**Westfield URC 10.30am 24th January 2021**

Psalm 121

I look to the mountains:

where will my help come from?

My help will come from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

He will not let you fall;

your protector is always awake.

The protector of Israel never dozes or sleeps.

The Lord will guard you;

he is by your side to protect you.

The sun will not hurt you by day,

nor the moon during the night.

The Lord will protect you from all danger;

he will keep you safe.

He will protect you as you come and go now and for ever. **Amen.**

SONG 829 FOR THE JOYS AND FOR THE SORROWS

For the joys and for the sorrows,

the best and worst of times,

for this moment, for tomorrow,

for all that lies behind;

fears that crowd around me,

for the failure of my plans,

for the dreams of all I hope to be,

the truth of what I am:

*For this I have Jesus,*

*for this I have Jesus,*

*for this I have Jesus,*

*I have Jesus.*

For the tears that flow in secret,

in the broken times,

for the moments of elation,

or the troubled mind;

for all the disappointments,

or the sting of old regrets,

all my prayers and longings

that seem unanswered yet:

*For this I have Jesus* ...

For the weakness of my body,

the burdens of each day,

for the nights of doubt and worry,

when sleep has fled away;

needing reassurance,

and the will to start again,

a steely-eyed endurance,

the strength to fight and win:

*For this I have Jesus* ...

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TO SET THE SCENE

God said many times in His word “I WILL NEVER LEAVE YOU” and we know that is true, it’s a bit like setting off on a journey in the car and we know that Jesus is with us we can imagine He is sitting in the passenger seat right beside us. He doesn’t interfere when we plan the route He just lets us get on with it. We know we are safe whatever happens. Sometimes, well quite often really, we take a wrong turning or miss the exit on the motor way but that’s ok because we know Jesus is with us. He promised He would never leave us so when we get lost we can just ask Him and He will show us how to get back on the right road and we get back to where we want to be eventually. Great Stuff! But wouldn’t it be better, indeed easier if we just let Jesus drive and we sit in the passenger seat? That way we wouldn’t waste time and energy getting lost in the first place, we would be in the right place at the right time and life would be so much easier.

SONG 1036 BLESSED BE YOUR NAME

Blessed be Your name

in the land that is plentiful,

where Your streams of abundance flow,

blessed be Your name.

And blessed be Your name

when I'm found in the desert place,

though I walk through the wilderness,

blessed be Your name.

Every blessing You pour out I'll turn back to praise.

And when the darkness closes in, Lord, still I will say:

*'Blessed be the name of the Lord,*

*Blessed be Your name.*

*Blessed be the name of the Lord,*

*Blessed be Your glorious name.'*

Blessed be Your name

when the sun's shining down on me,

when the world's 'all as it should be',

blessed be Your name.

And blessed be Your name

on the road marked with suffering,

though there's pain in the offering,

blessed be Your name.

Every blessing You pour out I'll turn back to praise.

And when the darkness closes in, Lord, still I will say:

*‘Blessed be the name....*'

You give and take away,

You give and take away.

My heart will choose to say,

'Lord, blessed be Your name.'

You give and take away....

*'Blessed be the name.*...'

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PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

Dear God, your love surrounds the whole earth

You created the world

And we are so glad that we are part of that creation

Help us to care for your earth

And to care about what happens to each person in it

In the disagreements and struggles between people

Some are neglected, some suffer, some die.

Help us to play our part in overcoming hatred

To reach out to those in need in our world

Jesus calls each one of us to be fishers of men

We pray for those in our community

Those who are searching for their spiritual home

Those who do not know you

For the witness of all the Christian fellowships in our village

We pray that Jesus will always be at the centre of our lives

Whether life is smooth or choppy

That we will trust in you alone

Through Jesus’ example

Dear God, You call each one of us by name

Bless each one here sharing in worship this morning

Help us to be certain of your love for us

And in that certainty to share our knowledge of you

with each other and with those we meet day by day

We are proud to belong to the World Wide Church of Jesus Christ

As we learn, pray and serve

All we can

We ask all our prayers, spoken and unspoken

In the name of Jesus Christ, Son of God, our Saviour Amen

SONG 506 O LORD MY GOD

O Lord my God! when I in awesome wonder

consider all the works Thy hand hath made.

I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder,

Thy power throughout the universe displayed;

*Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee,*

*How great Thou art, how great Thou art!*

*Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee,*

*How great Thou art, how great Thou art!*

When through the woods and forest glades I wander

and hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees

when I look down from lofty mountain grandeur,

and hear the brook, and feel the gentle breeze;

*Then sings my soul*....

And when I think that God His Son not sparing,

sent him to die - I scarce can take it in,

that on the cross my burden gladly bearing,

He bled and died to take away my sin:

*Then sings my soul*....

When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation

and take me home - what joy shall fill my heart!

Then shall I bow in humble adoration,

and there proclaim, my God, how great Thou art!

*Then sings my soul*....

tr STUART K HINE (1899-1989) © 1953 Stuart K Hine/The Stuart Hine Trust/Kingsway Music CCLI 150801

WORD

The last time I was able to bring some of my thoughts to you was in May 2020. I don’t think that any of us at the time would have thought we would still be unable to meet together almost a year on but here we are!! The last 10 months or so have been horrendous I think we would all agree. This time last year we had no idea what was going to happen, how our lives would be turned upside down. In February last year we had our last life group meeting, we didn’t know at the time it would be the last one of the year, and it was held at my house. We squashed up in my front room quite happily sitting next to one another. Then the pandemic came and almost overnight everything changed. We faced restrictions the like if which most of us had never known but we listened to the government and scientists obeyed the rules and thought in about 12 weeks we would be back to normal. I was thinking about the time when the Israelites were finally led out of Egypt to go to the Promised Land. When they set off I’m sure they thought it wouldn’t take too long to get where they were going, they were full of hope, excited for the future looking forward but as we know that is not how it turned out at all.

These two scenarios are not as different as they seem although they are separated by about 4,000 years. Many of us had to just stay home and wait it out but the weather was great during spring and if we were fortunate enough to have a garden to potter about in or simply sit in the time passed reasonably well. Some who were able set about helping out where they could, shopping for people and keeping in contact by phone or any other means they had. Many people went out for walks around the area they live in and spoke to people out in their gardens they hadn’t spoken to before. We applauded on Thursday evenings for our N.H.S. and key workers and we were in fairly good spirits putting our trust in one another.

The Israelites joy was short lived. They weren’t too far away from Egypt when they hit a huge snag. The Red Sea in front of them and a large Egyptian army behind them. Suddenly the joy evaporated and fear and anger took over. How can we get out of this? We should never have left Egypt. God performed a miracle the sea parted and they crossed but the army behind them perished and they went on their way.

As the weeks passed by some of us became irritated with the restrictions and started to want to “go back to how we were before”. We began asking “How long “. Then restrictions were lifted for a while and the shops opened and we could meet people in our gardens, go out to eat out to help out and we felt happier again.

As the Israelites went on their way praising God again they hit another snag, they started to run out of food and true to form some of them began to moan again. Once again God provided for them.

After a brief spell when we could meet people we were back in restrictions again. Throughout this time we knew we could do nothing about the virus and many people found this time very difficult to cope with.

If we continue to read through the account of the Exodus we see that they realised the only way to go on was to completely trust in God.

The main thing people have begun to realise through this pandemic is the understanding that people can’t control everything. Thousands of people who have not been in a church for many years, if ever, have been looking at the internet for ways to pray and services to follow and preachers to listen to.

Just as the Israelites finally accepted their need for God so have people in this generation began again to accept this. The vaccine for us is almost the same as when Moses looked out on the mountain and saw the Promised Land not too far in the distance.

Once they arrived there they still had many obstacles to overcome and now that through the grace of God we have the vaccine things will not suddenly “Go back to normal” for us.

Through all the time in the desert land God never left them they had a physical sign, a pillar of smoke in the day time and a pillar of fire at night but still some doubted that God would provide.

Through OUR time in a worldwide dessert God has never left us although at times many of us may think He is far away but He is still so close. His promise holds true - Isaiah 41 v.13 and Philippians 4 v. 6-7

We will still have to take care for a while BUT when we can open the doors of our churches and homes again what a challenge we have. This is where we are totally opposite to the Israelites. They had to keep themselves apart from those around them but God has given us a completely opposite instruction.

All those people who have been searching will need someone to talk to. Many people will have lost loved ones and will need comfort. Some will be afraid. We will have an opportunity to make a huge difference in our community.

This pandemic has shown how we really must rely totally on God.

We cannot just take Him along with us in the passenger seat of the car, only when He drives will what is impossible for man become possible through Him. Scientists developing a vaccine in months instead of years can only have been through the intervention of God Himself.

He is Sovereign. We know this and we can use this opportunity to let others know too.

I pray it won’t be too long before we can meet together again and use this time to share Gods’ love and welcome many more people into the family of Jesus Christ.

SONG 50 BE STILL

Be still, for the presence of the Lord,

the Holy One, is here;

come bow before Him now

with reverence and fear:

in Him no sin is found

we stand on holy ground.

Be still, for the presence of the Lord,

the Holy One, is here.

Be still, for the glory of the Lord

is shining all around

He burns with holy fire,

with splendour He is crowned:

how awesome is the sight -

our radiant King of light!

Be still, for the glory of the Lord

is shining all around.

Be still, for the power of the Lord

is moving in this place:

He comes to cleanse and heal,

to minister His grace -

no work too hard for Him.

In faith receive from Him.

Be still, for the power of the Lord

is moving in this place.

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**“**For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 8 v 38 -39.