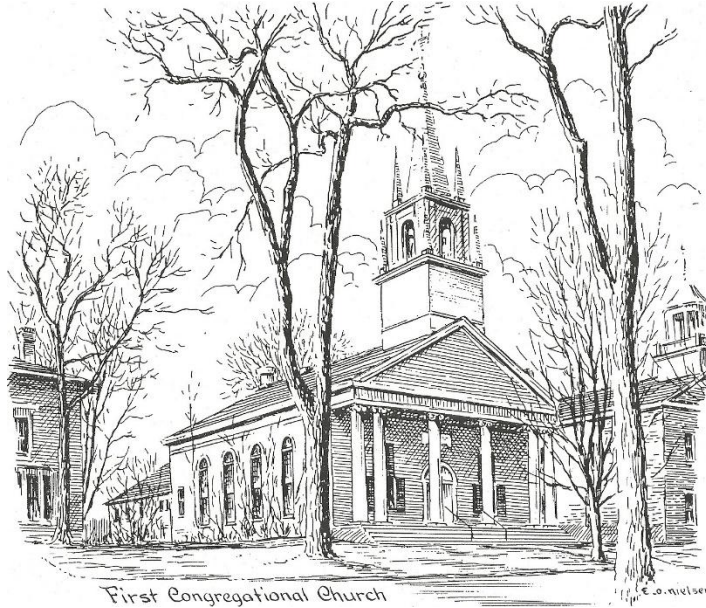


First Congregational Church
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
An Open and Affirming Church



We welcome you to the First Congregational Church of Wiscasset.

VISION: We are on a journey to reflect God's love, embracing diversity and affirming the dignity and worth of all.

MISSION: Together we strive to praise God, grow in faith, cultivate love, spread joy, care for all people and God's creation, promote peace, and do justice.

April 26, 2026

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

We welcome all to our worship service, whether present in the sanctuary, joining us on streaming video, or watching our service in the future.

Spiritual Contemplation Quote for the week: “Without a Shepherd, the sheep will go astray.” — Lailah Gifty Akita

PRELUDE

‘The Good Shepherd’

Dom Paul Benoit

RINGING OF THE BELL

WELCOME and ANNOUNCEMENTS

* CALL TO WORSHIP

L: Welcome!!

P: Thank you!!!

L: For some of you, it has been a good week and for others difficulties abound.

P: We need peace and healing for our souls and for our world.

L: Rest, open your hearts and lives to the Good Shepherd.

P: God, pour your balm of healing power to rest over our lives and our world, Amen.

* OPENING HYMN

‘The Lord is My Shepherd’

Red Hymnal No. 430

OPENING INVOCATION TO PRAYER

God of all sheep, those who remain close to you and those who stray, those who are always faithful and those who are lost, be with us Today! Bring us close, draw us in, and infuse us with the Holy Spirit. Amen.

JOYS AND CONCERNS: After each Joy or Concern, Please respond:

Pastor: “God,” Congregation: **“Hear our prayer.”**

LIGHTING OF THE PEACE CANDLE

Global Mission Partner Prayer this week: Indonesia

MORNING PRAYER AND SILENT MOMENTS FOR PERSONAL PRAYER

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.

SCRIPTURE LESSON

Psalm 23

* HYMN *‘Just a Closer Walk With Thee’* Red Hymnal No. 436

SERMON ‘Even in Black Fly Season, I Shall Not Want’

OFFERTORY PRAYER

OFFERTORY *‘It Is Well With My Soul’* arr. Charles Callahan

* DOXOLOGY

**Praise God from whom all blessings flow;
Praise God, all creatures here below;
Praise God for all that love has done;
Creator, Christ, and Spirit One. Amen.**

DEDICATION PRAYER

* CLOSING HYMN *‘On a Hill Far Away’* Black Hymnal No. 195

BENEDICTION

BENEDICTORY RESPONSE

Go now in peace. Never be afraid. God will go with you each hour of every day. Go now in faith, steadfast, strong and true. Know God will guide you in all you do. Go now in love, and show you believe. Reach out to others so all the world can see. God will be there watching from above. Go now in peace, in faith, and in love.

POSTLUDE

‘Prelude in Classic Style’

Gordon Young

You are invited to sit for the postlude.

* * * * *

“Our worship ends, let our service begin”

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Those serving you today:

Ushers: Anne and Dewey Harris

Reader: Deb Olson

Flowers: Beth Maxwell

Online Streaming: Tom Clement

Guest Organist: Ray Cornils

Please join us for fellowship, coffee or tea, and refreshments in Fellowship Hall following worship.

Please take note of the colored paper prayer slips in the pew rack. These are for you to write a word or phrase of prayer or concerns. Fold it and place it in the offering plate. It will only be shared with Rev. John.

First Congregational Church UCC
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Psalm 23

King James Version

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will 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 will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

ANNOUNCEMENTS APRIL 26

Happy April Birthday to Anne Harris, Harriet Matthey, Meg Skidmore, Linda Wallace & Susan Zimmerman

Help Yourself Shelf Wish List

* jarred spaghetti sauce * 1lb. white rice * drink mixes * canned chicken * tuna *
* cereal * SPAM * mayo * baked beans * toothpaste * dish soap * cat litter *

Purse Auction- Saturday May 2nd, beginning at 10:00am. If you have a new or gently used purse you would like to donate to the Organ Society fundraiser, please drop it off in the church office, with your name on it.

Bring a Friend Sunday, May 3rd - In the spirit of Derby Sunday, wear a hat &/or bright colors (optional). "Bring a Friend" worship will be followed with Starbuck's coffee, and treats in Fellowship Hall.

Coming Up This Week

Monday, April 27

Rev. John's Office Hours 9:00am-12:00pm

Office Hours 9:30am – 1:30pm

Mah Jongg 6:00pm – 8:30pm

Tuesday, April 28

Rev. John's Office Hours 9:00am-12:00pm

Office Hours 9:30am – 1:30pm

Wednesday, April 29

Rev. John's Office Hours 9:00am-12:00pm

Office Hours 10:00am – 2:00pm

Organ Society 9:30am

Feed Our Scholars packing 11:00am

Sunday, April 26

Sunday Worship 10:00am

Coffee Hour in Fellowship Hall following worship

The Lord's My Shepherd

1. The Lord's my shep-herd; I'll not want. God makes me down to lie
 2. My soul thou dost re - store a - gain and me to walk dost make
 3. Yea, though I walk in death's dark vale, yet will I fear no ill;
 4. My ta - ble thou hast fur - nish - ed in pres - ence of my foes;
 5. Good - ness and mer - cy all my days shall sure - ly fol - low me;

in pas - tures green, and lead - eth me the qui - et wa - ters by;
 with - in the paths of righ - teous - ness e'en for thine own name's sake;
 for thou art with me, and thy rod and staff me com - fort still;
 my head thou dost with oil a - noint, and my cup o - ver - flows;
 and in God's house for - ev - er - more my dwell - ing place shall be;

God lead - eth me, God lead - eth me the qui - et wa - ters by.
 with - in the paths of righ - teous - ness e'en for thine own name's sake.
 for thou art with me, and thy rod and staff me com - fort still.
 my head thou dost with oil a - noint, and my cup o - ver - flows.
 and in God's house for - ev - er - more my dwell - ing place shall be.

WORDS: *Scottish Psalter*, 1650, alt.
 MUSIC: J. L. Macbeth Bain, 1915; arr. Gordon Jacob, 1934, adapt.

BROTHER JAMES' AIR
 86.86.86

I Am Weak, but Thou Art Strong

(Just a Closer Walk with Thee)

436



1. I am weak, but thou art strong; Je - sus, keep me from all wrong;

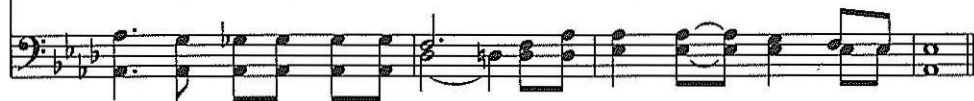
2. Through this world of toil and snares, if I fal - ter, Lord, who cares?

3. When my fee - ble life is o'er, time for me will be no more;

Refrain: Just a clos - er walk with thee, grant it, Je - sus, is my plea,



I'll be sat - is - fied as long as I walk, let me walk close to thee.
Who with me my bur - den shares? None but thee, dear Lord, none but thee.
guide me gent - ly, safe - ly o'er to thy shore, dear Lord, to thy shore.
dai - ly walk - ing close to thee: let it be, dear Lord, let it be.



WORDS and MUSIC: Anonymous

CLOSER WALK
Irr. w. refrain

1 On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross,
the emblem of suffering and shame;
and I love that old cross where the dearest and best
for a world of lost sinners was slain.

Refrain:

So I'll cherish the old rugged cross,
till my trophies at last I lay down;
I will cling to the old rugged cross,
and exchange it some day for a crown.

2 Oh, that old rugged cross, so despised by the world,
has a wondrous attraction for me;
for the dear Lamb of God left his glory above
to bear it to cold Calvary. [Refrain]

3 In that old rugged cross, which bore love so divine,
a wondrous beauty I see,
for upon that old cross Jesus suffered and died,
to pardon and sanctify me. [Refrain]

4 To the old rugged cross I will ever be true,
its shame and reproach gladly bear;
when God calls me some day to my home far away,
there God's glory forever I'll share. [Refrain]

Lyrics from the New Century Hymnal

April 26, 2026 Psalm 23 ‘Even in Black Fly season, I shall Not Want.’ Rev. John Hogue

If you’ve ever tried to get anywhere in Maine in July, you know two things are certain: road construction and someone waving you through with a coffee in one hand and a “slow down, bub” look in the other. If you’ve ever been out on the water when the fog rolls in thick as chowder, you also know this—when you can’t see where you’re going, you’d better trust the one who can. Psalm 23 is for those moments. It’s for when life feels like dense fog off the coast, when the path disappears, when you’re not sure if you’re heading toward safe harbor or a rock pile.

Every year, across the globe, an astonishing migration takes place — one of the longest and most precise journeys in the bird kingdom. The Arctic Tern flies from the Arctic all the way to the Antarctic and back again. That’s nearly 25,000 miles round trip — the longest known migration of any bird.(from all about birds website) Here is what’s wild: they don’t have maps. They don’t have GPS. There are no signposts in the ocean sky. Somehow, these birds find their way, year after year. How? Scientists believe they navigate using the Earth’s magnetic field — something they can’t see, but something that pulls and guides them, even across unfamiliar territory and vast, empty distances.

That’s a picture of what it means to have a Shepherd. “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” There are times in life when we can’t see the way ahead. The path feels unfamiliar. The journey is long. And we wonder if we’ll ever make it. However, like the Arctic Tern, there’s a pull. An unseen guidance. The Shepherd is leading — sometimes silently, but always faithfully. Just like those birds find their way home, we will too — not because we’re smart or lucky, but because the Shepherd knows the way. Psalm 23 isn’t sentimental—it’s survival truth. Psalm 23 is broken theologically into four parts, 1.rest 2. work 3. sorrow 4.peace.

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” — That is Provision.
In Maine, folks understand provision. You don’t take a good catch for granted. You don’t assume the weather will hold. You prepare. You trust. God promises enough. Sometimes “I shall not want” looks like:

- Strength to get through the day, especially during black fly season.
- Peace when answers don't come
- Just enough light for the next step

Have you ever watched a small child at a playground? Most kids run and play, but every now and then, they turn to look. Just to make sure mom or dad is still there. That check-in is everything. Psychologists call it “secure attachment.” It’s the idea that when a child has a caregiver who is consistently present, loving, and attentive, that child grows up feeling safe in the world — able to explore, try, risk, and even fail... because they know someone is watching out for them.(Source: Psychology Today)

It’s not that they won’t fall. It’s not that life will be perfect. But deep down, they believe: “I’ll be okay... because I’m not alone.” That’s exactly what David is expressing in Psalm 23:1: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” He’s saying, “I’ve got a secure attachment. I know who’s watching over me. I know who walks beside me. I know I’m not alone.” You and I don’t outgrow that need. We’re still checking — still wondering if Someone is watching, still needing assurance that we’re not abandoned. The gospel says: You’re not. God is not a distant deity or an inconsistent caregiver. God is a Shepherd — present, attentive, committed. When that truth sinks in, it produces peace. Rest. Even joy. Because if the Shepherd is near, I shall not want.

“He leads me beside still waters; He restores my soul.” — The Peace
Now let’s be honest—“still waters” aren’t exactly the Gulf of Maine most days. It’s more choppy, unpredictable, and occasionally trying to throw you overboard. Here’s the truth: stillness isn’t about the water—it’s about the Shepherd. You can be in the middle of chaos and still have a settled soul. God leads us—not pushes, not drags—leads us into places of restoration. Sometimes that’s a quiet morning with coffee before the world wakes up. Sometimes it’s a conversation that heals something deep. Sometimes it’s just a moment where you realize... “I’m going to be okay.”

If you’ve ever walked through a forest or looked closely at a leaf in sunlight,

you've witnessed one of the most incredible systems of provision ever created: photosynthesis. It's quiet. Invisible. Constant. Plants take sunlight — something intangible — and use it to create food and energy. They breathe in carbon dioxide, drink up water from the roots, and convert it all into life-sustaining sugars. It's the very process that gives us oxygen to breathe and fruit to eat.

But here's what's fascinating: it happens without noise. Without human intervention. Without the plant even knowing it's being sustained. It's happening all the time. While you're sleeping. While you're walking. Even while you're worrying about other things.

That's how God provides. Not because we see Him moving. Not because we understand every step. But because His provision is often like photosynthesis — invisible, silent, always at work in the background.

We're often so focused on what we lack that we miss what's already been given. God is sustaining you right now — breathing life into your soul, providing for your needs, and quietly transforming what looks ordinary into abundance. Just like the leaves on the tree, you are being fed... even when you don't see it happening.

God provides rest first. We need refreshment. We cannot live into life with the illusion that nothing bad will ever happen to us but God is our shepherd when fear strikes. We will hurt, but we will heal. There are wolves in this world but far less frightening because 'Thou art with me'. Rest and refreshment is critical for the restoration of the soul. How critical it is we lean into the trust of God. Yet you and I know what the world says- we want this and we want that. We want faster cars. We want thinner bodies. The biggest prison in the world is the word want. We tend to fill the empty void with the word 'Want.' On sheep farms there is always one sheep who wants to go outside the fence, that sheep known as 'Mrs. Gad about', always looking for a way out of the fence. Never humble nor content.

Now for green pastures. We know about May flies. They make us agitated. Restless. Anxious. Same with sheep, if they are restless, agitated, they will not be content. If sheep get the slightest hint of fear, they bolt and the entire flock

jumps. Sheep want to be content from parasites. In biblical times, olive oil is rubbed on their eyes and faces to help deter parasites . It would be soothing. The same with human beings if one is not content they will not spiritually grow. ‘Lie down in green pastures’ takes work to clear the land. This is the case in our spiritual lives and we need to allow ourselves to be replenished with life giving water.

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” — Notice it doesn’t say if you walk through the valley—it says when. In Maine terms: winter is coming. Every year. Here are some of the Valleys:

- Loss
- Illness
- Uncertainty
- Loneliness

Psalm 23 doesn’t say we avoid the valley—it says we walk through it. Why? Because we are not alone in it. “Thou art with me.” That’s the turning point of the Psalm. Everything changes right there. The Shepherd isn’t distant. He’s present.

I’ll share with you about Franz Jägerstätter who understood the ministry of presence. He was a simple man — a farmer, husband, and father living in a quiet village in Austria. He wasn’t a general. He didn’t lead a movement. But when Nazi Germany annexed Austria, Franz was faced with a choice that would define him. He was conscripted into Hitler’s army. And he said no. He refused to swear allegiance to a regime he knew opposed Christ’s teachings. He wasn’t a political activist — he was just a man who believed that following Jesus meant refusing to participate in evil.

Everyone tried to convince him otherwise: priests, neighbors, even his own bishop. “Just go along with it,” they said. “Think of your wife and children. Don’t throw your life away.” But Franz couldn’t betray the Shepherd he loved. He was arrested. Imprisoned. Eventually executed — beheaded by the Nazi regime in 1943. And yet... he wrote letters from prison full of peace. He spoke about Christ with joy. He prayed and fasted for others. One letter said, “I am convinced that it is still best that I speak the truth, even if it costs me my life.” Franz didn’t have comfort. He didn’t have safety. He didn’t even have

freedom. But he had peace. He had guidance. He had the presence of his Shepherd. And so he could say, even in a Nazi prison cell: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” (Source: johnpwalshblog.com)

The Shepherd doesn't get lost. Still the presence of a leader or Shepherd is powerful as was in the case of the historic account of Valley Forge in the American Revolutionary War. The Continental Army was cold, hungry, and nearly broken. At Valley Forge, George Washington's men endured brutal winter conditions — frostbite, disease, lack of supplies, and nearly no food. Some wrapped their feet in rags. Many had no blankets. They were soldiers in name, but more like starving farmers with muskets. What is remarkable — they stayed. They trained. They didn't scatter. Because Washington stayed too. He walked among the tents. He ate what they ate. He knelt in the snow to pray. One officer wrote that it was Washington's unshakeable faith and presence that kept the army from falling apart.

Washington couldn't provide every comfort — but his quiet leadership mirrored the Shepherd's role: present in suffering, steady under pressure, guiding his people through the darkest valley until spring came.

When a parent loses a child, the grief is overwhelming. When we witnessed the aftermath of 9/11 , we said 'Where was God that Tuesday?' Fire still burns , bullets still cause physical wounds, falling rocks still cause injuries, germs will continue to cause diseases as it did in the pandemic, whether we deserved it or not. The key is we humans cannot be stuck in the valley of the shadow. God helps walk through the valley, through the pain and into sunlight again. God replenishes his love with strength and faith to us.

“You prepare a table before me...” — The Provision in the Storm Right in the presence of enemies. Right in the middle of stress. God doesn't wait for life to calm down before He blesses you. God sets a table:

- In grief
- In conflict
- In uncertainty

Grace shows up in hard places.

‘Restores my Soul.’ Soul derives from the Greek word psyche which we get

from the English word Psychology . Lost sheep is where we coin the term ‘lost soul.’ Usually when a sheep is cast, it is overturned on its back and helpless, especially if it is obese. Being casted , sheep are vulnerable to prey of wolves. To restore something, we as humans need to find something to maintain the balance of our lives and 90% of all cases have to do with our soul. Compassion fatigue is one example one needs to restore their souls. We need to set free in our daily routine from worldly items and ourselves- that is restoration. That is why Psalm 23 says he leads me in paths of righteousness . Nothing is about insisting our will or love ourselves. For God calls us to love God and others and do his will. Theologian Martin Buber said ‘ ultimate sin is to use another person as a means to an end, without regard to the person’s feelings.’

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me...” — The Promise
That word “follow” can also mean “pursue.” God’s goodness isn’t lagging behind you—it’s chasing you down. Like a persistent nor’easter, but in a good way. You might feel like you’re running on empty, but goodness and mercy are closer than you think. Ask ourselves, can one say surely goodness and mercy shall follow me when our bodies break down with age? Can one surely say goodness and mercy shall follow me when divorce happens? A job folds away with no income? A child who does terrible actions and runs away, can ‘surely goodness and mercy shall follow me in all the days of my life?’

That is the true test. We attempt to do things on our own but we must not give up. God cares for his sheep because he first loved us. Good shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep.

We have to ask ourselves hard questions from time to time. How do we carry our spiritual weight and soul in terms of our character around us? Ask ourselves- do we deposit a blessing or a blight behind us ? Do we Deposit pleasure or are we a pain to others? Do we leave behind peace in our lives- or turmoil? Do we leave behind forgiveness or bitterness? Do we leave behind contentment or conflict? Do we leave behind flowers of joy or frustration? Do we leave behind love or rancor?

Wherever you go—whether you’re walking steady or stumbling along—God’s goodness is already on your trail. The final word? Do not fear. Do not sense

loss. Don't fear death. "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." That's not just about some far-off heaven. It's about a life anchored in presence—God with you in the pasture, God with you in the valley, God with you at the table, and God with you all the way home.

So walk on.

Walk through the valley if you must—but don't you dare set up camp there. God is holding our hands through the valley. That is goodness pursuing. There is a spiritual home that no darkness can take away. You will get home! As my Old Testament professor said, 'Psalm 23 is a gentle reminder God gives us vinegar in a teaspoon and honey with a soup ladle