



February 12, 2023

Rev. Dr. Thomas Evans

Psalm 27:1-14, Matthew 6:25-34

Marking the Hours with Prayer:

Vigils



Golden Verse

"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 of praying through the day we have arrived at the depth of night: 2 a.m., known as "Vigils".

Listen to this description of this time of prayer:

[It] which was originally celebrated by monks from about two hours after midnight to, at latest...called a "vigil", from Latin vigilia. For soldiers, this word meant a three-hour period of being on the watch during the night. Even for civilians, night was commonly spoken of as divided into four such watches: the Gospels use the term when recounting how, at about "the fourth watch of the night", Jesus came to his disciples who in their boat were struggling to make headway against the wind, and one of the Psalms says to the Lord: "A thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night."

Vigils are the time of prayer in which, like the disciples, we can make no headwind against the problems besetting us. In the hours before dawn during my teen years I would hop on a

bicycle and load my sack with about 200 newspapers. And the days with the inserts were backbreaking! When the winds came it was even worse. The bag was so heavy, the wind too strong and the hill so steep that I simply could not peddle hard enough to make any headway. That was the time to look heavenward, "Are You kidding God!" It only lasted a few moments, but it seemed like a thousand.

Vigils are that harrowing time in the night in which we simply cannot sleep because we cannot make any headway on the problems we are turning over and over and over again in our mind. We replay the conversations wanting to solve them and be rid of them, but they will not leave...we cannot fix them at this crazy hour so we have fixated on them and would like nothing more than to fall back to sleep.

Coronavirus is not the only pandemic. Worrying is our national pastime with many taking this approach, "I try not to worry about tomorrow...so I take each day one anxiety attack at a time." But worry is no joke. Anxiety afflicts 40 million adults. Doctors will prescribe patients not only medicine but advise people to watch less news. Because it is designed to tap into our

fears, our insecurities, our anxieties, and our social problems. Modern medicine can be of great help, for much of it is associated with physiological issues, but it is also a fundamentally spiritual issue.

The gift of Vigils is the gift of purging ourselves of this incessant worrying.

Cyprian (c. 200 – 258) offers us sage advice at this hour, *"Let there be no failure of prayers in the hours of night — no idle and reckless waste of the occasions of prayer."* Since we cannot resolve these problems at this hour of the night, we should devote them to God, praying that God will bring restful sleep now and clarity in the morning.

Vigil prayers when coupled with scripture help to release our anxieties, grow our trust in God, empower us to stand vigil for others, and remind us that Christ's sacrifice promises total restoration of all that keeps the world up at night.

Vigil prayer releases anxiety when we can't make headwind.

In our gospel reading Jesus reminds us of the futility of worry, *"And who of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life?"* But of course, telling someone not to worry simply creates worrying about worrying! So, we have to read further. *"Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you."* Jesus promises us that God knows our problems and our needs and

assures us that God cares for us immeasurably more than the flowers of the field that God has arrayed in glory.

Vigil prayer grows trust; gives our fears to God.

As we continue in Vigil prayer, you remember God not only cares about us but promises to lead us. As in Isaiah 41:13-14:

"For I am the Lord, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you. Do not be afraid, for I myself will help you," declares the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel."

"Worry often gives a small thing a big shadow." As this Swedish proverb reminds us that problems that keep us up in the night are rarely as bad as they seem and knowing that God has acted to liberate and bring hope to some of the biggest problems in history gives us confidence that God will fix our relatively minor problems.

Vigils means standing watch for others in their own dark night.

Since we all have had our vigil hour of making no headwind, we should look to carry others.

Though many of the problems we worry about truly are minor, there are those who face terrible challenges. In Luke 12:35-36 we read, *"Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks."* Vigils can be the time we open the

door for another because they no longer have the strength to do it themselves.

In common use the word “Vigil” has come to refer to a gathering of people to be present for one who is in this dark night. The ministry of presence is immensely powerful. Couple it with prayer and the Word of God can be the path to help extricate others. Perhaps not from their problems but from their despair.

A young girl had been diagnosed with a terrible disease and the parents raged at the injustice and came to be angry at God. They still attended worship and prayed but felt nothing. This is what the medieval mystic St. John of the Cross refers to as the *Dark Night of the Soul*. It is the moment when those religious practices no longer bring any sense of God’s presence. When Handel’s *Hallelujah Chorus* brings no joy, when the Lord’s prayer feels like it is being lost to the wind.

The parents felt like God was punishing them. And they were utterly distraught. So, their friends wanted a prayer service for healing. And over one thousand people packed the pews. Because of her illness the young girl joined us by FaceTime while the parents sat in the first pew. As I looked upon the faces of the parents, they held blank hollow expressions; they had been sapped of every emotion.

But as person after person took hold of the microphone and offered prayers, funny stories, heartfelt hopes, speaker by speaker their faces changed. From blank stares to intent listening, to sobbing tears, until finally when they took the microphone it was words of love, of thanks, of hope and belief in the goodness of the world once again.

Even Jesus accepted such help. His waking nightmare was the horror of the cross and carrying it through the crowd to that dreaded hill. But even so, Simeon of Cyrene carried His burden a little way. Standing vigil for others is when it is our time to carry another’s cross for even a few steps can bring hope.

Vigils are prayers of hope, not only for us but the world.

Vigils are not the last in our prayer cycle of the day. There is one more we will explore next week. Lauds, and it comes right before the dawn. As Vigil prayer comes to an end it remembers that the crucifixion led to the resurrection. And that Jesus’ work of passing through the pain was the step that promises the restoration of all human problems, all division, all injustice, all hatred, all that separates us from God. So, in a mysterious and strange way the pain of Vigils awakens us to the promise of Lauds. Amen.