

Evening and Morning

Thank God! Pray to him by name! Tell everyone you meet what he has done! Keep your eyes open for God, watch for his works; be alert for signs of his presence. (Psalm 105:1, 4, The Message)

That was today's psalm as imagined by Eugene Peterson in his paraphrase of the Bible called *The Message*. Peterson, a Presbyterian pastor who is now retired, had the time and the smarts to do what few can do: turn Hebrew and Greek into modern language. But *The Message* is a paraphrase, an approximation, and not a translation. It's not always successful, either. Later in the psalm "Let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice" Peterson renders as "Live a happy life!" That's a bit lame, even for those who love his fresh language.

Peterson wrote other books in addition to *The Message*. One that I recently finished is called *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity*. His basic idea is that the visible lines of pastoral work are preaching, teaching, and administration. That's what everyone sees. But for these lines to connect and form a triangle, there have to be three angles where the lines meet. Peterson calls those angles prayer, Scripture, and spiritual direction. Work on those is quiet and unseen, but just as essential. Basically, Peterson says that for someone to do the work of God, he or she has to stay grounded in God. Most of his book explains how to do that.

In the section on prayer, Peterson talks about the Sabbath. That's hardly surprising. The Sabbath was central to the life of Jesus, and some of his most remarkable healings took place on a Sabbath. But rather than connect it to Jesus, Peterson goes all the way back to the first chapters of Genesis, where the Sabbath is the seventh day of creation. In doing so he reminds the reader of how ancient Israel kept time. The story of creation ends each day with: and it was evening and it was morning, the first day, or the second, or the third. The ancient day began at sunset, not at sunrise.

We have an example of that in today's reading from Exodus. The people of Israel are wandering in the wilderness, grumbling about Moses and Aaron. (Grumbling is a very popular human activity, as the rest of the Bible will show.) God hears that grumbling and prepares to respond. Moses and Aaron explain what God will do. In the evening, Moses says, the people will have knowledge of God. In the morning they will see God's glory. At twilight meat appears in the form of quails, and in the morning "bread" shows up in the form of a "fine, flaky thing." It was called manna, after the Hebrew *man hu*, "What is that?" Over the course of one day, evening and morning, the Israelites are fed by God. God will continue to feed them that way as long as they are wandering in the wilderness.

As Peterson reflects on what the Hebrew evening/morning sequence of a day might mean for us, he imagines that it would open us to the rhythms of grace. He writes that at night "we go to sleep, and God begins his work... We wake and we are called out to participate in God's creative action... God calls us to enjoy and share and develop the work he initiated. Creation and covenant are sheer grace and there to greet us every morning." In other words, imagining God working while we are asleep gives a whole new meaning to what's ahead when we wake up.

It also gives a new way to look at Scripture. Take today's Gospel reading, for example. It's a familiar one, perhaps more so because it deals with workers' pay. We often hear about equal pay for equal work. This parable turns that idea on its head: equal pay for differential work. Those working the least are paid the same as those working the most. No wonder those who were hired first are resentful! If there was resentment in the ancient world, we, too, feel the unfairness of it all.

So how might a different way of looking at the day help us understand this parable? Imagine that the day actually began the evening before. All of those workers were sound asleep when God's creative work began. God was already at work redeeming the world and half-finished by the time the workers awoke. Now it was time for them to join in God's work, seeking something that would feed their families. As seasonal laborers, they were in a more precarious position than slaves, who could always get something from their masters, or regular, non-seasonal laborers. These men had to earn their bread each day.

Fortunately, there was a landowner who needed them to work in his vineyard. What's remarkable about this landowner is that he seemed to be already aware of God's redeeming work. He went out repeatedly looking for people who needed a job. As the story goes on, he is more interested in the needs of the workers than the needs of his vineyard. The wages become "whatever is right" rather than a specific amount. He wants to be sure that everyone can feed his family at the end of the day.

As a result, when it's time to pay, everyone is given a day's wage. The last are paid first, creating an expectation that the first will get more. Instead, they, too, get a day's wage. That's what they agreed to get. And they are resentful. They grumble, just like the Israelites in the desert. They don't know that they have just seen the grace of God in action – grace extended to everyone, equally. After all, God is about to finish his day, and he makes sure that before he's done, everyone's day is filled with grace.

As much as I like Peterson's idea of reversing what we normally think of as a day, I think it would be hard to pull off in our culture. But it's worth a try. It puts a lot less burden on our shoulders. "While we sleep," Peterson writes, "great and marvelous things, far beyond our capacities to invent or engineer, are in progress." God is preparing the world for us when we awake, so that we can use our obedience, service, and speech when morning breaks.

So give it a try this week. Go to bed leaving all of your worries with God as he starts his new day. Wake up thinking that God has already been at work, waiting for you, ready to use all of your gifts in service to God, waiting to fill you with his grace. Who knows? It might just let you live a happy life. Even better, it might make your heart rejoice.

[Pentecost 16: Exodus 16:2-15; Psalm 105; Matthew 20:1-16. The quotations from Eugene Peterson's *Working the Angles* are from pages 3, 5, and 67-69.]