

**UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho**

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

Fourth Sunday of Easter

3 May 2020

Psalm 23

John 10:1-10

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Good morning! And welcome to worship as the United Church of Christ Congregational in Wallace. Welcome together as the people of God and to a time and place where I believe God knits us together into one as the Body of Christ. I've always believed that on any given Sunday the Spirit moves among us and connects us with more than we can see or touch. That conviction was reinforced in a tangible way last Sunday during our virtual fellowship time, when we saw faces and heard voices from both Texas and Florida as well as various parts of north Idaho; we were reassured that while separate from each other in a multitude of ways, we are still very much walking and worshipping as one. Still being joined together by the movement of God's Spirit, still being held by the grace of God, still being called and taught, forgiven and fed by the presence of the risen Christ among us. Welcome to this time of worship together.

Once again, I'm sending a PDF of the words of this worship along with the video, in the hope that you will join me in the unison and responsive portions of the service, as well as the songs. Also, a reminder that we will celebrate the sacrament of communion later, so if you haven't brought something with you to represent the bread and cup, feel free to pause the recording while you do so. It can be anything from a roll and some juice to coffee and a doughnut to a pretzel and water. Jesus used what he had at hand the night of the Passover feast, and he'll bless whatever we bring with us today.

CALL TO WORSHIP

In the darkest valley,

at the banquet table;

in the hard work of life,

at the moments of ease;

in our day-to-day reality,

at times set aside—

like this time, now—

for worship, for listening, for paying attention;

with every step we take:

goodness and mercy follow us; our cups overflow.

(Joanna Harader, Spacious Faith)

SONG *“Gather Us In”*

Here in this place, the new light is streaming, shadows of doubt are vanished away.

See in this space our fears and our dreamings, brought here to you in the light of this day.

Gather us in, the lost and forsaken; gather us in, our spirits inflame.

Call to us now and we shall awaken; we shall arise at the sound of our name.

Not just in buildings, small and confining, not in some heaven light years away.

Here in this place the new light is shining; now is God present, and now is the day.

Gather us in and hold us forever; gather us in and make us your own;

gather us in, all peoples together, fire of love in our flesh and our bone.

CALL TO RECONCILIATION

It is not just material things, but the ‘stuff’ that makes us who we are – our hearts, our hopes, our dreams – that we have trouble sharing with others. But the more we hoard, the less we trust God to use us, and all our gifts, in the work of God’s realm. Let us entrust our brokenness to our God, that we might be made whole, as we pray saying:

PRAYER OF CONFESSION (in unison)

Why is it so hard to trust in your grace, Generous Heart? You promise to pour out blessings upon us, but we are reluctant to let go of what we have. We put a lock on our hearts and feelings, while you share your precious Child with us. You call us home to dinner, but we would rather keep playing in the shadows of life.

Forgive us, Goodness and Mercy. Anoint us with the oil of grace, until our hearts overflow with praise. Fill us with the living waters of hope, so we can share with others. Feed us at your Table of joy, so we might follow Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, with glad and gracious hearts.

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

When we would stand on sin’s shoulders, trying to peer through the windows, God throws open wide the front door, so we can come in and live forever in joy.

We are led through death to life; we are fed at grace’s table; we are forgiven. Thanks be to God. Amen.

*(Thom M. Shuman, *Playing Hopscotch in Heaven*)*

SCRIPTURE READINGS Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name’s sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.

John 10:1-10

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because

they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

SERMON

If someone asks you these days how you’re doing, what do you tell them? I don’t have a one-size-fits-all kind of answer; what I say depends both on the day and who asks. Unless I’m really having a no good, very bad day, I can usually stop to discern whether the person asking is just doing that polite greeting thing on their way to something else with no interest whatsoever in me, or if they genuinely care and are ready to listen to my answer. Even if the question seems genuine, what I say will depend on the day. Or the moment. Most of the time, I really am doing okay and weathering these crazy days of social distancing and sheltering in place with any plans for the summer suspended in the realm of fantasy fiction. But every now and then I acknowledge that it’s getting old. Look at me wrong at just the right time and I might whimper and whine. And you? How’s it going? I really would love to hear, and give thanks for the conversations when I do.

I read this week of the Baptist preacher who was reported to have frequently responded to questions about his well being by answering, I flourish! I can’t recall that that has ever been my answer, or my general outlook on life, but I think it’s impressive. And as tempting as it is to say, yeah, but he didn’t live in the spring of 2020... I’m pretty sure he lived through some other more than challenging times. Where does a person go to get filled up on flourishing?

Flourishing isn’t a biblical word as far as I know, but I do think it’s a notion that we can catch the scent of in both Psalm 23 and John 10. Both of today’s texts trumpet the presence of a lavish provider who offers way more than enough for those in their care. I don’t know about you, but where I come from filling a cup to overflowing was discouraged, and being offered an abundant life seems a bit lavish when you consider we live in a time when too many have too little and too few have too much. And yet that’s precisely the kind of God we worship and the Christ we seek to follow. A God who offers us shelter and protection, and who establishes a gate that both welcomes us in and keeps danger out. A God who leads us to nourishing waters and sets a banquet for us – even when we’re surrounded by enemies and walking through the darkest valley imaginable. God is a faithful, constant companion who promises to always see us through, walks with us in a profound kind of intimacy, knows our names and catches our tears, who says to us in more ways than we can count, You’ve got this. And I’ve got you.

I read a story recently on Facebook that I think expresses some of this notion of “flourishing”. It said that the author is unknown, and it describes a conversation between a child and grandfather. The child asks, “How old are you, Grandpa?”

Grandpa - "I'm 81, dear."

Child - "So does that mean you were alive during the Coronavirus?"

Grandpa - "Yes, I was."

Child - "Wow. That must have been horrible, Grandpa. We were learning about that at school this week. They told us about how all the schools had closed. And moms and dads couldn't go to work so didn't have as much money to do nice things. They said that you weren't allowed to go and visit your friends and family and couldn't go out anywhere. They told us that the shops and stores ran out of lots of things so you didn't have much bread, and flour, and toilet rolls. They said that summer holidays were

cancelled. And they told us about all those thousands of people that got very sick and who died. They explained how hard all the doctors and nurses and all essential workers worked, and that lots of them died, too. That must have been so horrible, grandpa!"

To which Grandpa replied, "Well, that is all correct. And I know that because I read about it when I was older. But to tell you the truth I remember it differently... I remember playing in the garden for hours with mom and dad and having picnics outside and lots of bbqs. I remember making things and fishing with my Dad and baking with my Mom. I remember making forts and learning how to do hand stands and back flips. I remember having quality time with my family. I remember Mom's favorite words becoming 'Hey, I've got an idea...' Rather than 'Maybe later or tomorrow I'm a bit busy'. I remember making our own bread and pastry. I remember having movie night three or four times a week instead of just one. It was a horrible time for lots of people you are right. But I remember it differently."

It's all true, and we get to decide where to stand and what to focus on: the horrors of the suffering or the compassion and kindness that seem to be overflowing in countless communities across this country; the bad news of how long this is taking and what rights we may have to put on hold for now or the good news of the ways in which even we can make a difference in the well being of others plus the ways that we are blessed in new and unexpected moments of beauty and wonder and connection with others.

If we let it, learning to flourish has the potential to unleash a kind of creative ability and boldness that more often than not is unimagined and therefore, unrealized. I love the story that Herbie Hancock told in his book *Possibilities*. He described being on stage at a concert hall in Stockholm, Sweden in the mid-60's, playing piano with the Miles Davis Quintet. He writes, "The music is flowing, we're connecting with the audience, and everything feels magical... The five of us have become one entity, shifting and flowing with the music. We're playing one of Miles's classics... it's the peak of the evening and the whole audience is on the edge of their seats.

Miles starts playing, building up to his solo, and just as he's about to really let loose, he takes a breath. And right then I play a chord that is just so wrong. I don't even know where it came from – it's the wrong chord. In the wrong place, and now it's hanging out there like a piece of rotten fruit... It's as if we've all been building this gorgeous house of sound, and I just accidentally put a match to it.

Miles pauses for a fraction of a second, and then he plays some notes that somehow miraculously make my chord sound right. In that moment I believe my mouth actually fell open...And then Miles just took off from there, unleashing a solo that took the song in a new direction." (as told by Kirk Byron Jones, *The Christian Century*, April 22, 2020)

When we live in God's overflow, we can live with an abiding confidence of having what we need and always having enough, enough to meet our needs and also to share with others. Appreciating what we have, rather than ruminating over what we don't have, allows us to abide freely and fully in ever-flourishing blessing. To live and love, serve and share within the abundant life Jesus came to give us, and to drink from the overflowing cup of God's goodness and mercy. Amen.

PRAYER REQUESTS

Evy May is praying for all of us and invites us to pray for her Rick and Dena's Granddaughter Chloe broke her wrist on the growth plate. Prayers for complete healing. They will be taking her cast off every 2 weeks, so they can do an xray and then put a new one on. They'll do that for 6 weeks and then continue to xray quarterly in order to watch the growth/healing. The family's been through a lot: Chloe's brother has Chrons disease, Philip's MS and Megan's cancer.

Prayers for all workers in the Wallace businesses as they start opening up this week. Prayers for visitors to be kind and responsible.

Prayers for our world leaders. Lord, grant them wisdom.

For states that are opening up to be safe and for people to abide by the social distance rules and for people to think beyond themselves and to think if they don't, what can happen. We want this over and get back to normal, whatever that is.

Continue prayer that this lockdown ends soon so people can go back to work, so they can support their families, combined with Kasey's joy that she is starting work again.

Kasey's friend's boyfriend is going to Texas to look for work

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, it's easy to be overwhelmed by the pain and suffering in the world and in our lives, and some days it's a struggle to not give in to that. Each of us carries with us the hurts and fears, wounds and weariness of our lives as well of those we love. These days, everywhere we look, we see and hear reminders of the unthinkable suffering of countless people in our community, country and world. People who are sick and dying, at risk of infection and heartbroken by the death of a loved one; people who are out of work and out of money, out of food and out of hope; first responders and medical personnel who labor and serve frantically to care for others and essential workers who fill grocery shelves and wipe down gas pumps, pack boxes and drive trucks; farmers who dump milk and plow under produce because of an evaporating market and meat handlers compelled to return to work to feed the rest of us. The list is long, the wounds are deep, the suffering is great. We bring all of it to you, and seek your healing and holding, your warming embrace and sheltering love.

We also pray, great and gracious God, for your wisdom. Wisdom for those who seek a vaccine and treatment possibilities. Wisdom for those who make decisions and establish the protocols and phases that will bring us through this pandemic. Wisdom for business owners and employees, and for those faced with the decision about when, where and how to leave our homes. Wisdom that will help us hold each other's needs alongside our own, to set impatience and anger aside in order to drink deeply of the overflowing kindness you lavish upon us, and then look for ways to share the bounty of our kindness with others. Infuse and bless us with your flourishing abundance, that together with you and each other we might imagine new possibilities and creative courses through the challenging days before us.

Our hearts overflow with gratitude to you for the generous, faithful ways you accompany us through COVID-19, and all of the days of our lives. By your grace, may we walk as your people, trusting your promises, reflecting your light, sharing your love, living your way. Hear our prayers, spoken and unspoken. And hear us as we join together in the prayer Jesus taught, saying: Our Father...

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

OFFERING

God has shown us the meaning of generosity in the beautiful diversity of creation, in the overflowing love of Jesus Christ, and in the never-ending gift of the Holy Spirit! God has abundantly blessed us and calls us to be a community that blesses others through the sharing of our love, our talents, and our material possessions. Let us rejoice in what we have been given and in what is ours to give – to our church, our community, and our world.

SACRAMENT OF COMMUNION

Invitation

For Holy Communion this morning, we sanctify our time and many tables for a sacrament never confined to sanctuaries or precious surfaces carved with "Do this in Remembrance of Me," but always following wherever one of God's precious children, like a sheep astray, is lost or needs to be guided.

Christ is our shepherd. In the loneliest lockdown, we do not want for companionship. In crowded families – distance-learning and never catching breath, we find an inner source of still waters. In the soul-stretching days of health care and emergency professionals, decision-makers for others, and essential workers with daily risk, we meet a restorer of souls. In the paths of tight-eousness – assisted living, correctional facility, shelter, immigration detention, nursing home, housing for those who are simply poor – we find a leader, a staff to lean on, a rod that points a new way. Christ leads us not around it, but through the valley of the shadow – and turns to us, as Jesus did when he came through the walls of a locked room in the afternoon of resurrection, said, “Peace be with you,” and then asked if they had anything to give him to eat. Give the gentle Shepherd who is the Risen Christ your bread, your cup and your heart.

Prayer of Consecration

We have bread and cup and heart. Our church community is dispersed in distance but we are one in Christ. In your many kitchens, and living rooms, rest your hands lightly upon these elements which we set aside today to be a sacrament. Let us ask God’s blessing upon them and upon us and upon those who are in our prayers this morning.

Gentle Host, you prepare a table before us in the threatening presence of virus. You anoint our hearts, bless our bread and our cups overflow. Surely as we shelter in place we find both the goodness of community and mercy to those most vulnerable. Now and all the days of our lives we claim that this house -- these many houses where we dwell and also our precious church building, are, indeed, the house of God.

Send your Spirit of life and love, power and blessing upon your children who are staying at home so that this Bread may be broken and gathered in love and this Cup poured out to give hope to all. Risen Christ, live in us, that we may live in you. Breathe in us, that we may breathe in you. Amen.

Words of Remembering

We remember the sharing of bread in many places -- wilderness manna, tents and caves of shepherds, Abigail’s saddle bags, the lunch of a small boy, the fish of the disciples and the loaf of Emmaus. And we remember that Paul the apostle wrote letters to congregations throughout places we now call Greece, Turkey and Macedonia, and they were the first “remote” worship resources, including these Communion words sent to the church at Corinth:

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Sharing of the Elements

Let us in our many places receive the gift of God, the Bread of Heaven.

We are one in Christ in the bread we share.

Let us in our many places receive the gift of God, the Cup of Blessing.

We are one in Christ in the cup we share.

Prayer of Thanksgiving (in unison)

We give thanks, Holy God, for this meal of grace, rejoicing that even in the holy dispersion of

virtual worship, you set a table for us, reminding us again that the risen Christ's love is not limited by buildings made with human hands, nor contained in human ceremonies. We celebrate your shepherding love that carries us into the unknown, to listen and follow, love and guide, feed and be fed. Amen.

(Maren Tirabassi, Gifts in Open Hands)

SONG *“Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us”*

Savior, like a shepherd lead us, Much we need Thy tender care;
In Thy pleasant pastures feed us, For our use Thy folds prepare;
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus, Thou hast bought us, Thine we are;
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus, Thou hast bought us, Thine we are.

We are Thine; do Thou befriend us, Be the guardian of our way;
Keep Thy flock, from sin defend us, Seek us when we go astray;
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus, Hear, O hear us when we pray;
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus, Hear, O hear us when we pray.

BENEDICTION

The grace of God, deeper than our imagination;
the strength of Christ, stronger than our need;
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, richer than our togetherness;
guide and sustain us today and in all our tomorrows. Amen.