

Hi and welcome to this online service. I'm Rev. Estelle Margarones from First Parish Church of York Maine, a member of the United Church of Christ.

Whether you consider First Parish 'your church' or whether this is the first time you've ever taken a peek inside, you are welcome here. Whether you got all dressed up or your PJ's, you are welcome here. Whether you have deep faith or a good deal of doubt, you are welcome here!

In less than an hour, we'll offer you a chance to get grounded, to hear inspiring music, reassuring prayers, and an encouraging message.

I open this time of worship with a simple illustration: A person went to a great sage saying, I've got a lot on my mind right now. I'm a jumbled mess. Sometimes I am really afraid. Sometimes I'm really peaceful. It's like there are two tigers inside me and they're fighting for my attention. Which one will win? The wise considered the man's words, and said, Two tigers. Fear and Peace. The that will win is the one that you feed. (May it be peace.)

Let's center ourselves in prayer:

Gracious, Loving God, it is in you that we live and move and have meaning. We know that you are as close to us as our own breath and, at the same time, larger than our minds can conceive. Lord, we need you now as never before. We know that you are always with us. Awaken our senses to your presence. May we see you in all of creation. May we hear you in the wind and in each other. May we feel your presence in kindness given and received. May we know your love deep within ourselves.

O God, this day we pray for the world. We pray for those who are ill, those who have died, those who are grieving and those who are afraid. We pray for healing and restored hope. We pray for all of the countries of the world. We pray for our neighbors and those we will never meet. We ask that you extend your loving grace to blanket the world with comfort and kindness and help.

Holy One, we are walking in your light. We are trying to be Unafraid. Trusting. Hopeful. Yet, we confess that we do harbor fears, for ourselves and others. Some are afraid the grocery stores won't have the items we want and others are afraid for the more vulnerable: those who need specific items because of allergies or because that's what WIC will cover. Some of us are afraid of catching COVID-19 while others are afraid that our beloved parents or grandparents will get sick.

And, Jesus, if we admit it, some of us are glad that our elderly family members are now with you so that we don't have to worry about being afraid for them. And then we remember how much we miss them and want to lean on them for support.

But Spirit of Love and Life, we do trust you. You have seen each of us through trying times before and we know that you are steadfastly with us now. We offer thanks and praise for your faithfulness. Your support. Your peace. Your love.

Be with us now and be with all who are serving you in so many ways. Medical professionals, grocery clerks, scientists, world leaders, truck drivers bringing supplies, social services, neighbors checking in on neighbors, restaurant drive through attendants, people praying all around the world, and those who are practicing the self-discipline of 'social distancing', which has become a holy act to prevent the spread of the virus. Lord we are grateful for all who serve and the many ways people are doing so.

Calm anxiety and bring clear and compassionate direction to your people. We offer our deepest gratitude for our good shepherd, Jesus who taught us this prayer: (please join me in 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. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory. Forever. Amen.

Now, HYMN

Typically, when we gather together on Sundays, we offer a special interactive time for children. Today, I'm calling this a time for all ages and I invite the adults, as well as the children watching to take part

I want to point out that in just a little over a week, we have all learned so much. If there's one thing that the novel Coronavirus has taught us, it's that we are adaptable, we can change the ways we do things. As humans, we tend to get stuck in ruts, doing the same things over and over because we've always done it that way. We know how to do them. They're familiar and comfortable for us.

But then something come along and jolts us out of that place of comfort. For whatever reason, we can't do what we could always do and necessity becomes the mother of invention. Have you heard that expression before? It means that when we have a need (necessity), we bring about a new way of doing things. The fact that you're watching this service online instead of being in the traditional worship space means that you're having a new experience. I celebrate the fact that we're learning new things, together.

I want to share a new way to pray. It's called 'embodied prayer' and it means that you use your whole body to pray. Many of us are used to praying by speaking or silently holding our hands in prayer position or even singing. Right now, there are a lot of people who could use a hug...and many of those folks live alone and don't have anyone to give them a hug, so I want them to feel God's hug. And I want you to feel it too. So here's what we're going to do, I'm going to show you a prayer I wrote and ask that we do it together.

Remember, you're not in a big group—you're just with the people who are closest to you, so give this a try. I'll show you how to do it. God of the universe (hands up), be with me now. Encircle me with your love. (hands in self hug). Fill my head (touch head) and my heart (touch heart) with your peace so that I may bring it to the world (hands out.) Amen.

Let's try that together and I'll leave room for you to repeat my words. (Repeat.)

I want to thank you all for trying something new. Let's be together in another in prayer. God of the Universe, thank you for bringing your love to our lives and your peace to our souls. May we be agents of calm in this chaos. Amen.

And now, Gina Connolly will sing ANTHEM

The passage I'll talk about today is from the Book of Psalms. We tend to think of the Bible as one book because it's one book, but it was actually written over hundreds of years and the different sections are actually different books themselves. Some are only a few pages long. The Book of Psalms is found just before the half way mark and it's comprised of 150 different songs and they don't have names-just numbers.

In Biblical times, they would have been sung with someone accompanying the singer on an instrument with strings. They look like poems to us because often times we read them instead of

singing them. And by the way, for those not familiar with the Bible, even though 'psalms' sounds like songs, it's spelled p-s-a-l-m-s.

We believe that the first 50 psalms were written by the same person. If David could write 50 of them, I wonder if after watching today, you might think about writing one? It's a prayer, a song, a poem. It can express what you're feeling right now and how you trust God.

Today, I'll be taking about the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. I'll read it to you now and if you know the words, you can join me in saying it out loud. (READ IT.)

The words offer some beautiful imagery. These words were written several hundred years before Christ, and 2500 years ago, shepherds were as much a part of community life as doctors and teachers are today. If you've ever been to Vermont or a farm right here in Maine, you may have an idea what it means for sheep to be cared for by a shepherd.

Whether or not the shepherd imagery resonates in this moment, I'm going to show you how these ancient words are relevant today.

First, I want to share with you that though this psalm is often read in times of dying, I understand it to be words for living. This entire piece speaks of trusting God, through a day and all of our days. It speaks of companionship for a journey. It speaks of someone not only accompanying us, but caring for us through a variety of circumstances.

At the time this was written, the people had been exiled (or turned away from their homeland). They were living somewhere new and everything was different. We may still be in our own homes, but everything is different right now. Everything from work to school to the way we interact with each other is not the way it's been our whole lives...and it's not the way it was at the beginning of March.

We're navigating new territory, but friends, we're not doing this alone. God is with us. And God isn't leaving us. All we have to do is open our heart to that divine presence. **The Lord is my shepherd.** A shepherd would go out into pastures with the sheep. That shepherd was responsible for keeping his or her sheep safe from predators and making sure the sheep had food and water. We're not talking about a time when there were farms with fenced in pastures that sheep could eat from. There were no drinking troughs. This psalm speaks to a very real sense of dependency on the shepherd.

We find ourselves in that same place today as we deal with all kinds of unknowns and limitations on our daily lives. COVID-19 is having a tremendous impact globally and we, the entire world, are realizing that we are dependent upon God.

Something important that you may not otherwise notice is that a shepherd would have had many sheep. Even though this is written from the perspective of one person comparing themselves to a sheep, it would have been understood that these words apply to the whole community. Friends, we are in this together. We are connected and dependent on each other and God in ways that were long implied, but have become glaringly obvious lately.

It brings me tremendous comfort to know that we're going through this together and that we have each other. I saw a meme on social media recently. It was a picture of three people carrying a piece a plank. They were all holding it on their shoulders. Underneath there was a gap, **but because some of them were always solidly on firm footing, they were all able to get beyond the place where the bottom dropped out.** First it was the two in the back, supporting the first person to get across. Then it was a person on either side of the hole helping the middle person. Then it was two people beyond the danger helping the last to safety.

We are those people and over the weeks ahead, we're going to find ourselves in different places in this mix. Jesus said "love God and love your neighbor". For the foreseeable future, we're going to find ourselves connected and helping each other in ways we never imagined. In ways we didn't know we were capable of. But trust me, we are capable because we are held by the one who created us.

**The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.** We use the word 'want' differently than people did more than 2,000 years ago. This means that God will take care of all of our needs. There's nothing like a pandemic to help sort out 'wants' from 'needs', is there? All of a sudden, things we wouldn't have thought twice about, like soap and water, are very serious needs. God will provide for us.

**He makes me lie down in green pastures.** Sheep eat grass so they need to graze in green pastures. If they're in the same pasture day after day, they'll eat the grass down to a nub, so shepherds would move the sheep from place to place. Imagine that it's summer and you're wearing a wool sweater and you're walking along Long Sands. It's hot and you're tired. Imagine the shepherd making the sheep lie down to rest. This time of social distancing and self quarantining has a gift for us. With our lives upended, we can stop running around and build in time for rest. After you've washed down those high-touch surfaces, maybe you just sit down and take a break to just sit and pray.

**He leads me beside still waters.** Have you ever washed a wool sweater? Or even wool socks? If so, you know two things. Wool gets stinky when it's wet, but more, it gets really heavy.

The shepherd led the sheep by still water, because if they were rough waters, like fast moving river rapids, the sheep wouldn't stand a chance. It would be carried away only to sink. When we're beside still water, we stand less of a chance of 1. Falling in and 2. Being carried away. If we do fall in still water, the shepherd can pull us out with his crook.

True story: the other day, I was out for a walk and I saw someone down by the Wiggly Bridge. She had a long grabber and was trying to get something out of the water. I learned it was her cell phone. Thankfully, she was able to pluck it out of the water.

You can trust that Christ will pull you back to safety, even when you are feeling under water. And maybe you've had that sinking feeling the last few days as you've learned more about the new Corona Virus. Prayer can help you rise above fear and it can help you be peaceful. He restores my soul.

**He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.** This is really old language that I think means that, as Christians, we already know how we're supposed to behave in community. We have the 10 commandments and we have what Jesus taught. Love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

**Even though I walk through the darkest valley (or some of you may know the older language, "the valley of the shadow of death") I fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.**

This can be so reassuring. In the Bible, mountaintops were associated with God. Valleys would have been far away from the mountain tops. **Being in a dark valley may mean that you're feeling down or feeling separated from God.** But you're not alone and nothing can separate you from God's love.

It means that even though you may go through a difficult time or a scary time or challenging time, you know that you will get through it because God is right there with you. A shepherd's crook would

have been used to pull sheep back to safety. Even though we might not have the capacity to get ourselves out of a difficult situation, God has the means.

**You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies.** I'm going to suggest that this means that even though you may feel unsafe in your surroundings, God will make sure you're fed spiritually and physically. I've heard it said that shepherds would clear the fields of things that would hurt the sheep. The shepherd may have been clearing the fields of brambles before he let the sheep graze.

**You anoint my head with oil.** Oil has a lot of properties. In those times, it may have been used to clean and seal scrapes the way we use antibiotic and bandages today. The idea of being anointed in biblical times is to show God's blessing. It's to be set apart for God's work.

When you follow Christ, the Good Shepherd, you are set aside to do God's work. As a Christian, that means showing God's love, demonstrating kindness and compassion, helping each other, and standing up against bigotry. We are the body of Christ here on earth.

**My cup runs over (or overflows).** I've understood this in a couple of ways over my life. First, I've understood it to mean that have more than enough of what we need. I've also had experiences when I've been humbled and so filled with gratitude for God's blessings, that I've been moved to tears. My cup runs over.

**Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.** When I first heard this, I remember thinking, 'how can goodness and mercy follow me—wouldn't they be leading me?' and then I saw parent with a small child. The child was charging on ahead, the parent following behind keeping a close eye, making sure there were no dangers ahead for the child, ever ready to scoop that little one up to keep her safe.

The words about dwelling in God's house forever can speak of unbroken continuity from this lifetime into the next. AND, it may speak to living as though we are in God's house now. (We may well be.) Heaven may be right here, right now in the way we treat each other.

Each week I encourage you to live the light and give the light and in doing so, I remind you that you do bring heaven to earth. May that be so. God is with you, right now, and God will see you through this. Blessed be and amen.

## HYMN

Folks, we're a self-supporting church, meaning that our denomination doesn't have a hierarchy to support us. They don't take in all the money and then pay our bills. The congregation owns the buildings, pays the staff and utilities, donates money and otherwise supports work in the community locally, nationally, and globally.

The truth is this, we need your help, especially right now, when we and so many other organizations have had to close our building's doors. You and I know that the church isn't a building, it's people doing good in the world.

So that we may continue to inspire kindness, so that we may continue to calm anxiety, and so that we may be agents of love in the world, I invite you make a donation to First Parish Church of York ME, either by clicking the 'support us' button on the homepage, bottom right or by mailing a check to First Parish Church, 180 York Street, York ME, 03909. Thank you for your support.

Faith makes a difference. I've said it before, faith offers us solid ground to stand on when our world has been rocked. rocked. May faith see you through. May your faith be an inspiration to others.

I will close this worship today with a prayer written by a Seattle woman **named Cameron Wiggins Bellm:**

May we who are merely inconvenienced  
Remember those whose lives are at stake.

May we who have no risk factors  
Remember those most vulnerable.

May we who have the luxury of working from home  
Remember those who must choose between preserving their health or making their rent.

May we who have the flexibility to care for our children when their schools close  
Remember those who have no options.

May we who have to cancel our trips  
Remember those who have no place to go.

May we who are losing our margin money in the tumult of the economic market  
Remember those who have no margin at all.

May we who settle in for a quarantine at home  
Remember those who have no home.  
As fear grips our country, let us choose love.

During this time when we cannot physically wrap our arms around each other,  
Let us find ways to be the loving embrace of God to our neighbors. Amen.

People of God, remember who you are and Whose you are. Remember God walks with you always.  
Be at peace. Amen.