

Keep Vigil

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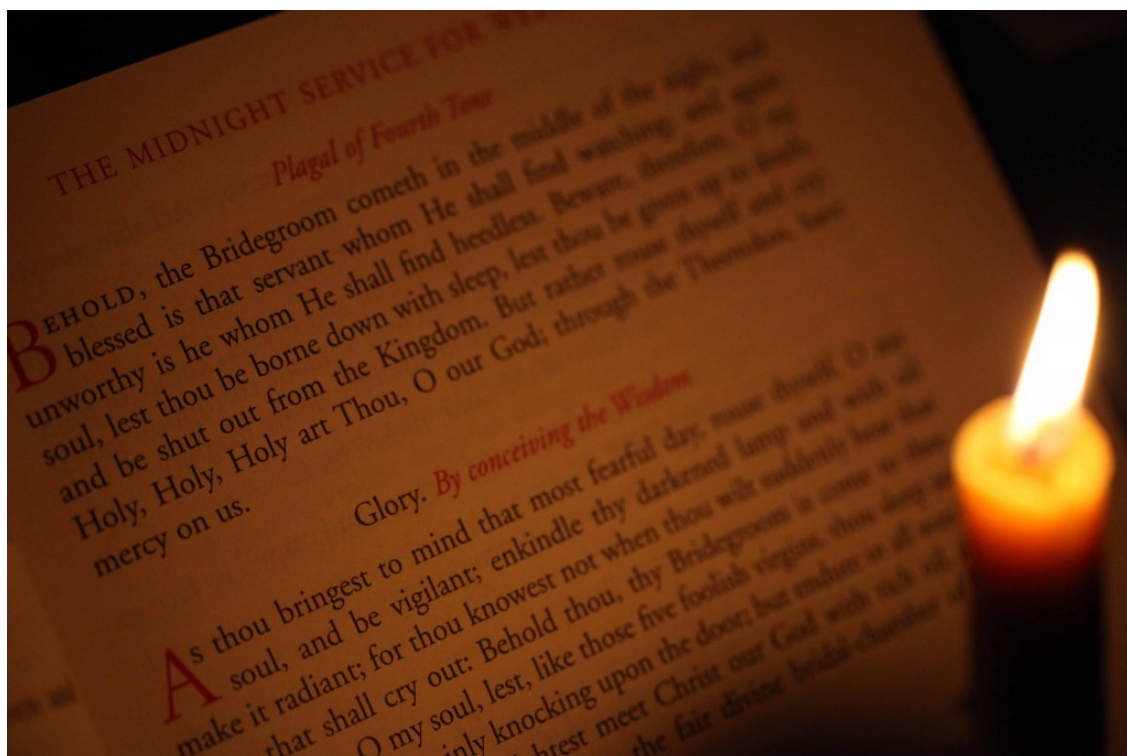


Forty days had come to a close. I remember them as one, how the weight of sleep had a habit of overtaking the light of day, how the light of a candle overcame the dark of night. A mother always remembers those forty days as if they were but one. And the evening and the morning were one day. Those forty days, they're a muddled scrawl upon the pages of my memory.

Having come to the end of them, I ventured out with a small babe swaddled tight and carried him for the first time beyond the entrance of our home. That was the day I walked a boy-child across the threshold of the narthex, placed him in the arms of a priest. That's when the print upon my memory begins to read clear, because I can still remember how I caught my breath, seeing him carried through the Royal Doors and into the Holy Place. I offered my child to God and the priest returned him to me, laid him on the solea where I scooped him into arms already aching for his return.

I stood there before an icon of Christ, gazing into His eyes, an epitachelion draped over my head and I remember how I held on to the hem of His garment. That's when the memory's stamped vivid. I can still hear his words, "Don't waste the time in the night when sleep is taken from you. Keep vigil. This time nursing your child in the still, quiet hours...don't complain because you're deprived of sleep. This is your opportunity for prayer."

Behold, the Bridegroom cometh at midnight, and blessed is the servant whom He shall find watchful.



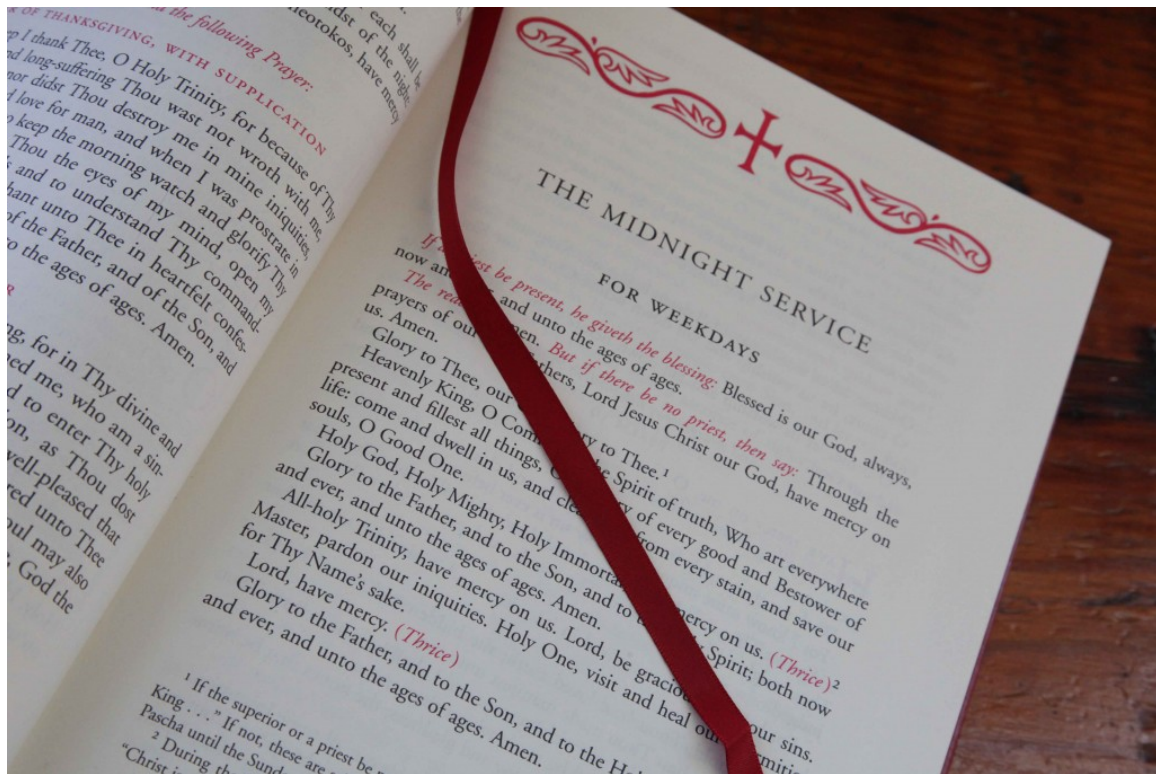
That wise counsel, those simple words, they changed my life. Keep vigil. This is your opportunity for prayer. Words transforming sleeplessness into wakefulness, burden into rest.

Years later I find myself pondering those words in my heart. The last months of another pregnancy and once again I'm enduring the long days of waiting, carrying within me another son, my seventh child. The days are growing long with the expectation of another day, one when I'll offer a new child to God. But my body's growing weary, all these years of childbearing. It's weighed down and tired, yet my heart's strengthened in remembering that it's the weakness of my frame that will offer the opportunity to be made whole.

Night after wakeful night, dark hours offering no rest, sleep only coming in fits. This is my weakness. It's the blessing of a body, great with child, the weakness that

wakes me from sleep in the still, quiet hours and gives birth to a night-long praise.

At midnight I arose to confess Thee for the judgments of Thy righteousness.



In the deep dark I rise from bed, walk quiet through shadows toward an eastern wall of our home. A match strikes flame and a candle keeps watch and I reach for a book, its pages worn from all the turning. That's where I find words that illumine the night, the Midnight Office. These are the hours that offer quiet to the heart, when children sleep soundly and I'm laid open, awake. It's a mother's lesson, learning how to be made strong through weakness. And I keep vigil.

The lesson begins when you embrace the blessing of childbearing, when you stop complaining about the fatigue, all the aches and the pains. The blessing begins when you stop lamenting the struggle of it all and start giving thanks, allowing His strength to be made perfect in weakness.

A mother's sleepless nights, they're the times that break you. They're times that can drive you into your heart, the place of prayer. Broken and humbled, that's when God healeth all thine infirmities. And He leaves mine with me, all the weaknesses, so that I might be benefited through them. He doesn't take them away, but redeems them. And through my blessed weakness, another sleepless night, He paves a path, a narrow way to Him.

The darkness of a night broken only by the light of the moon and the flicker of a candle's flame, that's when things become clear. The debt of sleep doesn't offer

true rest and our only repose is to rest in Him.

From my bed and sleep hast Thou raised me, O Lord; enlighten my mind and heart, and open my lips that I may praise Thee, O Holy Trinity.

A mother's vigil ends as the Book of Hours closes, a flame extinguished. All that's left is the return to a night of broken sleep and the comfort in knowing that this aching body is my benefactor. Know thyself. I know that lying in comfort, I'd be weighed down by sleep and no amount of will or resolve would raise me from the death of it. A body whole, but a heart unworthy and slothful, shut out from the Kingdom. God's grace, I find the strength to pray through the night, only because I'm weak.

These are the thoughts that give me pause, the source of my thanksgiving. It's the thanks in knowing that in only a few months, just a matter of weeks, a newborn babe will awake, crying out at midnight. The voice of God calling me to prayer during the watches of the night. And with God as my strength, I'll keep vigil.