

# Finding Compline

## *Nightfall*

IT WAS A DARK YEAR IN EVERY SENSE. It began with the move from my sunny hometown, Austin, Texas, to Pittsburgh in early January. One week later, my dad, back in Texas, died in the middle of the night. Always towering and certain as a mountain on the horizon, he was suddenly gone.

A month later, I miscarried and hemorrhaged, and we prayed Compline in the ER.

Grief had compounded. I was homesick. The pain of losing my dad was seismic, still rattling like aftershocks. It was a bleak season—we named it, as a grim joke, the “Pitts-of-despair-burgh.”

The next month we found out we were pregnant again. It felt like a miracle. But early on I began bleeding, and the pregnancy became complicated. I was put on “medically restricted activity.” I couldn’t stand for long periods, walk more than a couple blocks, or lift anything above ten pounds, which meant I couldn’t lift my then four-year-old. As I spent hours sitting in bed each day, my mind grew dimmer and darker. The bleeding continued near-constantly for two months, with weekly trips to the hospital when it picked up so much that we worried I was miscarrying or in danger of another hemorrhage. In the end, in late July, early in my second trimester, we lost another baby, a son.

During that long year, as autumn brought darkening days and frost settled in, I was a priest who couldn't pray.

I didn't know how to approach God anymore. There were too many things to say, too many questions without answers. My depth of pain overshadowed my ability with words. And, more painfully, I couldn't pray because I wasn't sure how to trust God.

Martin Luther wrote about seasons of devastation of faith, when any naive confidence in the goodness of God withers. It's then that we meet what Luther calls "the left hand of God."<sup>1</sup> God becomes foreign to us, perplexing, perhaps even terrifying.

Adrift in the current of my own doubt and grief, I was flailing. If you ask my husband about 2017, he says simply, "What kept us alive was Compline."



An Anglicization of *completorium*, or "completion," Compline is the last prayer office of the day. It's a prayer service designed for nighttime.<sup>2</sup>

Imagine a world without electric light, a world lit dimly by torch or candle, a world full of shadows lurking with unseen terrors, a world in which no one could be summoned when a thief broke in and no ambulance could be called, a world where wild animals hid in the darkness, where demons and ghosts and other creatures of the night were living possibilities for everyone. This is the context in which the Christian practice of nighttime prayers arose, and it shapes the emotional tenor of these prayers.

For much of history, night was simply terrifying.

Roger Ekirch begins his fascinating history of nighttime by saying, "It would be difficult to exaggerate the suspicion and insecurity bred by darkness."<sup>3</sup> In the eighteenth century, Edmund Burke said there was no other "idea so universally terrible in all times, and in all countries, as darkness."<sup>4</sup> Shakespeare's Lucrece famously laments the "comfort-killing night, image of hell."<sup>5</sup>

Nighttime is also a pregnant symbol in the Christian tradition. God made the night. In wisdom, God made things such that every day we face a time of darkness. Yet in Revelation we're told that at the end of all things, "night will be no more" (Revelation 22:5; cf. Isaiah 60:19). And Jesus himself is called a light in the darkness. He is the light that darkness cannot overcome.

The sixteenth-century Saint John of the Cross coined the phrase "the dark night of the soul" to refer to a time of grief, doubt, and spiritual crisis, when God seems shadowy and distant.<sup>6</sup> The reason this resonates with us is because night typifies our fears and doubts—"the hard day of the soul" or "the gray morning of the soul" would never have had the same staying power.

And in a darkness so complete that it's hard for us to now imagine, Christians rose from their beds and prayed vigils in the night. The third-century North African theologian Tertullian refers to "assemblies at night" in which families would rise from their sleep to pray together.<sup>7</sup> In the East, Basil the Great instructed Christians that "at the beginning of the night we ask that our rest be without offense . . . and at this hour also Psalm [91] must be recited."<sup>8</sup> Long after night vigils ceased to be a regular practice among families, monks continued to pray through the small hours, rising in the middle of the night to sing Psalms together, staving off the threat of darkness. Centuries of Christians have faced their fears of unknown dangers and confessed their own vulnerability each night, using the dependable words the church gave them to pray.

Of course, not all of us feel afraid at night. I have friends who relish nighttime—its stark beauty, its contemplative quiet, its space to think and pray.<sup>9</sup> Anne Brontë begins her poem "Night" declaring, "I love the silent hour of night."<sup>10</sup>

There is much to love about the night. Nightingale song and candlelight, the sparkling city or the crackling of a fire as stars slowly creep across the sky, the sun descending into the horizon

silhouetting a reddened sky. Yet each of us begins to feel vulnerable if the darkness is too deep or lasts too long. It is in large part due to the presence of light that we can walk around without fear at night. With the flick of a switch, we can see as well as if we were in daylight. But go out into the woods or far from civilization, and we still feel the almost primordial sense of danger and helplessness that nighttime brings.

In deep darkness, even the strongest among us are small and defenseless.

Despite modernity's buzzing light bulbs and twenty-four-hour drive-throughs, we nonetheless face our vulnerability in a unique way as darkness falls. There's a reason horror movies are usually set at night. We still speak of the "witching hour." And poet John Rives, the curator of *The Museum of Four in the Morning*, a website that archives literary and pop culture references to 4 a.m., calls it the "worst possible hour of the day."<sup>11</sup> These wee hours, he says, are a popular shorthand infused with meaning across genres, cultures, and centuries.

Night is not just hours on the clock. How many of us lie awake at night, unable to fall back asleep, worrying over the day ahead, thinking of all that could go wrong, counting our sorrows?

Our very bodies confront darkness each night. So each night we practice facing our truest state: we are exposed, we cannot control our lives, we will die.

In the daylight, I'm distracted. At moments, even productive.

At night I feel alone, even in a house full of sleeping bodies. I feel small and mortal.

The darkness of nighttime amplifies grief and anxiety. I'm reminded with the setting of the sun that our days are numbered, and full of big and little losses.

We are all so very, very vulnerable.

We can speak of vulnerability as something we choose. We decide whether to "let ourselves" be vulnerable through sharing or withholding our truest selves—our stories, opinions, or

feelings. In this sense, vulnerability means emotional exposure or honesty. But this isn't the kind of vulnerability I mean. Instead, I mean the unchosen vulnerability that we all carry, whether we admit it or not. The term *vulnerable* comes from a Latin word meaning "to wound."<sup>12</sup> We are wound-able. We can be hurt and destroyed, in body, mind, and soul. All of us, every last man, woman, and child, bear this kind of vulnerability till our dying day.

And every twenty-four hours, nighttime gives us a chance to practice embracing our own vulnerability.<sup>13</sup>

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I don't remember when I began praying Compline. It didn't begin dramatically. I'd heard Compline sung many times in darkened sanctuaries where I'd sneak in late and sit in silence, listening to prayers sung in perfect harmony.

In a home with two priests, copies of the Book of Common Prayer are everywhere, lying around like spare coasters. So one night, lost in the annals of forgotten nights, I picked it up and prayed Compline.

And then I kept doing it. I began praying Compline more often, barely registering it as any kind of new practice. It was just something I did, not every day, but a few nights a week, because I liked it. I found it beautiful and comforting.

A pattern of monastic prayer was largely set by Benedict and his monks in the sixth century. They prayed eight times a day: Matins (before dawn), Lauds (at sunrise), then Prime, Terce, Sext, None, and Vespers throughout the day (each about three hours apart). Finally, at bedtime, Compline.<sup>14</sup>

The Anglican Book of Common Prayer condensed these eight canonical hours into two prayer "offices," morning and

evening prayer. But some Anglicans (as well as lay Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and others) continued to have fixed night prayers. Eventually, in Anglican prayer books these two prayer offices were expanded to four, adding vespers and a Compline service.<sup>15</sup>

Like most prayer offices, Compline includes a confession, a reading from the Psalms and other Scriptures, written and responsive prayers, and a time for silence or extemporaneous prayer.



For most of my life, I didn't know there were different kinds of prayer. Prayer meant one thing only: talking to God with words I came up with. Prayer was wordy, unscripted, self-expressive, spontaneous, and original. And I still pray this way, every day. "Free form" prayer is a good and indispensable way to pray.

But I've come to believe that in order to sustain faith over a lifetime, we need to learn different ways of praying. Prayer is a vast territory, with room for silence and shouting, for creativity and repetition, for original and received prayers, for imagination and reason.

I brought a friend to my Anglican church and she objected to how our liturgy contained (in her words) "other people's prayers." She felt that prayer should be an original expression of one's own thoughts, feelings, and needs. But over a lifetime the ardor of our belief will wax and wane. This is a normal part of the Christian life. Inherited prayers and practices of the church tether us to belief, far more securely than our own vacillating perspective or self-expression.

Prayer forms us. And different ways of prayer aid us just as different types of paint, canvas, color, and light aid a painter.

When I was a priest who could not pray, the prayer offices of the church were the ancient tool God used to teach me to pray again. Stanley Hauerwas explains his love for praying "other people's prayers": "Evangelicalism," he says, "is constantly under

the burden of re-inventing the wheel and you just get tired.” He calls himself an advocate for practicing prayer offices because,

We don’t have to make it up. We know we’re going to say these prayers. We know we’re going to join in reading of the psalm. We’re going to have these Scripture readings. . . . There’s much to be said for Christianity as repetition and I think evangelicalism doesn’t have enough repetition in a way that will form Christians to survive in a world that constantly tempts us to always think we have to do something new.<sup>16</sup>

When we pray the prayers we’ve been given by the church—the prayers of the psalmist and the saints, the Lord’s Prayer, the Daily Office—we pray beyond what we can know, believe, or drum up in ourselves. “Other people’s prayers” disciplined me; they taught me how to believe again. The sweep of church history exclaims *lex orandi, lex credendi*, that the law of prayer is the law of belief.<sup>17</sup> We come to God with our little belief, however fleeting and feeble, and in prayer we are taught to walk more deeply into truth.

When my strength waned and my words ran dry, I needed to fall into a way of belief that carried me. I needed other people’s prayers.

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When my own dark night of the soul came in 2017, nighttime was terrifying. The stillness of night heightened my own sense of loneliness and weakness. Unlit hours brought a vacant space where there was nothing before me but my own fears

and whispering doubts. I'd stare at the hard, undeniable facts that anyone I loved could die that night, and that everyone I love will die someday—facts we most often ignore so we can make it through the day intact.

So I'd fill the long hours of darkness with glowing screens, consuming mass amounts of articles and social media, binge-watching Netflix, and guzzling think pieces till I collapsed into a fitful sleep. When I tried to stop, I'd sit instead in the bare night, overwhelmed and afraid. Eventually I'd begin to cry and, feeling miserable, return to screens and distraction—because it was better than sadness. It felt easier, anyway. Less heavy.

The mechanics of my nightly internet consumption were the same as those of the addict: faced with grief and fear, I turned to something to numb myself. When I compulsively opened up my computer, I'd go for hours without thinking about death or my dad or miscarriages or homesickness or my confusion about God's presence in the midst of suffering.

I began seeing a counselor. When I told her about my sadness and anxiety at night, she challenged me to turn off digital devices and embrace what she called “comfort activities” each night—a long bath, a book, a glass of wine, prayer, silence, journaling maybe. No screens. I fell off the wagon probably a hundred times in as many days.

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But slowly I started to return to Compline.

I needed words to contain my sadness and fear. I needed comfort, but I needed the sort of comfort that doesn't pretend that things are shiny or safe or right in the world. I needed a comfort that looked unflinchingly at loss and death. And Compline is rung round with death.

It begins “The Lord Almighty grant us a peaceful night and a perfect end.” *A perfect end of what?* I'd think—*the day, the week? My life?* We pray, “Into your hands, O Lord, I commend



my spirit”—the words Jesus spoke as he was dying. We pray, “Be our light in the darkness, O Lord, and in your great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night,” because we are admitting the thing that, left on my own, I go to great lengths to avoid facing: there are perils and dangers in the night. We end Compline by praying, “That awake we may watch with Christ, and asleep we may rest in peace.” *Requiescat in pace*. RIP.

Compline speaks to God in the dark. And that’s what I had to learn to do—to pray in the darkness of anxiety and vulnerability, in doubt and disillusionment. It was Compline that gave words to my anxiety and grief and allowed me to re-encounter the doctrines of the church not as tidy little antidotes for pain, but as a light in darkness, as good news.

When we’re drowning we need a lifeline, and our lifeline in grief cannot be mere optimism that maybe our circumstances will improve because we know that may not be true. We need practices that don’t simply palliate our fears or pain, but that teach us to walk with God in the crucible of our own fragility.

During that difficult year, I didn’t know how to hold to both God and the awful reality of human vulnerability. What I found was that it was the prayers and practices of the church that allowed me to hold to—or rather to be held by—God when little else seemed sturdy, to hold to the Christian story even when I found no satisfying answers.

There is one prayer in particular, toward the end of Compline, that came to contain my longing, pain, and hope. It’s a prayer I’ve grown to love, that has come to feel somehow like part of my own body, a prayer we’ve prayed so often now as a family that my eight-year-old can rattle it off verbatim:

Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the

weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love's sake. Amen.

This prayer is widely attributed to St. Augustine,<sup>18</sup> but he almost certainly did not write it. It seems to suddenly appear centuries after Augustine's death. A gift, silently passed into tradition, that allowed one family at least to endure this glorious, heartbreaking mystery of faith for a little longer.

As I said this prayer each night, I saw faces. I would say "bless the dying" and imagine the final moments of my father's life, or my lost sons. I would pray that God would bless those who work and remember the busy nurses who had surrounded me in the hospital. I would say "shield the joyous" and think of my daughters sleeping safely in their room, cuddled up with their stuffed owl and flamingo. I'd say "soothe the suffering" and see my mom, newly widowed and adrift in grief on the other side of the country. I'd say "give rest to the weary" and trace the worry lines on my husband's sleeping face. And I would think of the collective sorrow of the world, which we all carry in big and small ways—the horrors that take away our breath, and the common, ordinary losses of all our lives.

Like a botanist listing different oak species along a trail, this prayer lists specific categories of human vulnerability. Instead of praying in general for the weak or needy, we pause before particular lived realities, unique instances of mortality and weakness, and invite God into each.

This book is a meditation on this beloved prayer. It's about how to continue to walk the way of faith without denying the darkness. It's about the terrible yet common suffering we each shoulder, and what trusting God might mean in the midst of it.<sup>19</sup>