

# Parramatta City Uniting Church

**31 October 2021**



## **WELCOME**

This Sunday we celebrate the last Sunday in the Season of Creation and the focus is on Mountains. It is also Halloween, the eve of All Saints Day. Both share a concept of liminal space or the thin places between heaven and earth, or the physical and the spiritual. In our Christian context the liminal space is where we experience the presence of God in ways that transform us. We cannot create or manufacture this space but we can prepare ourselves to be receptive to transformation and reformation. Since this Sunday is also reformation Sunday it is a good time for us to commit ourselves to transformation and reformation as we experience the presence of God.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

We acknowledge the Burramattagal people of the Darug Nation, the first inhabitants of this place, as the traditional custodians of this land on which our congregations usually meet, and pay our respects to their ancient culture, their elders past and present and their emerging leaders. We acknowledge the presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who now reside within this area. We honour them for their custodianship of the land on which we gather.

## **LIGHTING OF THE CANDLE and CALL TO WORSHIP**

From the dawn of creation we were imagined by God  
From before we were born we were loved as God's own  
In this moment of worship we are brought together

All of us God's people, joined by God's Spirit  
So let us enter this time with expectation of receiving and giving blessing  
Let us be willing to be formed, transformed and reformed by of the love of God

The light shines in the darkness and is not overcome.  
Let us worship God.

*The candle is lit*

## **OPENING PRAYER AND AFFIRMATION**

**Rhonda**

God our creator and creator of all things,  
Today we reflect on the mountains of your creation.  
Places of inspiring grandeur, hidden secrets and magnificent vision.  
Through our sacred stories we learn of those who encountered you on the  
mountains and were enabled to inspire your people to better things.  
We learn of those who sought and found refuge in the mountains  
And of those who were granted a vision of the journey you call us on.

Our own mountains, with their blue hue and pristine bushland give testament to the  
bigger story of creation. The beautiful sandstone escarpments, the inaccessible  
valleys and tumbling waterfalls and the magnificent vistas of mountains that stretch  
the horizon, all take us to places of awe and wonder.

Like the saints of old, we too have our stories of mountain top experiences  
Enough to inspire us and others in our journey of discipleship  
We too encounter our fears of the unknown, the treacherous and dangerous in the  
mountains  
And we too recognize our vulnerability against the enormity of the mountains.

When we wish to seek out mountain top experiences for our own satisfaction – send  
us on your way  
When we refuse to journey on because we are afraid – send us on your way  
When we are frozen with inaction – send us on your way

May we join with the psalmists and the stories of old in recognizing your steadfast  
love and unwavering commitment to be with us always, every step of the way.  
Encouraging us, sustaining us and empowering us as we follow the way of Jesus.  
Amen.

## SONG: YOU ARE HOLY YOU ARE WHOLE

You are holy, you are whole.  
You are always ever more than we ever understand.  
You are always at hand.  
Blessed are you coming near;  
blessed are you coming here  
to your church in wine and bread,  
raised from soil, raised from dead.  
You are holy, you are wholeness, you are present,  
let the cosmos praise you Lord!  
Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah,  
our Lord!

*Page 3/TIS 753  
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## ALL AGE TIME

### SCRIPTURE READING – Psalm 121:1-8

I lift up my eyes to the hills—  
from where will my help come?  
<sup>2</sup> My help comes from the LORD,  
who made heaven and earth.  
<sup>3</sup> He will not let your foot be moved;  
he who keeps you will not slumber.  
<sup>4</sup> He who keeps Israel  
will neither slumber nor sleep.  
<sup>5</sup> The LORD is your keeper;  
the LORD is your shade at your right hand.  
<sup>6</sup> The sun shall not strike you by day,  
nor the moon by night.  
<sup>7</sup> The LORD will keep you from all evil;  
he will keep your life.  
<sup>8</sup> The LORD will keep  
your going out and your coming in  
from this time on and forevermore.

### - Romans 8:31-39

<sup>31</sup> What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not

with him also give us everything else? <sup>33</sup> Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup> Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>35</sup> Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? <sup>36</sup> As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all day long;  
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

<sup>37</sup> No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup> For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup> nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

**RESPONSE -** In these words may we hear God speak

## REFLECTION

This last Sunday in the season of creation with its focus on mountains is also Reformation Sunday and coincidentally Halloween. What a combination of very different ideas and yet at the same time it is also a gift. What these themes have in common might be just what we need to encourage us to embrace an uncertain future.

In my younger, fitter days, I used to do a bit of bushwalking. On one particular occasion, about 35 years ago, three of my friends and I went to Bobbin Head for a picnic lunch and then an afternoon 10km bushwalk. The time frame is important (no mobile phones). There had been significant heavy rain the weekend before which also turned out to be important. Somehow, we managed to take a wrong turn, probably because the main track was washed away, and about 2 hours into the walk before we realised that we were heading north when we should have been going east, a little further on and we were totally lost and disoriented.

We also realised that all four of us were single and living alone and no one was going to miss us for several days ... we had very little water, no food and no warm clothing for a cold night and darkness was about two hours away.

To our left was a steep escarpment, but it was climbable. If we could get to the top we might be able to see where we were and at least head west where we knew we would eventually find the highway. So, we climbed, and climbed.... Even fit, I never liked climbing!! It was maybe another hour before we got to the top of the escarpment to discover we were not far from the M1 that was still being built .... Civilisation of sorts.

The climb had been difficult, we often toyed with the idea of trying to find our way back to where we had lost the track, but we weren't confident that we wouldn't get more lost, if that's even possible.

The top of our mountain was indeed everything that we had hoped for, orientation and direction. We could see where we had to go next. Still a hike mind you, we were closer to Cowan!

In the Bible, mountains are often places of re-orientation or transformation particularly for those who are seeking clarity for the future. My mind goes to Moses and also to Jesus, both of whom on more than one occasion ascended the mountain and found what they needed to continue their discipleship journey.

In ancient culture, the mountain was understood to be closer to God and there are plenty of stories about encounters with God – as our understandings of God's presence with us always developed we know that ascending a mountain is not necessary to encounter God and yet we continue to describe our profound experiences of God as 'mountain top' experiences. But, mountains are not all grandeur and magnificence, they are also death traps which is also an important part of the imagery.

Psalm 121 is considered to be a "Pilgrimage Song" beginning with the nervous words of someone setting out on a dangerous journey. The hills can be seen as a place of danger, the hiding place for robbers and wild animals, as well as difficult terrain to navigate on foot with its narrow passages and loose rock and steep ravines. As the traveller looks to the possible dangers and perhaps reasons for not embarking on the journey, they are reminded that their help, their protection comes from the one who created all things, even the treacherous mountains.

Looking to the mountains will also invoke the memories of ancient stories of the place where great leaders have encounter God in ways that transformed and shaped history.

I have been saying to my congregations and students for some time now that I believe we are in a time of yet another reformation of the church and that like the protestant reformation from which many of our traditions have come, it was a time of great uncertainty, considerable anxiety, confusion, frustration and disappointments. We sometimes imagine and speak of the protestant reformation as if it happened overnight. Martin Luther nailed his list onto the door of the church and it was done.

The reality is it took over thirty years and painful years for many, as they struggled to know what to keep and what to throw out and what to create new.

Of course, our time is very different. Unlike the protestant reformation which rocked the very core of society, our reformation will go largely unnoticed because already the church is of little to no consequence to most people. Nevertheless, it's not without its pain, struggles and angst particularly for the faithful. Psalm 121 can help us here.

In this psalm the pilgrim is reminded of a much larger story, the story of God's steadfast love. The sense in this psalm is of total protection. The protector does not sleep because the creator is beyond time, the protector is sure footed so traversing the steep slopes and narrow pathways presents no danger.

The psalm bases its confidence in God as a consequence of a long history of the story of God's commitment and protection which serves to locate the pilgrim in his or her community – this is not just about individual protection but about trust in a bigger story – so that no matter what happens, one can be assured of the steadfast love of God.

This same sentiment is echoed in the letter to the Christians in Rome. No matter what happens, nothing can separate us from God's love.

The dangers that loom, the instinct to stay alive no matter what or the immobilising fear of the unknown are to count as nothing for those who seek God's ways. Simply because God is beyond time, God is life and love, God has promised to never abandon us.

For us here in Parramatta, but also for churches throughout the western world, we can be encouraged by this Psalm to climb the mountain and look out and beyond as what could be rather than what is lost. Reformation, like any mountain climb is hard going, it's easy to become disheartened, disoriented and perhaps a little bit cranky.

What I have discovered in the last little while that help comes in very unexpected ways from unexpected people.

When someone has the courage to voice their fear, or sadness or frustration, their own feelings not someone else's and when they do they provide an opportunity for shared conversation rather than debate.

When a postcard arrives in the mail telling me that I am being prayed for.

When a colleague from out-of-town rings out of the blue to say she thought I might need encouragement

I was looking through some Advent material by Bill Loader this week and something he said caught my eye;

**“a little act of kindness plants a seed of hope”**

I realised that this has been my experience these past few weeks, hope has come from the kindness of others – God has kept me.

As we continue to seek God's leading, as we do the hard yards of climbing and reforming, let us keep the affirmations of the psalmist before us. Let us keep the bigger story of God's steadfast love with us so that we might stay true to becoming people known for how we love.

It takes a strong commitment to name our fears, our motives and our dangers but when we do, as we do ...this psalm offers us more than trite assurances,

This psalm connects us to the bigger story of God's covenant, God's steadfastness and God's promise that we have nothing to fear.

In ancient times this psalm or song may have been used as a travelling mantra

The repetition of the words “the Lord will keep you” function as a recurring assurance as one confronts both fear and danger.

Whatever difficulties you are facing ..... the Lord will keep you

Whatever fears overwhelm you .... The Lord will keep you

Whatever sadness weighs you down .... The Lord will keep you

However you stumble or fall ..... The Lord will keep you

The Lord keeps us by reconnecting us to the bigger story, the story of God’s kingdom, the story of God’s creation, the story of God’s love.

And my experience of how this plays out is in the little acts of kindness that sow the seeds of hope.

May the Lord keep you on your discipleship journey as you name and confront dangers and fears. And may our acts of kindness sow seeds of hope for others. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Rhonda White

### **Questions and Response**

Where do the affirmations of Psalm 121 and Romans 8 touch your life right now?

What fears do you hold for the future?

What survival or protective instincts might be preventing you from being the person you are called to be?

Be intentional about doing a little act of kindness for someone each day.

### **Sources:**

Rev. Dr. Howard Wallace – Commentary on Psalm 121 Year A: Lent 2

<https://www.hwallace.unitingchurch.org.au>

Prof. William Loader – Advent Bible Studies

[Microsoft Word - Are we There Yet \(billloader.com\)](https://www.billloader.com)

### **SONG: SPIRIT OF PEACE**

1. When people despair we would bring hope  
in the shadow of fear we would show faith  
when hatred divides we would renew  
to people alone we would bring love

#### *Refrain*

Spirit of love  
Spirit send love  
Spirit of love  
Spirit send love

2. When people are bound we would be free  
in the darkness of doubt we would affirm  
where others escape we would endure  
when people make war we would bring peace

*Refrain*

Spirit of love  
Spirit send love  
Spirit of love  
Spirit send love

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*Words LN Quintrell*

*Music Douglas Simper*

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## PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

As people of Christ's community let us honour our commitments to pray for one another and as we pray may God's Spirit form our prayers and transform us to action. Let us pray.

At my bid "from where shall help come?" you're invited to respond with "the Lord will keep you." And with every utterance of response be open to how we might be the "Lord's" hands and feet.

**Bid: From where shall help come?**

**Response: The Lord will keep you.**

For as much as we would like to pitch tents and settle into safety we are mindful that you call us to be a pilgrim people and for this we need courage, for ourselves and each other and so we pray....

We pray for those who are afraid of an uncertain future....

For those working through difficult news about their health or the health of loved ones

For those facing end of life decisions

For those who have lost their jobs, are losing their jobs or are facing uncertainty about their income

For refugees awaiting settlement

**Bid: From where shall help come?**

**Response: the Lord will keep you.**

We pray for those who are facing danger .....

For those living in war torn countries or near old mine fields

For those whose governments are unable to negate uprisings, terrorist attacks and corruption

For whistle blowers calling out injustice

For people fleeing domestic violence

For the bullied, harassed and vilified



**Bid: From where shall help come?**

**Response: the Lord will keep you.**

We pray for those who are finding pilgrimage too difficult....

For those who are tired from the journey

For those who have been damaged by the church and its representatives

For those who are struggling to find the passion they once knew

For those who are enthusiastic and impatient for reform

For those who go unnoticed and are undervalued

**Bid: From where shall help come?**

**Response: the Lord will keep you.**

God, our lover and protector

Empower us to be participants with you as you form your kingdom

May we be always willing to stay on the journey with you

And being the blessing you call us to be.

Let us pray the words that Jesus taught us.

Our Father in heaven

Hallowed be your name

Your kingdom come

Your will be done

On earth as it is in heaven

Give us this day our daily bread

And forgive us our sins

As we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us in the time of trial and deliver us from evil

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours

Now and forever. Amen.

## **Word of Mission**

Go Into this week with acts of kindness and sow seeds of hope for many.

## **BLESSING**

The blessing of the one who called us into being

The blessing of the one who inspires us to be all we are created to be

The blessing of the one who confronts us with who we are

Creator, Redeemer and Lifegiving Spirit. Amen

## **BLESSING SONG – For you Deep Stillness**

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**For you deep stillness of the silent inland  
for you deep blue of the desert skies  
for you flame red of the rocks and stones .  
for you sweet water  
from hidden springs**

**From the edges seek the heartlands  
and when you're burnt by the journey  
may the cool winds of the hovering Spirit  
soothe and replenish you  
in the name of Christ  
in the name of Christ.  
in the name of Christ.**