

### Call to worship

I lift my eyes up to the mountains, from where does my help come?  
My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.  
We look not to the mountains or valleys,  
even heaven or earth,  
For God is here among us.  
Come, let us worship the God of Creation,  
the God of People, the God of Community.  
Let us worship together in faith.

### Hymn Immortal, Invisible R&S 67

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,  
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,  
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,  
Almighty, victorious, Thy great name we praise.

Unresting, unchanging, and silent as light,  
Nor wanting, nor wasting, Thou rulest in might;  
Thy justice like mountains high soaring above  
Thy clouds which are fountains of goodness and  
love.

To all life Thou givest, to both great and small;  
In all life Thou livest, the true life of all;  
We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,  
And wither and perish, but nought changeth Thee.

Great Father of Glory, O help us to see  
'tis only the splendour of light hideth thee.  
And so let thy glory, Almighty, impart  
through Christ in the story, thy Christ to the heart.

W. Chalmers Smith

### Gifts

We have the means to give, we have the reason to give,  
and there are many waiting for us to give.  
Yet often, our hands hold back, and we hoard what we have for ourselves.  
God of grace, help us to live and give in your kingdom of love,  
where there are no enemies, only brothers and sisters,  
and kindness is the air we breathe. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

### Opening Prayer

God, you loved this world so much  
that you sent your own son, Jesus Christ  
to live and die among us,  
in order that we might have life.

Forgive us for keeping that abundant life to ourselves,  
for jealously hoarding your generous gifts,  
for choosing self-interest over compassion and justice.

Teach us what it means to live as children of the light,  
generously sharing your abundance  
with our brothers and sisters in need. **Amen.**

### Hymn One more step R&S 549

One more step along the world I go  
One more step along the world I go  
From the old things to the new  
Keep me traveling along with you

*And it's from the old I travel to the new  
Keep me traveling along with you*

Round the corner of the world I turn  
More and more about the world I learn

Christ Church, 5 March. 2023

All the new things that I see  
You'll be looking at along with me

As I travel through the bad and good  
Keep me traveling the way I should  
Where I see no way to go  
You'll be telling me the way, I know

Give me courage when the world is rough  
Keep me loving though the world is tough  
Leap and sing in all I do  
Keep me traveling along with you

You are older than the world can be  
You are younger than the life in me  
Ever old and ever new  
Keep me traveling along with you

Sydney Carter

**Bible readings:      Psalm 121  
                                 John 3:1-17**

Psalm 121 is one of the Songs of Ascent, (Psalms 120-134). In general, these psalms focus on the journey to Jerusalem. In fact, they were sung by pilgrims travelling to Jerusalem for festivals. It was specifically designed to teach the children of God how reliable God is even in difficult times, like the long pilgrimage up the steep hills and mountains. Have you ever sung with your children on a long trip? That's what Psalm 121 is – one of Israel's songs for the journey. As the people of Israel tramped through the hills of Judea on their way to Jerusalem for the great feast days, they sang songs like Psalm 121 to keep the children of God happy. They weren't on a pleasure trip in an air-conditioned car speeding along the motorway, so they didn't sing little ditties. They were on a spiritual pilgrimage on donkeys or their own two feet on paths that were narrow and dangerous, so they sang deeply spiritual psalms. That's the key to understanding Psalm 121. They were travelling physically from their homes to what they considered to be God's home in the temple in Jerusalem, so their journey really was spiritual. They were on a journey into the very presence of God.

We are on the same journey. We have been delivered from bondage to the power of evil through the Red Sea of Christ's blood. We have been abundantly blessed, but we are still distant from God. We believe in God, but we don't always experience God's presence as fully or as often as we should and could. We walk by faith, not by sight. Our journey into God's presence is neither short, nor easy, nor safe. So, as we join Israel on pilgrimage, their songs can lift us. "I lift up my eyes to the hills - where does my help come from?" The Israelites were literally looking up at the hills through which they climbed as they made their ascent up to Mt. Zion on which was perched the Temple where God was present in the Holy of Holies. Even if you are not on a physical journey surrounded by hills, their question is still

our question, our central question for the journey. Where does my help come from? “My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.” My help comes from the One who has the power to make the universe. We can be sure that no matter what we meet on our journey, God will be our keeper, as it says in verse 5, watching over us. The Hebrew word *ezer*, “help,” is rarely used of humans, so it is clear that the psalmist’s help does not come from the hills themselves but rather from the God who created them. What kind of help can we count on? Well, there is a constant refrain that runs through this song for the journey. “The Lord watches over you.” *Yahweh*, the Hebrew word for God, usually translated as Lord, is mentioned 6 times and ‘watch over’ is found 5 times. The same verb can mean “keep,” “guard,” “preserve” and “observe”, in other words, watch over. Not as in an all present, all seeing God, that we were sometimes threatened with as children, or like Father Christmas who knows if you’ve been naughty or nice, but like a watchful parent, or a guardian angel, keeping watch, to catch you when you fall, and wipe the tear from your eye, or put the icepack on your bruises. As you travel through this world on the way to your face-to-face meeting with your Maker and Redeemer, you can count on God watching over you. But what does “God watches me” amount to? Does God merely observe, however closely, but do nothing? Or does God watch and then intervene? And if so, then how do we account for those times when God doesn’t seem to intervene? Was God asleep? While Psalm 121 assures us that God will neither slumber nor sleep, many of the psalms rail against God by saying he has done precisely that – been asleep at the wheel.

This song for the journey spells out in simple child-like language three results of God’s watching over. Verse 3 says, “He will not let your foot slip”. This is not talking about physically slipping. Any child knows that God doesn’t keep us from slipping in that way. In the Old Testament this phrase in verse 3 most often refers to spiritual slips, when we slip off the path to God. Psalm 121 is a promise that, no matter what happens to us, the Lord will not let our foot slip off the path to God. We will be able to complete our journey into God’s presence. Verses 5 and 6 say, “The Lord is your shade at your right hand; the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night.” Neither the heat of the sun nor the cold of night, neither the dangers of the day nor the madness of the moonlight, neither cancer nor stroke, depression nor anxiety will keep you from finishing your journey into the presence of God. Yes, those things may come into your life, but the Lord will shade you, protect you, watch over you in such a way that all the dangers that fill the world by day and by night will not keep you from your destination.

Finally, verse 7 provides the ultimate help. “The Lord will keep you from all harm - he will watch over your life.” Those words may stick in our throats, because, of course, all of us

have experienced harm in this life. We all bear scars from the multiple wounds of life. That's why it is important to ask what this means. A look at the original Hebrew is helpful. The word harm doesn't mean hurtful things. It means evil. And the word life means soul. As we journey towards God, we can sing that God will not let evil harm our soul. The journey is long and hard and painful, but God will keep evil from destroying our soul, the centre of our being, the thing that makes me, me, and you, you. The Lord will help us on our journey into God's presence, so that even in the valley of the shadow of death, we don't have to fear evil. The Lord watches over us, so that evil cannot prevent our souls from meeting God face to face.

In a way, in Lent, we are also on a journey to Jerusalem, like Jesus was, like the pilgrims of Psalm 121 were. Last week we started the journey (I hope, since I don't know what John talked about last week) with the start of Jesus' journey – the temptation in the wilderness. As we get closer to Easter, we will listen again to the stories of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem on a donkey, his actions in the Temple, his final dinner, time in Gethsemane, his arrest and so on, up until the crucifixion. Through Lent, and in life, God is journeying with us. God is our 'keeper', attentive to all our goings out and coming ins. God will keep you from all evil and protect your soul.

Psalm 121 is a comforting psalm, presenting an ever-present and attentive God caring for God's people. It is a psalm that many pray or recite in difficult times when they want to feel God's comforting presence. Of course we do come to harm, whether the minor harm of a sunburn or the greater harms inflicted by the broken world. Yet there are times when we can find ourselves inexplicably spared from some harm or danger by no means of our own. At those times the words of this psalm speak to faith in a God who does indeed protect us, and walk alongside us.

**Hymn** How deep the Father's love for us Red folder 35

How deep the Father's love for us  
How vast beyond all measure  
That He should give His only Son  
To make a wretch His treasure  
How great the pain of searing loss  
The Father turns His face away  
As wounds which mar the Chosen One  
Bring many sons to glory

Behold the man upon a cross  
My sin upon His shoulders  
Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice  
Call out among the scoffers

It was my sin that held Him there  
Until it was accomplished  
His dying breath has brought me life  
I know that it is finished

I will not boast in anything  
No gifts, no power, no wisdom  
But I will boast in Jesus Christ  
His death and resurrection  
Why should I gain from His reward?  
I cannot give an answer  
But this I know with all my heart  
His wounds have paid my ransom

Stuart Townend

### **Prayers of intercession**

Lord God, Maker of heaven and earth.  
You made magnificent mountains and the oceans,  
the tiny worms and bugs, and everything in between. And, you made us.  
You are amazing and powerful, yet you love each of us dearly.  
Thank you for guiding our lives and ruling all of creation.  
In the knowledge of your love and your power,  
we bring before you our prayers for our world.

God of all of us who think we are too old or too poor or too small or too weak or too busy,  
God of all of us daunted by the sheer wonder of the plan you lay out before us:  
we come to you now, aware of all you have done for us, and yet still struggling with our doubts.  
Birth us all anew, O God; hear us and help us on our journey.

We pray for this world where so many wander homeless  
not by choice, but out of necessity,  
where so many are looking for a great Name to rescue them.  
We pray for all the people in this world, especially... (Ukraine, train crash Greece))  
We pray for the women and men who lay down their lives  
for the safety of brothers and sisters and neighbours... (earthquakes)  
We pray for those who lead us.  
Birth us all anew, O God; hear us and help us on our journey.

We pray for all those who long for a new beginning:  
those who are imprisoned,  
those who are estranged,  
those who have left loved ones behind,  
and those who are ill or infirm, and those who mourn.  
Give them all new life by the power of your Spirit.  
Help us to see how we can be present with them as your hands and feet.  
Birth us all anew, O God; hear us and help us on our journey.

We pray for your holy Church:  
Give us the courage to leave everything behind and follow you.  
Give us the faith to act on what we do not understand.  
Bless us to be a blessing to everyone in your Name.  
Birth us all anew, O God; hear us and help us on our journey.

### **Lord's Prayer**

**Hymn** To God be the glory R&S 289

To God be the glory, great things He has done,  
So loved He the world that He gave us His Son,  
Who yielded His life in atonement for sin,  
And opened the life-gate that all may go in.

*Praise the Lord! praise the Lord! Let the earth hear His voice!  
Praise the Lord! praise the Lord! Let the people rejoice!  
Oh, come to the Father, through Jesus the Son,  
and give Him the glory; great things He hath done!*

Oh, perfect redemption, the purchase of blood,  
To every believer the promise of God!  
And every offender who truly believes,  
That moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

Christ Church, 5 March. 2023

Great things He hath taught us, great things He has done,  
And great our rejoicing through Jesus the Son;  
But purer, and higher, and greater will be  
the wonder, the beauty, when Jesus we see.

Fanny Crosby

**Blessing**

Lift up your eyes! Look around.  
Where does our help come from?  
Our help comes from the Lord,  
the Maker of heaven and earth.  
God will not let you stumble and fall;  
the One who watches over you  
will never slumber or sleep.  
God will keep you safe from all of life's evils;  
from your first breath to the last breath you breathe,  
from this day forward and forever.  
So go in peace to love and serve God and your neighbours.

Hymns used under the Christ Church CCLI licence 63352  
One License A-738739