

No matter what, no matter when... God is!

Worship by the Upper New York cabinet

Introduction by Bishop Mark J. Webb, Upper New York Area Resident Bishop:

We are grateful for the pastors, worship leaders, musicians and tech people of the churches with the Upper New York Conference of the United Methodist. Their faithful work in providing worship opportunities during this season has been a blessing to many. Today, members of the Upper New York Cabinet and one of our Camp & Retreat Ministries staff members are pleased to join you in a worship opportunity so that those who have worked so hard may experience a time of rest and renewal.

The global pandemic known as COVID-19 has disrupted lives in so many ways. Individuals have struggled with physical illness, families have experienced the loss of loved ones, many are dealing with the loss of income and wondering what the future may hold. During this time our normal has been turned upside down. Fear and uncertainty have at times grabbed hold of us.

Yet, as those who follow Jesus Christ, we continue to proclaim that No matter what, no matter when . . . God is.

As we worship together, may we allow the Spirit of God to speak within our hearts, minds and spirits and remind us of the truth that God offers, the promises that God keeps and be strengthened within our own lives for the days ahead. We pray that in this time we will be equipped to offer to a hurting world a message of hope and assurance.

The psalmist invites us to worship with these words:

O come, let us sing for joy to the LORD,
Let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation.
Let us come before God's presence with thanksgiving,
Let us shout joyfully to God with psalms.
For the LORD is a great God
And a great King above all gods,
Come, let us worship and bow down,
Let us kneel before the LORD our Maker.
For God is our God,
And we are the people of God's pasture
and the sheep of God's hand.

Scripture & Reflection by the Rev. Nancy Adams, Mountain View District Superintendent:

Hello, friends. Hear these words from Psalm 27:1-6:

The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom I be shall I fear?
The LORD is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall afraid?

² When evildoers assail me
to devour my flesh—
my adversaries and foes—
they shall stumble and fall.

³ Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war rise up against me,
yet I will be confident.

⁴ One thing I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the LORD,
and to inquire in his temple.

⁵ For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will set me high on a rock.

⁶ Now my head is lifted up
above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent
sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

How do we handle fear? Let's see what psalm 27 has to say about it. The psalm is not about freedom from trouble or threat, but a solid grounding of faith that enables the reader to endure whatever trouble comes along. We are reminded of god's faithfulness here and elsewhere in the psalms and throughout all of scripture. As is a good practice for us, the psalms often recall the exodus through the red sea as deliverance away from pharaoh's army – to remind us of god's faithfulness in the past and that god is worthy of our trust in the present and the future. Vs. 3 reminds us, an army encamps against us – an enemy of some kind – whether it is fear of the future, family drama, an unfavorable diagnosis, loneliness, financial woes, depression, grief over the loss of loved ones, or that we have to be separated from them during the pandemic. Those are just some of the enemies that encamp around us, wanting to strike or strike again. But the psalmist tells us we needn't fear. The psalmist also knew that trust is strengthened by worship. We read in vs. 4 of the desire to live in the house of the lord all his days, to behold the beauty of the lord and inquire in his temple. When we come together in faith, we are strengthened, even if it is through the wonders of technology.

Psalm 27 does not just consist of nice words printed on a page. It consists of a blessed truth, that no matter what, no matter when, god can be trusted, so we needn't fear. We are reminded in Hebrews 13:5, our lord's promise is to not leave us or forsake us. That, my friends, is good news! There are so many promises in scripture to encourage and strengthen us. I heard about a rabbi who said he wanted the scriptures to be on the hearts of the folks in his congregation. Someone asked him, "don't you mean you want the scriptures to be in their hearts rather than on their hearts?" He said, "no. I want the scriptures to be on their hearts so that when their hearts break, the promises of scripture will flow in." Wow. That's why it's so important to read the scriptures and to be transformed by what we read.

Life is hard. Right now we're in a world-wide crisis. Having faith doesn't exempt us from grief, getting angry, getting confused, and yes, getting scared, even though the psalmist tells us we needn't fear. Where is your greatest sense of security? My greatest sense of security is in my relationship with god in Jesus Christ. "the lord is My light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?" Remember that the promises of god cannot be broken by standing on them! The lord is worthy of my trust. The lord is worthy of your trust. No matter what, no matter when, god is our light, our salvation, and our strong-hold. I hope you have found that to be true, because it is. Hallelujah!

Prayer Focus by the Rev. Rich Weihing, Albany District Superintendent:

Hello Friends. Thank you for joining me in this time of prayer. We'll take part of our time to look back, we'll take part of our time to be present, and we'll take part of our time to look forward.

I'll invite you first simply to take a deep breath. Inhale and exhale, and do that a few times more if you need. Remember God's spirit is in you, in us, among us, around us, beyond us. Thanks be to God. Remember as you breathe in, God's breath, God's spirit. You're a beloved child of God and nothing can change that. Nothing you do, or I do, or anyone does. Nothing you could ever be could keep God from loving you. That's the foundation of our prayer life.

I want to invite you, if you wish, to have something to write with to record your thoughts, your responses, your prayer. I want to also invite you to consider that this a means of prayer. A way of praying. Not just for an individual, but maybe for prayer partners. Maybe for a small group; not just a prayer ministry. It could be any group, any ministry, any gathering. It might not simply be for the church but something you care to offer to your community as well.

Now, let's begin. I invite you to look back over the last day. Which for you at this moment of the day you're worshipping, might be part of a day, but it could be 24 hours if you wish it to be. I want to ask you to look back imaginatively through the eyes of faith, using a tool that my friend, Aunt B taught me, and taught a lot of children and their loved ones about; using "God-Glasses."

When we wear God-Glasses, we are sometimes given the gift of being able to see our lives and the lives of others as if with God's eyes; as if with God's grace, with God's mercy, with God's

righteousness, with God's glory. And I'm giving the gift sometimes to see what I wouldn't otherwise have seen; to understand what I wouldn't otherwise understand. So I invite you, whether or not you have God-Glasses, to do what you can to look with the eyes of faith; the faith in God, who loves you so much; the faith and trust on Jesus Christ, our risen lord who accompanies us; and our faith in the spirit filling us and around us that God has been present to you and gifting you and blessing you over the last day. So especially now, please be mindful of the ways God has been present to you, the ways you've been blessed by God, over the last day. These might be in small details of your life. They may be in some very grand, huge events that have happened to you. Be mindful of God's blessing to you over the last day.

After our being mindful of God's blessing, I want to ask you to enter a time that can be a little more difficult in prayer. I tend not to pray this way so it can be a challenge; because these days have been so challenging for all of us, because there have been roadblocks, there have been stumblings for us all, there's been a need for healing everywhere. There's been death. We are fearful because we've lost jobs. We don't know what the future holds. In all of this and more, I invite you now to be mindful of how, over the past day, part of a day, 24 hours, you may have had time when you felt God was distant or you weren't so aware of God's presence in your life. Using that imaginative prayer perspective, your God-Glasses, look back over your day to consider honestly: have there been times when you felt that God was distant? Make that a part of your prayer. Thank you.

And from that, friends, I invite you to offer yourself to God in whatever way is right to pray in light of the ways God has blessed you in the last day and in which you've felt challenged to sense God's presence in the last day and I'll be back to gather with you in a little bit. Thank you.

Scripture & Reflection by the Rev. Bill Gottschalk-Fielding, Director of Connectional Ministries and Assistant to the Bishop:

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. – Ephesians 3:20-21

When we moved here ten years ago, one of my favorite features of this house was a little patch of woods in the back yard where several tall maples stood. I loved those trees.

But in a couple of years, the trees started to die.

I had several arborists and a tree doctor come and take a look. They didn't have good news to share. Something had changed in the soil over the years. It had become too wet to support maples like these. No one was sure why, but the bottom line was clear: if we wanted trees, we'd have to plant different trees that thrived in wet soil.

At first, I was pretty disappointed. I wanted these trees – my trees - to grow in that little patch of woods.

But then, I caught the vision of the arborists and tree doctor. I noticed how the wild apple trees in nearby were thriving. I began to imagine what other trees I might plant here, trees that might flourish and thrive.

Imagination allows us to see the possibilities even among the challenges.

You and I are certainly facing many challenges. In a few weeks, seemingly out of nowhere, so many good and ordinary things have been lost to us. Things like:

- Singing “Amazing Grace” together in the same pew on a Sunday morning;
- Sitting in the stands rooting for your child as she steps up to bat;
- Joking with a co-worker in the cubicle next to yours.

Some of us have suffered even greater losses. We’ve lost a job or we’ve gotten sick and lost our health. Some have even lost a loved one.

Add to these losses to the uncertainties about the future:

- will there be a second wave?
- will the economy pick up?
- will our church be able to recover?

- its no wonder if we feel unable to see a way forward.

But, as the passage from Ephesians reminds us, our God is able, “able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine.”

A wooden cross and a sealed tomb couldn’t limit our God; neither will Coronavirus or bear markets. God is able to accomplish what God seeks.

And the God we meet in Jesus Christ seeks nothing less than the renewal and healing of all creation, including you and me and every person joining us on line today. Every person around the world today.

This is our Easter faith. Its what allows us to call the day of crucifixion Good Friday; its what transforms a cemetery into a garden of new life. Its what can help us find, even in the midst of a pandemic, opportunities for personal growth and self-less service.

The other day, I witnessed an extraordinary ordinary miracle.

I was in line to off load my trash at our local dump.

Two cars ahead of me, an older man began to empty his trunk of trash. But instead of a couple 30 gallon bags, he had dozens of tiny plastic grocery bags. He took one at a time, shuffling slowly from his car, to the dumpster, and back to his car.

We couldn't help him due to social distancing. So we had to wait. And wait. And wait.

Two months ago, someone would've honked their horn with impatience or rolled down their window and said something about, "could you hurry along; I've got places to be." Frankly, though I hopefully wouldn't have done any of those things, I might have thought them!"

But that day, I was prompted to pray for him, and asked God to bless him. And as I looked around, I saw a few people smiling, not in derision, but appreciation. A few were checking their phones; some just sat and thought and patiently waited. No one looked angry or anxious. We just waited while an old man took out his trash.

I was proud of us and amazed by this simple act of grace.

I wonder how many more and greater things God can work within us.

Here's the thing: When this worship service is over, the facts on the ground will not have changed much. COVID-19 will still be a threat. The numbers of positive tests, hospitalizations, unemployed and even deaths will be far too high. We will still need to wear masks, keep our distance and wash our hands.

But these circumstances, though grave, do not limit what God is able to do. And because God's power "is at work within us" and God's love has been "poured into our hearts," these circumstances do not determine our present or future.

What new thing is God giving life to even now, in you, in your family, your church, your community? God is **able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.**

Prayer Focus by the Rev. Rich Weihing, Albany District Superintendent:

Hello again friends. Having looked back over the last day or a portion of the day to be mindful of how we have been blessed by God. Our God has been present powerfully to us, or how we may have sensed it has been difficult to know God's presence. It's time to be present to God and I acknowledge this may be a challenge for some of us. It's a challenge for me sometimes. This is not a time for me to invite you to be in prayer about what you need specifically or on behalf of another. Those times will come. It's not a time to pray about what to do. We'll talk about that in our next brief session. For now, be mindful of what God calls you to be. Who God calls you to be right this minute. In light of the blessings you have received, the challenges you have lived, those you have named over the last day, what do you need to be? Who do you need to be for God right this minute? Take time in prayer to be with God. And if it helps, remember

those prayerful imagination God-Glasses to think with grace, to think with mercy, with righteousness, with God's glory about yourself, and God's call for you, and God's love for you. How is God calling you to be right now in prayer?

Scripture & Reflection by the Rev. Vonda Fossitt, Genesee Valley District Superintendent:

In days of tragedy, turmoil and uncertainty we cannot... we must not lose sight of who God is. God is constant, loyal - steadfast and unmovable. God Is Faithful!

And because God is faithful, the recipients of God's faithfulness can trust in The promises of God. We have full assurance that what God has promised it surely will be realized, indeed it will come to pass.

Numbers 23:19 says, "God is not as a human that he should lie or a mortal being, that he should change his mind". If God said it, He will do it! As God promised Abraham that God would bless him, God promises us that we too will be blessed. O Israel if we will be God's people, God will be our God. If God is our God then will bless us.

God promised to protect us – Psalm 121 "He will not let your foot slip - He who watches over you will not slumber nor sleep."

God promised salvation to all who believes in His Son Jesus Christ. "For I am Not ashamed of the Gospel for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" Romans 1:16

Now is the time to remember that no matter what God is faithful!

God has faithfully promised that all things will work for the good for all who love God". The question is even now when things look so bad, when it seems so discouraging, do we love God?

Be not dismayed whatever may tide God will take care of you.

No matter what No matter when God is faithful and God loves us.

Even when trouble comes knocking at our door. Not only does God promise that trouble don't last always and he will make a way out for the children of God, through our Savior Jesus Christ God promises us eternal life to those who trust Him.

So stay in the arms of God, trusting and believing, standing on the promises of God, resting in our Savior as our all and all.

And when people see you keeping the faith, when they witness your spirit of

hope, when they see you praying to God, when they hear you Praising God, worshipping God they will wonder what keeps you hopeful, and maybe they too will want to put their trust in a faithful, loving and wonderful God and believe that Jesus truly saves.

Prayer Focus by the Rev. Rich Weihing, Albany District Superintendent:

Hello again. From looking back at where we have been over the last day to being present with God, considering how we need to be now, let's look ahead. I'll ask you now to consider in prayer imaginatively what God is now calling you to do. Consider what your plans are for the rest of this day if there is more to this day before sleep. Or think ahead 24 hours. What are your plans? In light of what you heard from God about God's action in your life already, and about God's present action right now, are you being called to keep on the same track, and if so, pray that God will help you be strong staying on track. If you're being called to change, offer that to God in prayer, and seek the power, seek the will, seek the grace to change what needs to be changed. Let's take some time in silence now to offer these prayers to God and to listen to God's response.

Call to Stewardship by the Rev. Mike Weeden, Northern Flow District Superintendent:

Thank you for that word...

The other day I found myself gazing out my back window as a maple tree and a pear tree were exploding with life and colors.

And I found my mind wandering back to Acts Chapter 17 as Paul is preaching about the tomb of the unknown God; and Paul declares:

“

Nor is God served by human hands, as though God needed something, since GOD IS... the One who gives Life, and Breath and Everything else.”

I wonder sometimes in this season of Spring whether God has written on the very fabric of creation - for our reading - the promise of resurrection life from death, of rebirth from destruction, of love that conquers the very tyranny of fear in Jesus Christ.

We who know we are follower of Jesus, we know we are called to give...

To give of ourselves because we long to join God in telling this story of resurrection life, and hope and power and love

In Jesus

And we who are followers of Jesus we know we gain life by giving life away...in self-giving love

*And we do so abiding and trusting that God IS...
the One who gives Life, and Breath and Everything else.*

That's why it is always a privilege to come to this time in a worship service when we are invited to give ...to give of our time, and our talents, our service, our witness,...and our treasure; to partner with God - to invest if you will - to make the power of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus known in this world.

To give away...to be a living sign as prophets and practitioners of hope
that God IS...

the One who gives Life, and Breath, and Everything else.

That is what your or gift...your self giving...make real, makes possible, in your church, in your community, and in the world.

I invite and encourage you to continue to give regularly to the ministry of your local church. I invite you now as part of our self-giving to the glory of God to take your envelope - maybe you are an online giver and you give regularly, or give one gift at a time, to think about that gift in your mind's eye even now - before you mail your envelope...or push enter, join me in prayer:

Thank you, God, for your love for us, we thank you God for the way in which you have poured yourself out for us and all creation in Jesus. Lord we pray you bless these gifts and these lives as we serve you and make known to the world the life and death, the hope and power, and the resurrection of Jesus.

In his name we pray. Amen

Sending Forth by Bishop Mark J. Webb, Upper New York Area Resident Bishop:

We hope you have been blessed by this time of worship. Take the message of hope, the promise of God's faithfulness and sufficiency and live it boldly and share it widely.

I am grateful for the testimonies of how you, God's people have been the hands, feet and voice of Jesus during these unparalleled days. Your faithfulness is being used by God. Thank you for being the body of Jesus Christ. Continue looking for the ways this week where God is inviting you into the work that God is already doing. Continue to say yes to God, believing and sharing that No Matter What, No Matter When, God is!

As you go, hear these words of blessing from the writer of Hebrews:

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do God's will, working in us that which is pleasing in God's sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.