

# The Night Watch

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The Night Watch is one of the most powerful spiritual encounters that we can have with God. This experience has historical roots within the Christian tradition of daily prayer called the Divine Office. Over the past centuries, the Divine Office has also become known as the Liturgy of Hours. As many as seven hours of prayer have developed over the years<sup>1</sup>. They are as follows:

1. Lauds
2. Matins
3. Prime
4. Sext
5. None
6. Vespers
7. Compline

The Night Watch has historical roots in the pre-dawn vigil of Lauds and the dawn vigil of Matins. Together these two prayer offices bridge the deep darkness of the night with the break of light of the new day. It is during this period of time that we can encounter God in a very unique way.

Jesus began his day with prayer while it was still very dark. The Gospel of Mark states:

"In the morning,  
while it was still very dark,  
he got up and went out to a deserted place,  
and there he prayed."  
(chapter 1.35)

The Psalmist did the same--

"I rise before dawn and seek your promises;  
I put my hope in your words.  
My eyes are awake before each watch of the night  
(hence the name of our prayer experience--Night Watch)  
that I may meditate on your promises."  
(chapter 119.147-148)

The best way for me to describe these two deeply linked hours of prayer is by describing some my own observations and feelings. Many of them come from the many Night Watches that I experienced sitting quietly on a small bench facing eastward at Mount Calvary Retreat House in Santa Barbara.

Often I sit quietly staring at the dark sky waiting for the pre-dawn hours for the darkness to yield to light. Usually I hear nothing but an occasional hoot of an owl or a bark of a dog. Sometimes I hear something that sounds like whispering voices which is probably the wind. I just keep staring into the dark sky noticing the stars and the moon. Some of the stars seem to disappear and reappear as the night goes on. One star--the North Star--stays constant. It makes me dwell on Christ's words "It is I, Jesus . . . I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star."

I know that the darkness of the sky is soon going to crack with light when invisible little birds first begin to chirp. I stare at the dark sky anxiously waiting for the first hint of light.

I like to associate the first hint of light (and subsequent shades and forms of light) with the eye of God piercing the darkness and finding me waiting and ready. As this moment of time approaches I look towards the heavens and I like to say "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork" (Psalm 19.1) and remind myself that "The mighty one, God the Lord, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun . . . (Psalm 50.1) including me.

What fills my heart with anticipation is the divine promise that "Light dawns for the righteous, and joy for the upright in heart" (Psalm 97.1). The Psalms repeatedly describe the righteous as persons whose "delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night" (Psalm 1.2). I like to hear God saying to me "I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you" (Psalm 32.8). This helps me prepare myself for more of God's words.

I find the transition from night to day as a time for waiting and anticipation. Watching the dark gradually turn to light is a natural time for waiting. I like to repeat to myself

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,  
and in God's word I hope;  
my soul waits for the Lord  
more than those who watch for the morning.  
(Psalm 130. 5-6)

Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, must have been familiar with the above words and experience of waiting and anticipation as he reflected on the role of his son. He proclaimed

By the tender mercy of our God,  
the dawn from on high will break down upon us,  
to give light to those who sit in darkness  
and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the way of peace.  
(Luke 1. 78-79)

As the daylight increases so does the shape and color of the eye of God. Shades of dark begin to separate blue from dark. A long crack of dark blue grows slowly into a long crack of lighter blue. The first streaks of red appear below the shades of light blue separating the darker shades of color at the top and the lighter shades at the bottom. Soon a blueish-pink color emerges as the first hint of yellow can be seen. Then a ball of sun appears as an eyeball. I like to say to myself

"Truly the eye of the Lord is on those who stand in reverence,  
on those who hope in God's steadfast love."  
(Psalm 33.18)

and hear God saying

"I will counsel you with my eye upon you."  
(Psalm 32.8b)

As the daylight increases so does my need to consecrate this new day to God. The Psalms are full of passages of commitment that consecrate the day through prayer and praise. "But I, O Lord, cry out to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you" (Psalm 88.13). I find Psalm 5 one of the most intense petitions of prayer of all the psalms. Several different times within this short passage the psalmist earnestly asks God to listen.

Give ear to my words, O Lord;  
give heed to my sighing.  
Listen to the sound of my cry,  
my King and my God,  
for to you I pray.  
O Lord, in the morning you hear my voice;  
in the morning I plead my case to you, and watch.

The psalmist ends this passage by watching. I experience the time of "watch" as a time of waiting. "For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation" (Psalm 62.1). I know that my salvation is secure because ". . . God's steadfast love endures forever" (Psalm 136.3). What happens in the heavens each morning makes me want "to declare your steadfast love in the morning" (Psalm 92.2a) and even "sing aloud of your steadfast love in the morning" (Psalm 59.16a). Looking up at the early morning sky assures me that God created "the sun to rule over (every) day" which I interpret as a testimony that "his steadfast love (for me) endures forever" (Psalm 136.8). As a result, I yearn to consecrate my day by declaring as did the Psalmist

"O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,  
for his steadfast love endures forever.  
O give thanks to the God of gods,  
for his steadfast love endures forever.  
O give thanks to the Lord of lords,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;  
who alone does great wonders,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;  
who by understanding made the heavens,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;  
who spread out the earth on the waters,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;  
who made the great lights,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;  
the sun to rule over the day,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;

Because of my Christian tradition, it is easy for me to associate God with light during my morning office particularly because of the Johannine literature. John often applied the symbolism of light to Christ throughout his gospel and letters (i.e. John 1. 4-9; 1 John 1. 5-7). For this reason, dawn naturally symbolizes one of the central tenets of my faith--the resurrection of Christ. According to gospel accounts, Christ's resurrection had occurred by early dawn. His resurrection assures my after-life with God.

Thus, each morning I associate the crack of dawn as a triumph of life over death. Doing so, however, makes me mindful of my present life on earth. The psalms make it clear that "the Lord loves justice" (Psalm 37.28a) and equally clear that I should as well. "The mouths of the righteous utter wisdom and their tongues speak justice asserts the psalmist as well as "The law of their God is in their hearts" (Psalm 37. 30-31).

Bearing this in mind I know that "When the sun rises, people go out to their work and to their labor until the evening" (Psalm 104.22a-23). I also know that I am one of them and that what needs to be interwoven in my daily actions is a sense of justice for God and for my neighbors that is awakened through my Night Watch experience.