



January 22, 2023

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Luke 1:39-45, Luke 2:22-28

Marking the Hours with Prayer:

Vespers: The Hour to See the Son



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

In our series on *Marking the Hours with Prayer* we have arrived at the time when day turns into night, traditionally at 6 p.m. To be equipped to pray at this hour we need to understand where this prayer cycle lands in the life of Christ, for Jesus’ entire life serves as a guide for each and every day we walk this planet.

This is the quiet time of His ministry, when there is a lull. After the healings and miracles but before the trial and crucifixion. It is an inflexion point.

He knows His teaching is complete and He enjoys one last moment by entering into Jerusalem to the remarkable approbation of the crowd. I imagine He savored this moment knowing the trials and tribulations that were soon to come.

Traditionally the *Magnificat* is sung at Vespers, and it profoundly speaks of Jesus’ accomplishments. When Mary offered these words at His birth, they were a mighty tall order. Jesus must have known of it. Maybe she taped it to His door as a way to motivate Him. “Son, this was the prayer I said to Your Heavenly Father; don’t forget it!”

I imagine this was a joyful burden laid at Jesus’ feet; perhaps some of you feel the same; a joyful, but at times heavy, burden. To care for your parents as they age is such a gift, to return a portion of the love and life they gave you; at times you may want to resent it, but in your saner moments you know it is a supreme privilege and honor to be given such as task.

If we turn the *Magnificat* into a to-do list Jesus too must have been profoundly thankful to be charged with the greatest of responsibilities at His birth. Perhaps this is how He approached them, after all boys must mind their mothers. “Okay, today I have to scatter the proud in the thought of their hearts!”

But He did not stop there!

He “lifted up the lowly” by finding those moments to restore dignity to people.

I remember this one family at the dedication ceremony of their Habitat for Humanity home. They were so grateful to have a home to call their own and to be proud of, a place others helped them move into but one in which they put their sweat as well. And one that they can pass on to their children. Lifting up

those waylaid and made low by the world was at the center of His life.

As Mary challenged in her Magnificat, He also *filled the hungry with good things*, for example in those loaves and fishes. When those near starvation have a meal it tastes like ambrosia, the very food of the gods, from God.

And also, as Mary prophesied, He sent some of the rich away emptied handed; like the rich young ruler who loved his money more than he loved God. In Jesus' realm power cannot be bought, it can only be given. I imagine as He looked back on His 3 years of ministry, He knew He had done it in such a way that His mom, Mary, was still "rejoicing in God her savior". But the joy was also a burden for as He looked at what He had done He knew still more was required.

Our Vesper prayer time should take all of these aspects of Jesus' life into account, feeling the beauty of a day well lived and knowing that even though there is more to be done, by God's grace, we have the gift of time to sit and be still and to pray.

But don't think this means a lot of talking, audible or not.

Praying sometimes is referred to as speaking to God but perhaps even more it is the practice of listening – both through our speech and through our silence.

In the real world listening through speaking seems like an oxymoron (how can I listen while I am talking) but it is not and in prayer it can be potent if we are aware. As you attend to the tasks of home at the Vesper hour of the day, consider the words you use as the

day's work is finished. Are they words of grace, patience, and love? Or are they words of exasperation, cynicism, exhaustion, and anxiety? In listening to your own words, you can hear your spirit, and perhaps the Spirit crying out to you.

But in prayer, this vexation can turn into something powerful. In listening to your words of prayer you can hear the Spirit speaking to you, you know the Spirit that Paul tells us will *intercede with sighs too deep for words*. But after the sighs, the words will flow, and they will be the Spirit's words and not our own.

The human mind is a fascinating creation. There are times we seem to be in control: when the thoughts I conjure up are ones like the grocery list, what to watch on TV, and my opinions on the Yankees. But there are other moments in which the thoughts and feelings come unbidden, seemingly out of thin air. At times these are dark and evil and at others they are sublime and beautiful.

In evening prayer, we open our mind to seek to let God's very thoughts flow through us.

It is something like the sun. When you first step outside in the morning, you can see the beauty of the day. Then you feel a warm ray on your face. Finally, your eyes might look to the sky and see the beauty of the sun, the source of all you experienced so far, for without the sun all would be darkness and you can see nothing. Without its rays pouring forth both day and night, the earth would be a perpetual, lifeless, frozen ball of ice.

Vespers draws its name from Latin meaning (among other things) "evening star",

the first star to appear in the sky as the sun dips down into the horizon. It is a faint and gentle star that hints of the beauty of the night to come. This prayer time is a time of beauty, solitude which fills us with thanksgiving.

I remember being at the bottom of the Grand Canyon. It was my first foray into this vast and ancient place, mesmerizing in its power.

I was not prepared well for it. My legs were shaking, I was so tired. My mind was fuzzy, I was so overheated. But then the sun dipped, and the first star appeared. I had managed to carry my pack and set up my tent in the midst of absolute exhaustion. Finally, I could rest; it was a Vesper moment. And as I laid on the hard ground and tasted the dust in my mouth suddenly all that was left was grace.

The beauty of the Canyon, lit by the twilight stars, disclosed the ancient colossal, intimate colors – refulgent, resplendent, radiant. The stratified rock reflecting the twilight, uniquely disclosing beautiful minerals laid into the rock, layer by layer, which speaks to you of the deep time that brought us this vision. Reminding us God is a Lord of the ages, beyond human scales, which heartens us to think that as heavy as life seems, it is not too heavy for God.

This is the gift of Vesper prayers. It may not have been a good day. It may have been hard and hot, and exacted more from you than you wanted to give. But in the Vesper moment God will invade you with grace.

In your evening prayer, after you deal with the vexations and the blessings, the Spirit turns you to the source of it all, the Lord who

made heaven and earth. And as you breathe in and out you realize the air is like the presence of the Spirit in your heart, always giving you life, and the blessings of the day the mere fact of its existence are the grace of our Lord Jesus, the Son who illumines our lives. Each day truly is a gift we have not earned, and the friends, family, and even strangers that made the day worth it are like the love of God, forever embracing us in holy joy.