



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

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(Lent, pp. 65-73)

Suggested Articles:

📖 The Voice in the Wilderness
(Lent, pp. 34-37)

📖 The Penitence of Mary Magdalene
(Lent, pp. 38-39)

📖 The Penitence of Jerome
(Lent, pp. 40-41)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Keeping Vigil

Lent is a traditional time for keeping vigil—an attentive openness to the work of God in our lives and throughout the world. But what does it mean to keep vigil today, when most of us no longer adhere to the strict discipline of late night prayer?

The Prayer of St. Ephraim

O Lord and Master of my life, give me not a spirit of sloth, vain curiosity, lust for power, and idle talk. But give to me, thy servant, a spirit of soberness, humility, patience, and love. O Lord and King, grant me to see my own faults and not to condemn my brother; for blessed are thou to the ages of ages. Amen.

The Prayer of St. Ephraim[†]

Scripture Reading: Luke 22:39-46

Reflection

“Vigil” calls to mind diverse images—late-night prayer, soldiers on guard, families waiting for a birth. From the Latin *vigilia*, originally for a soldier’s night watch, this word was adopted by early Christians for their nighttime *synaxis*, or worship meeting. Today we often hear the word referring to the night office of the Liturgy of the Hours, evening worship the night before a religious celebration, or the wake after a loved one’s death.

Given this complicated etymology, the multifaceted nature of keeping vigil is not surprising. Heather Hughes explores three features of this practice that make it important for our discipleship not only during Lent, but also through the Church year.

▶ *The enhanced awareness typical of late night wakefulness.* Think of waking up in the middle of the night when noises sound louder and you are hyper-sensitive to your surroundings. Intentional times of vigil employ this nighttime alertness to become more attentive to God’s presence in the world.

Thomas Merton notes the link between enhanced sensory awareness and the spiritual attentiveness characteristic of keeping vigil. In “Fire Watch,” he reports that guarding his monastery from fire through the night became “an examination of conscience in which your task of watchman suddenly appears in its true light: a pretext devised by God to isolate you, and to search your soul with lamps and questions, in the heart of darkness.” Keeping vigil is never an end in itself; it facilitates this kind of encounter with the living God.

▶ *The responsibility of being fully present.* Keeping vigil engages our natural bodily response to moments of intense love, fear, sorrow, compunction, or awe. At a loved one’s deathbed we cannot sleep or eat as the gravity of the situation overrides our basic physical needs. Our sense of what is truly important impels us to be fully present, without seeking distraction or escape. Likewise, keeping spiritual vigil cultivates our sensitivity to what is most significant in life—reminding us that we do not live by bread alone. We are fully present before God, as we are with loved ones in times of suffering or joy.

▶ *Complete obedience to God’s will.* Christ’s praying in Gethsemane is the pattern for our keeping vigil. As he is fully present to the



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Father, he discerns the Father's will through prayer and maintains obedience to the point of death.

Like the disciples in Gethsemane, we are called to pray with Christ—to stay spiritually awake and to keep watch in compunction for our own sin and sorrow for the world's need. This is not an easy task, as even the disciples abandoned Christ, falling asleep from grief.

Hughes commends practices to help us to keep vigil—ancient disciplines like corporate prayer, fasting, almsgiving, examination of conscience, and *lectio divina*, and creative activities like fasting from artificial light or committing to draw or write. Lent is a special time to keep vigil. As with Christ in Gethsemane, we have the agony of apprehending, wrestling with, and accepting God's saving will for the world and for our individual lives. We are given the chance to become fully awake to a world that requires Golgotha, but is also given the empty tomb.

Study Questions

1. What are the spiritual purposes of keeping vigil?
2. Discuss the practices, ancient and new, that Heather Hughes commends to help us keep vigil. How does each one foster our increased attentiveness to God?
3. Which practices appeal to you most? How could you use them to keep vigil during Lent or through the Church year?
4. Consider how Georges Rouault's *St. John the Baptist*, Donatello's *The Penitent Magdalen*, and Bernini's *St. Jerome* portray individuals who were particularly perceptive of God's work in their lives and in the world.

Departing Hymn: "Go to Dark Gethsemane" (vv. 1, 2, and 3)

Go to dark Gethsemane,
you that feel the tempter's power;
your Redeemer's conflict see;
watch with him one bitter hour,
turn not from his griefs away;
learn of Jesus Christ to pray.

See him at the judgment hall,
beaten, bound, reviled, arraigned;
O the wormwood and the gall!
O the pangs his soul sustained!
Shun not suffering, shame, or loss;
learn of him to bear the cross.

Calvary's mournful mountain climb;
there, adoring at his feet,
mark that miracle of time,
God's own sacrifice complete:
"It is finished!" hear him cry;
learn of Jesus Christ to die.

James Montgomery (1820)

Tune: REDHEAD

† *The Lenten Triodion*, translated by Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware (London, UK: Faber and Faber, 1978), 69

Keeping Vigil

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To reflect on the the origins of the Christian practice of keeping vigil.
2. To consider the value of this practice for our discipleship throughout the Church year, but especially during the Lenten season.
3. To explore corporate and personal practices that can help us in keeping vigil today.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Lent (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Go to Dark Gethsemane” locate the tune REDHEAD in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

“Sitting in a hospital room waiting for a loved one’s death can seem surreal, but for me such times of vigil have been *more* real than day-to-day life,” Heather Hughes recalls. “Being with my grandmother during her last days, the terrible reality of death demanded the challenging discipline of being fully present with someone I love while she was in pain. Watching her struggle with the reality of her situation – asking questions no one could answer, filled with fear and hope – I realized that there was nothing I could do for her; I could not end her pain or give her more life. I was completely helpless to do anything other than pray and be near her. Yet this “doing nothing” was one of the hardest things I have ever done. Sitting in apparent stillness, I was whirring through a cycle of desires to ease, to end, to ignore, to run from her suffering. It is easy to say ‘you can’t know until you’ve been there,’ but I think that we can – indeed, that we are called to do this by remembering Christ’s crucifixion.

“The only thing I could do for my grandmother is exactly what Christ desired from his disciples in Gethsemane. Knowing what he was going suffer, Christ asked only that his disciples remain with him in the night, keep watch, and pray. Their response reveals how difficult such a vigil can be.” (*Lent*, 67-68)

Keeping vigil beside a loved one’s deathbed is a human analogue of the Christian practice of keeping vigil before God. How can we keep vigil today – remaining attentive to God’s work in our lives and throughout the world – when with Christ’s closest disciples we are greatly tempted to escape through worried distraction or sleep?

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the Prayer of St. Ephraim in unison.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 22:39-46 from a modern translation.

Reflection

This study guide – like the previous two, “Responsive Fasting” and “Walking the Walk (of the Stations of the Cross)” – explores a central discipline of Lent in both traditional forms and its creative adaptations today. It is

appropriate and beneficial to keep vigil throughout the Church year, but Lent is a special season to practice this discipline that attunes us to God's work in our lives and throughout the world. As we enter Gethsemane and keep vigil with Christ we will awaken more fully to the reality of the Crucifixion as our path to the Resurrection.

Study Questions

1. The purpose in keeping vigil is to become spiritually awake. The various practices, ancient and new, that Heather Hughes commends can make us more attentive to the work of God in our lives and throughout the world. Even this attention to God's work is not an end in itself; rather it facilitates an encounter with the living God by increasing our sensitivity to his presence. Encountering God through keeping vigil transforms us, making us more capable to follow Christ's example in Gethsemane – praying, discerning the Father's will, wrestling with that will, and submitting in loving obedience to God, who works in ways that transcend our understanding.
2. Create smaller groups to discuss some of these particular practices, ancient and new, that Hughes discusses: praying the Liturgy of the Hours, reflecting on the Stations of the Cross, attending Holy Week services, fasting, almsgiving, volunteering at worthy organizations, examining our consciences, engaging in *lectio divina*, fasting from artificial light, committing to regular times of sketching or creative writing, going on prayer walks, and so on.

How do these diverse activities accomplish the same good work? Consider how each one fosters an attentive openness to God's work, leads us to be fully present to God and neighbors, and promotes obedience to God's will.

3. The ancient practices of the Church, such as *lectio divina*, have passed the tests of time and place. Yet we should recall that these ancient practices developed from popular devotions by faithful Christians. Invite members to share their own ideas for creatively keeping vigil, or to discuss a favorite practice from the previous question. Has exploring the discipline of keeping vigil inspired them or changed their plans for personal devotion during Lent or through the Church year? Encourage them to make a plan and to check in with one another through the season or year.
4. Heidi Hornik remarks that Georges Rouault's *St. John the Baptist* was "created by an artist whose own faith became stronger over the years as he reflected on the suffering of Christ and the perpetual pain and suffering of humans due to sin." Rouault presents John the Baptist as a classic figure of penitence, with his features saddened by sin and his body robed in a shirt of camel's hair. The figure projects the artist's own sensitivity to the suffering world's deep need for God's redemptive and reconciling work.

In *The Penitent Magdalen* Donatello hints that Mary Magdalen's penitent asceticism has physically marked her body: "the flesh was originally painted to suggest a leathery tan produced by years of exposure to the sun in the wilderness." Attuned to God's presence, her attitude is filled with hope in God: "Donatello depicts the penitent Mary Magdalen with physical and emotional tenacity in the face of adversity – her suffering having increased her spiritual strength. Her faith is evident as her hands are clasped in prayer."

In Bernini's *St. Jerome*, the fourth century scholar monk's perception of God's presence through Christ is strikingly portrayed: "His eyes are closed in prayer as his cheek touches gently the head of Christ [on the crucifix Jerome holds]. The impact of that touch is compounded by the dramatic effect of the drapery that billows out of the niche." The saint seems more aware of Christ's reality than of his immediate surroundings. He has developed his sensitivity to God's presence through penitential practices and clearly encountered Christ through his prayerful contemplation of the crucifix.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.