, and Muriel's grandson Jaren.... and all those affected by the coronavirus and the families of those who have died from the virus. *Please send me the names of those you would like for me to add to this list next Sunday!*

### **A Benediction**



*Life is short, no matter the length of our days ....  
We do not have much time to gladden the hearts  
of those who make the way with us.  
So be swift to love. Make haste to be kind.  
And may the Creator of us all, the Redeemer of us all,  
and the Comforter of us all,  
be with each of you in these coming hard days.  
Amen.*

**Readings from the RCL (Revised Common Lectionary)  
for next Sunday, March 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020**



Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

**A word for the day from [www.gratefulness.org](http://www.gratefulness.org):**

*“There are no guarantees. From the viewpoint of fear, none are strong enough.  
From the viewpoint of love, none are necessary.” ~ Emmanuel Teney*