Focus On Spiritual Formation: The Practice of Vigil

“I will watch for You, for God is my Stronghold” Psalm 59:9
“Watch therefore -- for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning -- lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Watch.” Mark 13: 35-37
“So then, let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.” 1 Thessalonians 5:6

The Practice

The practice of vigil is a natural outgrowth of the Jewish tradition of beginning a Holy Day at sunset of the day before. In Christian practice, a vigil is most typically a prayerful preparation for some coming or hoped-for event. It most frequently occurs on the eve of, or throughout the night preceding, the day of significance. More broadly, a vigil can be any time of prayerful watching and waiting for God. At times of community strife or grief, a “prayer vigil” brings people together with words of mutual reassurance or silent supplications for healing and peace. At times of loss, as a family prays for a missing or deceased person, others may join in their vigil, trusting in God to give them strength to go forward.

In all these contexts, a vigil involves prayerful waiting for a revelation of God in our lives. Vigil is keeping watch for God.

Getting Started

The season of Advent is a perfect time to begin to think about and practice vigil. Advent at its heart is a time of expectant waiting and preparation for God’s gift in the birth of Jesus. The wise men and the shepherds in the field were all consciously or unconsciously watching and waiting for a sign, a revelation of God. Both received “signs” of the most dramatic order – a brilliant star in the east, a multitude of the heavenly host, and ultimately a life-changing encounter with the Prince of Peace. Perhaps God’s response to our watching and waiting during Advent will be more subtle but no less real. Come to one of Trinity’s Christmas Eve services this year with hopeful anticipation. Come as to a vigil.

Of course, we don’t have to wait until Christmas Eve. The practice of keeping vigil can begin right now by simply turning off the TV, putting down the phone, lighting the candle of Advent, and then silently and prayerfully listening for God’s still small voice, allowing the peace of the moment to ease our concerns for those things done and left undone.

At Trinity

The beginning of Advent this year on November 30 will be celebrated with a Service of Comfort and Prayer during the 5th Sunday at 5 service. In keeping with the practice of vigil and our Advent theme of Watching, this service will engage the question of how grief, stress, loss, and struggle – especially during the holiday season – can enrich our faith. Come experience the power of Watching in the Dark.

Background

Jesus himself, on the night before his death, found refuge in the Garden of Gethsemane to wait, pray, and watch for God’s will for him. At Pentecost, his Disciples gathered expectantly in the Upper Room for the coming of the Holy Spirit.
In the first centuries of the Christian era, Church Fathers such as St. Augustine expressly approved the practice of vigil, although there were instances of abuse when the all-night event developed into an excessively exuberant celebration. As a consequence, admonitions for vigils to be kept “sober” appear frequently in early church writings.

In monastic practice during the Middle Ages, a prayer vigil continued from sunset prior to, until the morning of, an important day in the church calendar, beginning with the evening Vespers and continuing on to the early morning Matins. These night-time Vigils included psalms, generally a set of 12, and a Nocturn or set of canticles (songs or chants derived from Biblical texts) from the Old Testament, at times enhanced with lessons from Scripture.

The liturgical calendar offers many occasions when the practice of prayerful watching during a vigil may be appropriate. Perhaps the most frequently celebrated is the Easter Vigil, an all-night prayer service commencing on the evening of Holy Saturday. As noted, Advent and Christmas Eve services are a central part of the tradition of holding Vigils in advance of Holy Days.

Further Resources

- Keeping Vigil by Heather Hughes: http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/193457.pdf
- Ralph Wilson, Rediscovering the Prayer Vigil; http://www.joyfulheart.com/maturity/vigil.htm