

# Keeping Vigil

BY HEATHER HUGHES

The season of Lent, and especially Holy Week, are traditional times for keeping vigil—an attentive openness to the work of God in our lives and in our 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?

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Developing a proper attitude toward the penitential practices of Lent can be challenging. We are tempted to mistreat them either as ends in themselves or as tools for kicking our bad habits. But if Lent is a preparation for God's saving grace in Easter, it must be about more than moderating our use of food or coffee or Facebook, taking on a new prayer schedule, or giving alms. We do not fast in order to overcome sinful habits through discipline (though that may be a good and inherent by-product of our fast), or examine our conscience to feel bad enough about ourselves, or tithe to earn something from God. Rather, we undertake these practices in order to more fully embody the fact that "if we have grown into union with him through a death like his, we shall also be united with him in the resurrection" (Romans 6:5, NAB).<sup>1</sup> In other words, Lenten practices prepare us for and express what we must give to God in order to be united with Christ: namely, our entire lives. They serve to awaken us to the reality of Easter, which can only be entered through Good Friday.

It makes sense, then, that the season of Lent, and especially Holy Week, are traditional times for keeping vigil—an attentive openness to the work of God in our lives and in our world. The spiritual alertness we pursue in keeping vigil is invaluable during this season of penitential preparation for Easter. But what does it mean to keep vigil today, when most of us no longer adhere to the strict discipline of late night prayer? What are some practices that can help us to become spiritually awake, to thoughtfully reflect on and anticipate God's coming?

When we hear the word “vigil,” several seemingly disjointed images may come to mind: late night prayer, soldiers watching in the dark, or a family mourning loss. All of these associations are appropriate, because the word is multifaceted. It comes from the Latin *vigilia*, originally for a soldier’s night watch, but adopted by early Christians for a nighttime *synaxis*, or worship meeting. Now we most 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.



It is interesting that “either on account of the secrecy of their meetings, or because of some mystical idea which made the middle of the night the hour *par excellence* for prayer...the Christians chose the night time for their *synaxes*, and of all other nights, preferably the Sabbath.”<sup>2</sup> There’s something about being awake when we should be sleeping that enhances awareness. Think of what it’s like to wake suddenly in the middle of the night – when your own room seems strange in the dark, or when you are camping outdoors. When the light, activity, and background noise of the day are gone, our senses become alert to things we otherwise would not notice. Everything is suddenly alien: the rustling of nocturnal animals, the creaking of trees, even our friends turning over in their sleeping bags become loud signals of a mysterious world – a world beyond our understanding and control. This hyper-awareness is essential to keeping vigil; it begins with our immediate surroundings, but can extend to God’s action in the world and even the condition of our own souls.

In a haunting meditation on his experience of watching for wildfires one hot summer night in the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, Thomas Merton makes the link between the enhanced sensory awareness of those on vigil and their enhanced spiritual awareness: “The fire watch is an examination of conscience in which your task as 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.”<sup>3</sup> Merton is confronted with the immediacy of God’s transcendent mystery; the darkness and isolation of his vigil provide an experience much like Job’s encounter with God’s voice in the whirlwind:

God, my God, God Whom I meet in darkness, with You it is always the same thing! Always the same question that nobody knows how to answer!

I have prayed to you in the daytime with thoughts and reasons, and in the nighttime You have confronted me, scattering thought and reason. I have come to You in the morning with light and with desires, and You have descended upon me, with great gentleness, with most forbearing silence, in this inexplicable night, dispersing light, defeating all desire.<sup>4</sup>

In his wakefulness Merton perceives more of the world around him, but also the quality of his own soul. Like Job, he learns that his questions, doubts, and accusations do not begin to confront the unfathomable enormity of God's reality.

This is what we hope to accomplish through the spiritual discipline of keeping vigil: an encounter with the living God, an increased sensitivity to his presence in our lives and in the world, and a better understanding of who we are in light of this.



Like the practice of fasting, keeping vigil engages our natural, physical response to extreme states of love, sorrow, compunction, fear, or awe. Our basic needs for food and sleep are not diminished, but are overshadowed and contextualized by the significance of birth, illness, or death – something so demanding that we “keep watch” in love.

It is difficult to express the tremendous sensitivity which arises when we are confronted with the reality of life and death. We are never so fully engaged with what it means to be human – the odd double vision of our unimaginable value and significance as those who bear God's image, with our utter insignificance apart from God. We are never so aware of our own limitation and dependence,

which is why these important times become a battleground between compassion and pity, and ultimately between faith and nihilism. Compassion leads us to keep vigil with those who suffer and to suffer with them; pity demands that we end our loved ones' and our own suffering by the swiftest and easiest means at hand – which may start in love, but ends in the cruelty of absence or “solutions” to

suffering like euthanasia or abortion. In faith we can wait with hope; otherwise these agonizing vigils seem void of meaning – pain to no purpose, accomplishing nothing.

My own associations with keeping vigil have evolved over the years from imaginative images of watchtowers and beacon fires (informed by a youth spent reading too many fantasy novels) to the far more concrete memories of waiting for the birth and the death of loved ones.

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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. 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 to 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. Even when we will ourselves to stay alert and keep watch for what God's saving work actually looks like, apart from how we wish it to be (something which certainly wouldn't involve Gethsemane, Golgotha, Judas, or Pilate), we find ourselves “sleeping from grief” with the disciples (Luke 22:45, NAB). Imagining the disciples' confusion, fear, and weakness as they escaped from Christ's agony into the oblivion of sleep brings to mind the Pauline warning to “not sleep as the rest do, but...stay alert and sober” (1Thessalonians 5:6). It is far easier to escape in ignorance, or even to lop a soldier's ear off with Peter, than to watch and wait in the dark with Christ as he works for our good in ways we will never fully understand.

Especially during the penitential seasons of the church year, this is exactly what we are called to do. Keeping vigil is an act of prayer and communion with God which helps us to know him, and thus ourselves. This increased awareness then aids us to rightly discern the what, when, where, and how of future action. (The gruff Mad Eye Moody in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series does not refrain “CONSTANT VIGILENCE” in order to prevent those working for good from taking action; rather, his tragicomical warnings promote their active preparation for right action against evil.)

By keeping vigil we become aware of our surroundings – God's good, yet fallen creation. We get to know who we are and how we fit into the divine plan. Beyond this, we begin to discern how we might enter more deeply into God's work in our own souls and the world around us. In many ways, keeping vigil during Lent is our entrance into Gethsemane. With Christ, 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.



What are some ways to wake up to these truths this Lenten season? Let me suggest some corporate penitential practices of the Church that can guide us. Faithful Christians will discover personal ways to keep vigil as well; while engaging the universal disciplines of the Church, they will also seek God in creative ways that reflect how they are wired as individuals.

First, participating in the Church's rich tradition of *corporate prayers, fasting, and almsgiving* during Lent can help us keep vigil. For instance, when we abstain from meat on Fridays, pray the Liturgy of the Hours, reflect on the Stations of the Cross, or attend Holy Week services, we are joining in a sacrifice being made by other Christians all over the world, and this can awaken us to the corporate reality of the Church. This participation grants significance to individuals, rather than reducing it. Becoming invested in the Church through alms, prayer, and fasting heightens our awareness of God's presence in our lives, because we are aware of having something at stake in God's will.

My favorite poet, Gerard Manly Hopkins, famously expressed this truth to his friend Robert Bridges who had written Hopkins asking how to believe. The poet responded not with an ornate theological treatise (of which he was fully capable), but a terse, two-word letter: "Give alms."

There is no better way to increase our awareness of and concern for God's action than to literally invest in the kingdom of God. During Lent especially, we should not just seek for signs of God's love, but willingly become its expression through charitable acts—that is, not random handouts, but thoughtful expressions of the theological virtue. If there is something that we think "Christians should be doing," let us not wait for a

purity of motives or an opportunity to fall in our lap before becoming a sign of God's love ourselves. We can find an organization doing good and important work, and increase our tithe through them or volunteer our time. In doing so, we keep vigil for an increased awareness of God in the world; since God is present in every act of charity, we are sure to find him there.

Another ancient practice that helps us keep vigil is *the examination of conscience*—that is, reviewing our thoughts and actions with the goal of understanding our motivations and helping us to avoid sin and grow in

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virtue. Honestly facing ourselves in this way can be grueling. The Sacrament of Confession or Reconciliation forces some to do it, because confessing our sins requires that we know what they are. It is noteworthy that Catholic and Orthodox Christians schedule more opportunities for Confession during Lent than the rest of the year, and many traditions focus in worship services on the examination of conscience and participation in God's forgiveness in preparation for Easter. Clearly, this is a way during the season of Lent to keep vigil for God in our own hearts.

Ideally, we should examine our consciences when we pray every evening. However, when one is taking on this practice for the first time that is a sizeable goal. We might start by setting aside some time before attending Church each Sunday to reflect on the week, prayerfully reading through the Ten Commandments to consider how we have conformed ourselves to their instruction or failed to do so. Many useful tools in books or online can guide our examination of conscience; some are patterned after biblical lists of character traits and commandments, and others employ historic resources like the seven capital vices tradition.

The goal in all of this soul-searching is what John Climacus in the seventh century calls "the blessed joy-grief of holy compunction."<sup>5</sup> We examine our consciences so that we can more accurately repent and more fully embrace God's graceful forgiveness. An honest examination prevents us from thinking that we are bargaining with God – trying to feel bad enough about our sins to make God forgive us – and refocuses our attention on God's work in us. Rather than bogging us down in self-loathing, it prepares us to receive forgiveness and avoid sin in the future.

In the sixth century Pope Gregory the Great urges believers to be alert to temptation as the warhorse in Job 39:25 is alert to the looming battle.

He [the warhorse] overcomes in every contest whatsoever, because before the contest he prepares his mind for the contest. For to 'smell the battle afar off,' is so to foresee in thought misfortunes when yet far distant, that they may not, by being unexpected, be able to overcome him. Paul was admonishing his disciples to smell this battle afar off, when he was saying, *Examine yourselves whether ye be in the faith, prove your own selves* [2 Corinthians 13:5]. As if he were openly charging them, saying, Call to mind the contests of persecutions, and considering the inmost and secret thoughts of your hearts, discover, what ye are able to continue in the midst of sufferings. Holy men smell this battle from afar, when dwelling even in the peace of the Church Universal....<sup>6</sup>

We are to be spiritually vigilant in our consciences in the same way that warhorses show heightened vigilance in battle. The spiritual enemies that beset us, Gregory warns, are pride, the seven capital vices (vainglory, envy, sadness or *acedia*, anger, avarice, gluttony, and lust), and a host of vices that

follow their lead. Through the examination of conscience we can come to know our secret thoughts and motivations and be better prepared to resist the distorted thinking and desires of the vices. We learn to anticipate spiritual trouble from far off and to prepare ourselves for the battle with temptation and sin.

A final ancient practice that can help us keep vigil this Lent is *lectio divina*, or divine reading. Originally referring to the Scripture read aloud during the liturgy, *lectio divina* has come to refer to the personal practice of reading short passages from the Bible meditatively and repetitively. Guigo the Carthusian (d. 1188) advises reading the same passage four times with the different intentions of *lectio* (reading), *meditatio* (meditating), *oratio* (praying), and *contemplatio* (contemplating). *The Benedictine Handbook* explains the function of this repetition:

Lectio is at the service of prayer and goes beyond the act of merely absorbing the contents of a page.... What is read must first be digested and assimilated through a process of quiet repetition, in which we aim to become progressively attuned to its subtle echoes in the heart. The text thus serves as a mirror that brings inner realities to consciousness. This heightened awareness exposes our need for divine help and readily leads to prayer.<sup>7</sup>

As a form of vigilant prayer, *lectio divina* draws us into a spiritual awareness of the truths of Scripture rather than a scholarly study of its texts.

When we open the sacred book we also open ourselves; we let ourselves become vulnerable – willing to be pierced by God’s two-edged sword. This is what St. Benedict refers to as compunction, allowing ourselves to experience the double dynamic of every genuine encounter with God: the growing awareness of our urgent need for forgiveness and healing on the one hand and, on the other, a more profound confidence in God’s superabundant mercy.<sup>8</sup>

This practice is suited for any time of the church year, but it is incredibly valuable during the penitential seasons. This explains why the *Rule of St. Benedict* provides for each individual to read books during Lent (rather than the usual practice of listening to them read communally).

*Lectio divina* can take a lot of time. To get started, we might space the repetitive reading through a day, set aside time each morning or evening, or read a couple times each week during Lent. “In lectio the intention is affective not cognitive, it is a work of a heart that desires to make contact with God and, thereby, to reform our lives”<sup>9</sup>; and so, even more than when we study Scripture, our surroundings are important. As a form of keeping vigil, *lectio divina* demands that we eliminate distractions in order to perceive the work and will of God. I find it difficult to focus on prayer when my room is a disaster or there are people around who are not participating. We can prepare

for *lectio divina* by cleaning up our space, incorporating our senses by lighting a candle or studying an icon, and kneeling while we read. Also, it is important to read the Scripture passage aloud: “Lectio is like reading poetry; the sound of the words creates interior assonances, which in turn trigger intuitive connections which lodge more effectively in the memory.”<sup>10</sup>



The ancient practices of the Church are certain to aid us in keeping vigil during Lent, but we should also pursue an increased awareness of God’s work in our lives and the world through personal acts of devotion suited to our individual personalities.

For example, writer Jennifer Fulwiler and her family benefit greatly from a once-a-week Lenten fast from artificial light. They have found that this intentional limitation teaches them humility by restricting their schedules, increases their intentionality throughout the day, makes them less dependent on television and the Internet, reduces stress, and most importantly, in her words,

It made us viscerally aware of our need for God’s providence. Darkness can be scary when you can’t control it. I have rarely felt more powerless than when I would watch the last rays of sun disappear from the sky, knowing that I would be left in darkness that I could not banish at will. Electric light gives us the illusion of having control over our lives, and I found going without it to be a stunning reminder of our littleness and powerlessness in the grand scheme of things.<sup>11</sup>

Like Thomas Merton’s vigil in “Fire Watch,” a fast from artificial light can remove the distractions and defenses that get between us and the living God, exposing us so that we can truly encounter God in the unimpeded darkness of night.

For artist Paul Soupiset, the practice of daily sketching is a fruitful discipline during Lent. His sketches should inspire others to explore their creative gifts this Lenten season.<sup>12</sup> This can be a way to keep vigil—to become more aware of who we are created to be, and of the God who created us. I am no illustrator, but I do find that writing increases my sensitivity to truth and even to God’s presence. This Lent, I plan on responding to lectionary readings by writing short reflections, poems, or prayers as a way to keep vigil.

Other personal, creative disciplines do not require artistic talent. I have friends who keep vigil by praying the rosary during their morning run, or by going on prayer walks—seeking to be awakened to the necessity of intercessory prayer as they pass by their neighbors and travel through their cities.

Any Lenten vigil must start with the practices universal to a living faith: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Participating in ancient Christian practices of corporate prayer, donation of time and money, examination of conscience,

or *lectio divina* can increase our attentive openness to the work of God in our lives and in our world. But it is important to remember that popular devotions as ancient as *lectio divina* were developed by faithful Christians like Jennifer Fulwiler, Paul Soupiset, you, and me. So I think we have permission to be creative in keeping vigil in the Lenten season — as long as we are truly seeking to enter into Gethsemane and keep vigil with Christ, watching, praying, and becoming spiritually awake to the reality of the Crucifixion as our only path to the Resurrection.

## NOTES

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2 Dom F. Cabrol, OSB, “Matins,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911), [www.newadvent.org/cather/10050a.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/cather/10050a.htm) (accessed December 10, 2012).

3 Thomas Merton, “Fire Watch, July 4, 1952,” *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1953), 352.

4 Ibid.

5 John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, *The Classics of Western Spirituality*, edited and translated by Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 114.

6 St. Gregory the Great, *Morals on the Book of Job (Moralia in Job)*, XXXI.71 (Oxford, UK: John Henry Parker, 1844), [www.lectionarycentral.com/GregoryMoralia/Book31.html](http://www.lectionarycentral.com/GregoryMoralia/Book31.html) (accessed December 10, 2012).

7 Michael Casey, OCSO, “The Art of *Lectio Divina*,” *The Benedictine Handbook* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 106-109, here citing 106.

8 Ibid., 108.

9 Ibid., 107.

10 Ibid.

11 Jennifer Fulwiler, “8 Reasons to Turn Out the Lights during Lent,” *National Catholic Register* (February 15, 2012), [www.ncregister.com/blog/jennifer-fulwiler/8-reasons-to-turn-out-the-lights-during-lent](http://www.ncregister.com/blog/jennifer-fulwiler/8-reasons-to-turn-out-the-lights-during-lent) (accessed December 10, 2012).

11 For his watercolor sketches from Lent 2007, see *Lentenblog: Moleskin Sketches by Paul Soupiset*, [paulsoupiset.com/lentenblog\\_microgallery/index.html](http://paulsoupiset.com/lentenblog_microgallery/index.html) (accessed December 10, 2012).



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