



January 8, 2023

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Psalm 77:1-3

Keeping the Hours:

I Was Mindful of God and Was Glad



### Golden Verse: Isaiah 9:2

*“As you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Ephesians 5:19-20*

Our Golden Verse focus for the next weeks comes from *Ephesians 5:19-20*:

*As you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

The key challenge of this phrase, “*at all times*” has been answered since the early centuries of the church through a practice known as the “Divine Office” or *praying the hours*. These fixed times of prayer are meant to be expressions of praise to God, matching the rhythm of our daily schedules while also focusing on the pattern of the life of Christ. These prayers remind us that all time is the right time to worship God and they keep us spiritually balanced throughout the day so that whatever we face we do so with the presence of God in our hearts and minds.

During the weight of winter and its increasing darkness a pall of gloom can enter our hearts, so in these next six weeks we will move through this pattern of daily prayer in our worship services so that the light of Christ might

ever be in our hearts and give you some resources to carry with you during the week.

As a result, this prayer cycle is able to meet the demands of the day, to focus our energies on our purpose, to deal with our anxieties, give expression to our hopes, and assuage our deepest fears.

All animals have circadian rhythms (patterns of activity and dormancy through night and day) but we have an additional rhythm – not diurnal or nocturnal, but spiritual; and each day if we set forth a prayer, we will feel balanced and full of peace.

As the Psalmist wrote, “*This is the day that the Lord has made*”. This very day, today, it is a gift from God and so we are called to “*rejoice and be glad in it*”. By following this pattern, we will inevitably have a better day. The lows won’t bite so deep and even in the fast-paced moments we can soak in God’s presence. Your love for strangers and friends will naturally emerge through this pattern of prayer.

This morning we explore “Prime” the morning prayer at the outset of the day and Jesus’ time in the temple; the first glimpse of His ministry.

St. Basil the Great of the 4<sup>th</sup> century gives an excellent description of Prime:

*[The prayer] is said in the morning in order that the first stirrings of our mind will may be consecrated to God and that we may take nothing in hand until we have been gladdened by the thought of God, as it is written: 'I was mindful of God and was glad.' (Ps 77:3)*

The Psalms not only express the stirrings and even ravings of the human heart but have served to shape those stirrings for millennia. By reading a text like Psalm 77:3 our hearts truly can become glad and joyous at the rest from the night we just received, and the promise of the day before us, simply by finding a way to be mindful of God at all times of the day.

It is why the 12-year-old Jesus was in the temple. To be present in God's house to center His life on God. To begin the day in Godly contemplation is to remind ourselves of God's vast wonder and magnificence, keeping our pride in check and our spirit open; listen to how Basil the Great prays at this time of day:

*We bless Thee, O most high God and Lord of mercy, Who art ever doing numberless great and inscrutable things with us, glorious and wonderful; Who grantest to us sleep for rest from our infirmities, and repose from the burdens of our much toiling flesh.*

Jesus' seemingly pre-teen retort to Joseph, "Didn't you know I'd be in my Father's house," was perhaps a reminder to Joseph that we all ultimately answer to no earthly authority

but to the merciful One who's being is beyond our grasp and momentary reason.

Jesus set His clock by prayer. As Mark 1:35 says, "Early in the morning, well before sunrise, Jesus rose and went to a deserted place where he could be alone in prayer." So, He would go to the hills to be alone; be in a boat to find calm. There is something sacred and deep to moments of solitude in the wee hours of the day.

As I prepared for this sermon series I too sat on the lake, in the stillness of creation. There was a dazzling array of fall colors on the trees, contrasted by a rather cloudy sky. At first, I felt a heavy gloom from the clouds but in an instant, these were no longer dominating the horizon. They suddenly separated – they were hugging the mountains like a warm blanket but above was a blazing blue sky. It was a remarkable sight. Up on the hillside amidst the trees there was a strong rockface, suggesting a timeless and formidable strength amidst the fluffy softness of those nestling clouds. The whole scene became an arena for embracing the timeless strength and beauty of God, the soothing comfort of His love and the surprising beauty of Her light.

To be in nature in the morning hour is to begin our day by connecting it to the handiworks of God not the work of our own hands, which somehow enables us to entrust our work to God as well. Henry David Thoreau knew it, "an early morning walk is a blessing for the whole day."

Some years ago, I had a chance to embrace this ancient practice of Prime; still faithfully embraced by Catholic monks. Their Prime prayers were offered at 4 a.m. At first the

groggy sleep and the impenetrable Latin Psalm chanting only enhanced the fog in my brain and body, but as the minutes multiplied after *an hour and fifteen minutes!* there was a seeping effect; I was like a dusty, rock-hard sponge soaking water.

At first it did not penetrate my soul but over time bit-by-bit the text and the music soaked in; until suddenly I was supersaturated with mystery and wonder of God. It turned the morning from simply the time of day in which I inject morning coffee into my veins for the sole purpose of getting ready for work, into a special, sacred time.

The rest of the day simply felt right. It reminded me that the day is bigger than any of my concerns; that people have risen and faced more daunting times and done so with the peace of God in their hearts; I knew that though inscrutable, God was presided over all, yet also with great and enduring power. So that even the weight of the 24-hour doom cycle it could not douse the confidence in our sovereign God working out His will.

#### **Closing Prayer:**

God who rules the night and the day, shape each moment of time this day to be our holy offering to You. Though I cannot always see it, may I know Your presence in each conversation, each person I meet, and all the decisions I make. Let me be Your vessel of holy presence to others even as I see You in them. Amen.