

NIGHT WATCH
2021 ADVENT DEVOTIONS | WEEK 3
BY TERI McDOWELL OTT

Rest



SUNDAY, DECEMBER 12TH | EXODUS 20:8-11

I am not a night owl. When the sun disappears below the horizon, my body instinctively wants to slow down and stop. I've only pulled a couple of all-nighters in my life. One time was with friends in our last days of high school. We spread sleeping bags in my family's backyard, gorging on junk food and watching the sunrise. Another time was during a semester overseas in Spain. Staying up all night was par for the course in Madrid — night club lovers partied until 6 a.m., went straight to work and later took a long afternoon siesta. The friends I studied with convinced me to stay up with them on our last night together. I'll never forget the fun we had ... nor how awful I felt boarding my plane home the next morning.

Before electricity, the setting sun forced everyone to stop the day's activities. Nighttime is God's daily reminder: we are not meant for nonstop work. Lack of adequate rest short-circuits our body's healthy functioning, increases stress, impairs our thinking and disrupts our hormonal balance, which can lead to increased appetite and weight gain. We're learning more about the importance of a good night's sleep from

science. But God made rest an imperative from the beginning. The third commandment of the Decalogue is the longest, indicating its importance. We honor God with our rest. Failing to rest, or denying our need, is one way we "play God." After six days of labor, even God took a break.

Remembering the sabbath, remembering God's commandment to rest from our labor, is a sacred and faithful act. Rest is a call to humility, to remember that time continues when we stop: the sun sets, the moon rises, the night breaks into a new day with or without us. This daily rhythm reminds us of our equal status before God. Whether you are a landowner or a land worker, you require rest. The sabbath commandment is for servants and masters alike.

Jewish families welcome Shabbat on Friday nights by gathering around the table for a long, slow candlelit dinner. Family and friends enjoy quiet conversation, sing songs and recite prayers. Special food is saved to enjoy during this meal. Jews who struggle financially will deprive themselves all week in order to enjoy a little wine and delicious food on Shabbat.

Now, during Advent, practicing devotions prepares us to rest in the presence of God. So can small evening rituals. We sleep better if we take time to wind down, turn away from our digital screens, drink a warm glass of milk, meditate. Denying our body the rest it needs denies the natural rhythms of God's creation. Take the time to honor Advent rituals (lighting candles in prayer; singing hymns of hope and expectation; decorating our homes and sanctuaries) to rest better with God as we wait for Christmas.

Eternal God, guide us to rest so we can live faithfully and full of hope for Christ's coming. Amen.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 13TH | 1 KINGS 19:4-8

Elijah is on the run, fleeing Jezebel who wants to kill him for killing Baal's prophets. But after a day's journey Elijah is mentally and physically spent. He collapses under the only tree he can find and cries out to God, "It is enough." Now, exhaustion is Elijah's greatest enemy. He wants to die. Blessedly, he falls asleep and wakes to an angel who gives him food and drink. By these miracles of rest and replenishment, Elijah is able to carry on.

Sustaining God, thank you for being present to us when we've had enough, when we can't go on. As this Advent arrives, we've had enough of the pandemic, of injustice, of divisiveness and division. It is all we can do to keep ourselves from opting out of all the struggles. May this Advent season feed and nourish us spiritually as we rest in the promise of Christ's coming. Amen.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 14TH | PSALM 3:1-6

The psalmist laments those who rise against him, the “ten thousands of people” surrounding him. Yet the psalmist doesn’t succumb to pressure. He sleeps well because God serves as his shield. God answers his cries. God sustains the psalmist so he can get the rest he needs, even under stress.

Those who rise against us may not be enemies from without but enemies within. Doubts and insecurities circle our hearts and minds. Fear and anxiety wound our potential, hampering us from becoming who God created us to be. This Advent, meditate on the God who gives us rest, who understands our fully human and fallible nature, the God who risked being born into a world strewn with enemies without and within.

Holy God, despite our stress, help us to rest as the psalmist rests this Advent. Calm our anxiety. Steady and slow our breathing. Comfort us with your Advent promise to be God-with-us. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 15TH | PSALM 23

Psalm 23 is often read at graveside committals. Death is our ultimate rest. But there is comfort in this passage for the living too. The shepherd guides his sheep and ensures they rest well in green pastures, beside still waters. Enemies may be at our tables, but we rest in the assurance that God is present to protect us. Here in Advent, as we await the birth of the Christ child who will grow into our Good Shepherd, we anticipate the comfort, guidance and rest our Savior will provide.

Good Shepherd, save us from the darkest valleys. Save us from evil. Save us from paths that do not lead to righteousness. With hopeful anticipation we await the birth of Christ; we await the miracle of a God incarnate, a God who loves us enough to provide us with goodness and mercy and the blessed rest that comes from being in your company. Amen.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 16TH | PSALM 121

This psalm of ascent is sung by pilgrims making their way to worship, preparing their hearts by singing praise to a God who neither slumbers nor sleeps, a God who does not rest so we can.

As a child, and even sometimes as an adult, I’ve found it hard to fall asleep alone in the house. My imagination turns shadows into creepy monsters

and floorboard creaks become unwelcome footsteps. Alone at night, I’m conjuring the worst of my own fears. Psalm 121 offers exactly the help and hope I need: a God who stays awake so I can sleep, a guardian of both day and night.

O God, our guardian, we can rest well knowing that you are keeping watch. As we prepare our hearts for Christ’s coming, we lift our eyes to the night sky this Advent to praise the God of heaven and earth, to praise the God who keeps watch on our behalf. Amen.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 17TH | LUKE 21:37

Chapter 21 of Luke’s Gospel is full of foreboding lessons: Jerusalem and the Temple will be destroyed, the disciples will be persecuted, the signs of the Second Coming will be terrifying and earthshaking. After all this heavy teaching, Jesus slips away from the people to spend the night on the Mount of Olives. Here in Luke, we don’t know if Jesus spends this night praying or sleeping or just sitting in the darkness alone. But there is a clear separation between the work he does during the day and the renewal and replenishment he seeks at night.

Holy God, you gave us Jesus as a model of what our lives can and should be like. Help us to follow him in our life’s work and in our need for rest. Help us separate our days and our nights so we can be renewed to serve you to the best of our ability. Amen.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 18TH | JOHN 9:1-5

Stories of Jesus healing the blind are in all four Gospels. This healing ministry is a significant portion of his daytime work. But this work, as all occupations in Jesus’ day, stops at night. Certainly, the Son of God could heal at night too. The Light of the World doesn’t need the advantages of modern electricity to work in darkness. Yet, Jesus honors this natural boundary. He stops when others stop.

What work do we need to stop in Advent so we can be prepared to receive Christ this Christmas? What in our lives do we need to give a rest so we can be spiritually ready to receive our Savior?

God of the sun and the moon, help us to order our days around your natural boundaries. Help us to stop our work when it is time so we can renew ourselves and ready ourselves for Christ this Advent. Amen.