

Service Transcript
Sunday 9th August 2020

Service Leader: Ian Battiste

Intercessory Prayers: Rev Mark Reid

Sermon: Rev Beth Powney

“For God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.”

Psalm 46:1

Heavenly Father, We give thanks that we can come before you today to worship and praise you so freely and even through life’s storms or what seems like dark times you are there with us by our side ever faithful and true. Lord we pray for all those who live in fear and insecurity—for those who need encouragement, for those who need our help, lord we pray they will come to know you and that through you brings life in its fullness – Amen

Be still and know

We come to quiet ourselves in this haven of holiness.

Be still and know

We come to discern the Word which can set us free.

Be still and know

He is a Great God. He is our Hope, our Help, our Refuge, our Strength and our Redeemer.

Heavenly Father we give thanks that no matter where we are, what we are facing in this world, whether our lives are youthful, ageing or growing frail, you are always there with us in our every situation. Your presence, your closeness, your participation in our every experience, every moment, is our strength and refuge. When life seems bleak and conditions threaten to overwhelm us, may we feel your spirit of love surrounding us in every moment of our lives as we give thanks for your greatness, you alone are worthy of our praise – Amen

Intercessory Prayers - *Lord, lead us through change.*

We have entered a period of change; unexpected change where we are having to adapt more quickly than we ever had before because of the pandemic. Today we are going to pray for change in three contexts. First of all we are going to pray for the changes that are happening in our nation and community as we deal with the virus, then we shall pray for Paul and Sarah Brown as they adapt to the pandemic in Thailand, and finally we shall pray for our church as we prepare to reopen the building and have a very different experience of church than we have experienced previously.

So let's pray. At the end of each prayer I am going to say **Father, hear our prayer** and we all shall say *through Jesus Christ our Lord*.

Father, we continue to pray for our nation and our world as we pass through this pandemic and we cry out "Lord have mercy on us." We continue to pray for all those in Government and the scientific and medical community who are trying to find mitigations and solutions to the pandemic; please give them wisdom to take right decisions to reduce the spread of Covid and save lives.

We pray that as we go through changes in the next few months, that people in our land may continue to be committed to doing those things that benefit the community as a whole and ignore the voices of those who are only interested in looking after themselves. May your church be a positive example and witness at this time of certainty, bringing the hope that can only come through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Father, hear our prayer

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Father, we pray for our link missionaries Paul & Sarah Brown in Chiang Mai, Thailand. We pray that at a time when that land is in political chaos as a result of Covid and because of instability on the political system, that you will bring order out of chaos.

We pray for Paul and Sarah as they restart their New Life Center Foundation that trains people for business, that things will run in the best possible way under Covid restrictions.

We pray for the church they are part of too, the House of Praise International Church, that in these difficult times that their outreach ministry, Project Love may reach many, who are struggling because of the lockdown in Thailand, with the love of Jesus.

Father we realise that poorer countries like Thailand, and it's near neighbour India are suffering considerable because of Covid, in terms of infections and deaths as well as in unemployment, poverty, food shortage and the medical services under pressure. In dealing with these issues, we pray that the authorities in these countries may act with compassion, justice and equity. Again, may Your people set the example.

Father, hear our prayer

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Father we pray for our own church fellowship as we recommence Sunday Services next months and hold a Small Group activity from this month, that you would give wisdom to our Leadership Team as they navigate their way through the guidelines and regulations, so that what comes out, is both a safe and amenable environment to worship you. We pray for those who continue to be sheltering at home, are unwell at this time and those going through difficult moments as they struggle through family difficulties and bereavement – lord be close to them and encourage them. We pray for the family of Marian Ussher as they mourn her loss, please help them in their sorrow to remember that she is with you, because in Jesus she put her trust, and may they be comforted by this.

Father, hear our prayer

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

In whose name we bring these things before You

Amen

Sermon: Living in the Borderland

Reading: Joshua 3:1-17

As you will recall a generation earlier the Israelites were unable to enter the land of Canaan, the promised land, because of their fear, unbelief and rebellion when the spies reported the giants in the land. (Numbers 13 & 14) Now in the book of Joshua, after Moses has died and they are under the leadership of Joshua, they come to standing on the edge of the river Jordan, ready to finally cross into the promised land. This is what we read about in Joshua chapter 3.

The ark must go ahead of them. The movement of which requires very specific instructions and preparations. These instructions were for **the people** (vs 5 how to approach the Ark, and sanctify yourselves) to **the priests** (vs 6, vs 13 that the ark should go in front of the people and that they should place their feet in the river first) **to Joshua** (vs 7-8) as their anointed leader.

The ark here represented God, a sign to the Israelites that He is present

They carried out the instructions and preparations and they start to cross after the priests have led the way by putting their toe in the water first as instructed.

For this sermon we are however focussing on the first few verses of chapter 3.

Let's go back to verse 1 and notice the use of the word *abar* in this verse, interpreted in our Bibles as 'crossing over' or 'passing through'.

The use of the word – 'crossing over' *abar* to pass over or by or through, to emigrate, leave (one's territory) Defines the experience of not being able to go back to the familiar, nor being able to stay where we currently find ourselves. This is a new crossing over, a new beginning.

This is completely new situation for the people. One that is much longed for but still new. Therefore Joshua reminds the people in verse 4 – '*for you have not passed this way before*' – he knows that he is taking them into the unknown and change will always be a journey into the unknown.

This is what I would call an *abar* moment and it will mean that they will not be the same again and that there is no going back to the way it was. The way it was, was in the wilderness, but it was a familiar wilderness and all that many had ever known and so had a certain appeal and a sense of security.

Right now in our society I believe, we are living an 'abar' moment, a crossing over into new territory, which we have never experienced and didn't ask for. There is no doubt that when things fundamentally change, we change. All around us our society is changing, our culture is shifting. At present we cannot see what that is, but the history books will write about this time of the COVID 19 pandemic and the year 2020,

How are we responding to this moment and how will we respond?

We may be looking for the time when we can go back to normal. The Israelites were probably planning about how they would pitch their tents again, make new homes, create new villages and towns, put some roots down. I am sure as they stood on the banks of the river they would have been thinking this and so many things, yet we know that ahead of them was a series of hard and seemingly endless battles. In all of this as they stand on the banks of the Jordan, Joshua reminds them that this is an *abar* moment, a forever change moment, a crossing place where they had never gone before, they are emigrating for good, there is no going back. However the covenant of Yahweh represented by the ark, will go before them and make a way.

When we think about this going back to normal, what do we think about? How about Christmas 2020– meeting family, hugging friends, sharing silly games and fun, in person, being in large gatherings for our carol services. The nostalgia of everything being ‘normal’.

However I think we are at an *abar*’ moment in time, we are in new, uncharted territory and we didn’t ask to be here! Can we actually go back?

When I went back to my old church to take a funeral last year, an elderly lady there said to me ‘When are you coming back? She was missing me! My reply was that we can never go back to what was. So here we are in our unchosen, not looked for ‘*abar*’ moment. What will we do with it? How will we consider where God is leading us?

Let’s just consider another what I would call ‘*abar*’ moment in the Bible, found in the New Testament.

Read Acts 10 – here is Peter on his rooftop having a doze on a hot afternoon. God breaks in and takes him to a crossing place, shaking his world to the very depths. All that he had understood about the Gentiles is swept away in a vision and a visitation by a stranger and then a journey to the home of Gentile. Peter takes the good news of Jesus to the gentiles. This is earth shattering, ground breaking stuff for Peter.

We cannot conceive of how hard and demanding this was for Peter. But God has broken in in a truly unexpected way.

Consider Peter’s life for a moment, he certainly did not ask to be living in a world of Roman occupation and without his best friend and mentor Jesus. He did not ask to be thrust into the forefront of proclaiming Jesus, but that is where he found himself.

After that moment on the rooftop, and his obedient journey to Cornelius, his life was never going to be the same again. There was no going back to normal for the well brought up Jewish man. It was a crossing place from which there was no return.

For this sermon I have used the title of ‘Living in the Borderland’, which is a title which comes from a book of the same title by Gary Nelson. He encourages us to take courage to live in the borderlands, as in the places which are unknown to us church folk, a place of a wild risky encounter with God. In his book he challenges us to go to the borderlands, outside of our comfortable church buildings and processes. It seems to me that what has

happened to us is that we are being pushed to the borderlands, anyway. I believe that God is calling his church to live and be different.

In our *abar*; moment, our crossing place moment we have an opportunity to embrace a new adventure, for actually we cannot go back any more than the Israelites could go back after they had entered the land of milk and honey, the land to which they were called, any more than Peter could go back after he had responded to his rooftop vision.

There is a risk that we quickly become comfortable with this new normal, and rest into the new type of church we have created, however I believe that God is with us in this, but he also wants to lead us out of this and forward with him.

Are we prepared to go where God leads?

As he led the Israelites:

He had prepared them for this moment,
he went before them,
he gave them instruction,
he gave them courage and strong leadership,
he performed a miracle and continued to do so.

As he led Peter:

Jesus had journeyed with him for three years
Peter was called to be a fisher of men
He was called to leadership
He was forgiven and set free
He was filled to overflowing with the Holy Spirit
And then he had seen miracles happen

Now God says – here's your greatest challenge yet – go to the Gentiles.

What about us? We could just press re-boot on our church as it was or will we ask God the brave question of what is his best for us and our community for the greatest good of his kingdom both now and at the end of our lockdown?

If going back is not an option,
what is God calling us to do or be?
what are we crossing over to?
actually what have we been prepared for?
Who will we be in the Borderlands, which is both now and in the future

A few years ago, I did a sponsored Tandem parachute jump. For this jump I had a man strapped to my back, who was a very experienced sky-diver, someone who I could completely trust, he was the expert. As we sat on the edge of the open door of the plane, the instruction was, just lean back. In other words, lean into him and in doing that we would fly out of the door. Which is exactly what happened. It was utterly thrilling and exciting and I would love to do it again. I felt completely safe.

So the question is then, will we lean into God as the one who is the genuine expert and in who's arms we are completely safe throughout all of this life-changing experience, knowing

that he goes before us into whatever the rest of 2020 and beyond holds or will be resist this 'abar' moment in order to seek the comfort of what was 'normal'?

Remember Joshua's calling back in chapter 1 verse 9

'Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.'

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father thank you for your blessing on our service today. Thankyou that we are able to set aside our everyday tasks and spend it with you by sharing our time of fellowship together even though it's online, thankyou that technology still enables us to come together and meet with you to share worship and praise. Keep us aware of all that we have learned today and help us to do what we can to show your love through the lives we live. Thank you that you remain our refuge and strength – Amen

For Reflection & Discussion

Read Joshua 3:1-10

1. Beth's sermon was about "crossing over" from one territory into another – those times in life that big changes happen in our lives that take us from the familiar into the unknown. What situations have you had in life that changed you completely? How have these helped to shape the course of your life? What part did your faith play?
2. What can we learn from finding and following God's will for our lives and church from these phrases?
Verse 4 Then you will know which way to go, since you have never been this way before.
Verse 5 "Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do amazing things among you."
Verse 9 "Come here and listen to the words of the LORD your God.
3. For the Israelites, going back wasn't an option for them. Many Christians are looking for the restoration of normality after the events of the last few months. Do you think this is a realistic option? Why?

Read Acts 10: 9-22

4. Beth said "will we ask God the brave question of what is his best for us and our community for the greatest good of his kingdom both now and at the end of our lockdown?" What does Peter's experience tell us about embracing new ideas? What new things have we already learnt from life in lockdown? How do you think they can shape us in the coming months and years?

Take time to pray through some of the things you have reflected on.

