

*A Church Lock In*

I have read that in medieval times, when a young man had completed his training and was about to be made a knight, the future knight would spend from dusk till dawn in a church the day before he was to receive knighthood. The knight candidate would pray for God's strength and guidance for the endeavor on which he was about to embark. I have known some people who have kept the vigil through the night with the body of a deceased loved one before a funeral. This was a common practice back in the days when viewings, and perhaps a "wake," were done in the deceased's home. Such vigils could be mournful or raucous or both.

The first church I served had an interesting custom for Good Friday and Easter. There would be a prayer service ending about three in the afternoon on Good Friday, the time of Jesus' death on the cross. From three o'clock Friday until the Sunrise service on Easter morning, there would be someone constantly in the nave and chancel of the church keeping the vigil.

Individuals or groups, such as our Youth Group, would sign up for hour-long time slots from 3 PM Friday until 6 AM Sunday. We'd keep a single candle burning in the chancel and we'd keep printed devotional and prayer resources for folk's use in the nave. Whereas the wee small hours of the morning Friday and Saturday night were the hardest time slots to fill, the Associate Pastor -- that was me -- got volunteered to fill those. There was something both kind of eerie and kind of sublime about being alone in the darkened church in the middle of the night between our remembrances of Jesus' death and resurrection.

It's not obvious from the translation of Psalm 4 we used today, but other translations of the Psalm seem to suggest that in that psalm King David is recounting a night he spent alone in the Temple in prayer. It's also not clear whether this is something David did regularly, or only once, or if other pious Israelites would have overnight prayer vigils in the Temple as well. What is clear is that this was a time of big trouble for David.

Even David, a man after the Lord's own heart, a man beloved and favored by God, had many periods of trouble. In this particular instance unnamed enemies had risen up against David for some unknown cause. That's a common occurrence in the Psalms. We can imagine that in David's palace there must have been many political intrigues and the ever-present possibility of an assassination or coup, or an attack by a foreign country. Perhaps the situation in David's kingdom isn't so different from the world situation today. And if a person as close to the Lord as David was had such troubles, can we expect anything less?

David begins his prayer to God honestly: with a complaint, with a lament, a cry. David connects those who slander and disrespect him, God's anointed king, with those who reject God's truth and chase after dumb idols. His plea is a common one, one no doubt we all have uttered: "How long, O Lord, how long will you allow this sacrilege to go on? How long must I wait on deliverance and vindication?" But whereas we might have expected David's pleading and wailing to go on all night long, his mood suddenly changes.

David was supremely confident that God would hear his prayer and grant his request. David trusted in God's reputation as the protector and defender of the weak and innocent. His faith was such that even though he was hard pressed, he didn't lose any sleep over his problems. Me, I often get insomnia when I find myself in a conflicted situation. But not David, who was so sure of his deliverance even before it happened, that he could say, "I lie down in peace, at once I fall asleep." David, in the confidence of his faith, even takes it upon himself to instruct his enemies and adversaries as to what they should do. He tells them to refrain from sinning and get their relationships right with the Lord. Then they too will know better times.

The knight-elect's evening locked in the church, the tradition of a "wake" before a funeral, my late Good Friday night vigil, and David's night in the temple all remind me of Jesus' Sabbath rest in the tomb between his death on Friday afternoon and his resurrection sometime after sundown on Holy Saturday, which was discovered at sunrise on that first Easter Day. Even more than David, the Lord's anointed king, Jesus was the "Anointed One." In fact, the titles we apply to Jesus, *Christ* and *Messiah*, both mean "the Anointed One" in their original languages, Greek and Latin respectively. Jesus is the Holy and Righteous One, the only begotten Son of God.

Jesus, like David, had to suffer through enemies rising against him. But unlike David, Jesus' enemies actually took his earthly life. It was necessary that Jesus die for our sins. I do believe that Jesus went to his death in pain and with the mortal fear any human being would have in such a situation, but Jesus also knew deep in his heart that God would somehow use even his death to further His kingdom and that in the end he would be vindicated.

Jesus could metaphorically “sleep” in the tomb in a confident faith, knowing the Father would do the right thing. As we all know, God the Father did raise Jesus from the dead, making him triumphant over sin and death, his enemies and ours, and proving Jesus righteous and innocent beyond the shadow of a doubt.

Jesus shares his victory, his vindication, his confident faith with us. In St. Luke’s account of Jesus’ first appearance to the disciples, the disciples’ first reaction to the risen Jesus is fear. They thought they were seeing a ghost! But Jesus calms their fears and he does that by proving to them that he is really, truly, physically raised from the dead. His body can be touched and felt: the resurrected Jesus even eats. This is similar to what we discussed last week when we considered the “Doubting Thomas.” Jesus didn’t just rise in the disciples’ minds and hearts, he didn’t rise as a disembodied spirit. Jesus resurrection is perfect and complete, and he shares it with us.

In light of this, what should we do, especially when we are troubled? What are we to do when our enemies get us down? May I suggest prayer, rigorous prayer, perhaps knocking on the door of Heaven all night long if that feels right to us? That there are going to be times of conflict and trouble in our lives is a given. That’s unavoidable. But there’s really nothing for us to lose any sleep over in worry; we can be brave and confident. God is in control. He hears our prayers and does what is right, although we might not always understand how it is right at the time. When we arrive on the other side of the problem, or on the other side of life, we will see how God always did what was best. We can count on that. We can count on Him.

One prayer that God always grants immediately is when we repent and ask forgiveness. God never stops forgiving our sins in Jesus name. In Jesus' name we are forgiven. In Jesus name you are forgiven, right now. Thanks be to God, and go tell others what God has done for you. Amen.