



WATCH NIGHT

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Thursday, December 31, 2009

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Lection - Isaiah 43:18-21 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 18) Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.

(v. 19) I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.

(v. 20) The wild animals will honour me,
the jackals and the ostriches;

for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,

to give drink to my chosen people,

(v. 21) the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Within the African American tradition, Watch Night services evolved around the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation by Abraham Lincoln in 1862, when black people gathered on December 31, 1862 to wait for the new day and the freedom that was promised for January 1863.

We began The African American Lectionary with December 31, 2007 waiting for the new year to begin. We close this second year again in watch—waiting for the next cycle. With our calendar, December 31 signals the end of the old and the promise of the new. In addition to our way of organizing time, there are cultural calendars that are significant to other cultures in ordering time and their lives. To a large extent, our calendar is dominant in that it governs the time line for marking civil affairs of the planet. For

Christians, it is important to know that this version of ordering time reflects contributions from earlier calendars and treats all time as sacred and no time as ordinary.

Many cultures begin their new year with great celebrations, feasting and partying. This is also true with many within African American communities. However, Watch Night Service is a special way to move across the line of time that marks the end of one year and the coming of a new year. This night finds many Christians in church on their knees in gratitude for the completion of another leg in the journey and recommitting to a sacred partnership with the Almighty for whatever is to come in the new cycle before us.

For African American Christians, crossing of this line time is a time to remember the night their ancestors watched and waited for the arrival of January 1, 1863 and the application of the Emancipation Proclamation by President Abraham Lincoln. This observance is significant as a part of the fabric binding multiple and extended efforts to undermine and destroy the legal system of slavery within the United States of America. We are called to mark this time as a reminder of the importance of not accepting that which is evil in our midst. The 19th century struggles against slavery as morally wrong and indefensible remain an important element in the evolutionary journey of this nation, and the concept and quality of freedom around the world.¹

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Isaiah 43:18-21

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

One of the realities of the last night of the year is that we face it with the baggage of the previous year. Many New Years are simply a repeat of our old years, because we carry both distant history and recent memory of pain and struggles. In the midst of our trials and tribulations, we have too often hung our harps of faith on weeping willows of self-pity and defeat and allowed daily survival issues to dim our vision as we peer into the future through a glass darkly. As we have waged war against the devil, who in various nefarious and sometimes unexpected ways has come against our families, our aspirations, and us, we often approach the New Year with dimmed hope rather than the conviction that real **turn around** can happen in our lives.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The text was spoken at a time when the people of God were re-establishing their identity as a free people. Their recent history had been one of slavery and servitude as they spent the last seventy years in Babylon. During that season, they struggled to keep their faith strong and their hopes alive. One thinks about the pain and the pathos of their lament that is found in Psalm 137:1-4, “By the rivers of Babylon---there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” One hears their heartbreak as they with uplifted hands declared, “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember

you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy” (vv. 5-6). And we hear their bitterness of spirit as they spoke about their captors, “Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem’s fall, how they said, ‘Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations’ O Daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take you little ones and dash them against the rock” (vv. 7-9)! Such is the brokenness and bitterness of spirit that overtakes us when we refuse to keep singing our songs of faith and when we allow our present circumstances to suffocate our dreams and wipe out our vision of hope.

However, their season of suffering that was so onerous and nightmarish to live through had come to an end. With the demise of the Babylonian empire and the rise of the Persians as the preeminent leaders on the world’s stage of history under the leadership of Cyrus, an invitation had been extended to the displaced people of God to return to their ancestral homeland and rebuild their torn down cities, culture and, yes, their faith. A faithful remnant of the covenant people of God had returned to Palestine to pick up the broken pieces of their history and build a new future for the coming generations. Yet, how were they to build for the future when so much of their recent past had been filled with so much pain, despair and disappointment? The baggage of both the distant as well as the recent past can be a major stumbling block and impediment to the development and implementation of a wholesome vision and healed life for the future.

The stories of their faith were centuries old. In times of distress and confusion they encouraged themselves as best they could by retelling the familiar narratives of how Moses delivered their ancestors from Egyptian bondage, and how they were sustained during forty years of wilderness wanderings as they struggled to get to the land that flowed with milk and honey. They remembered the war stories of Joshua and how he had led their fathers and mothers in their conquest to conquer and make the Land of Promise their own place of opportunity and breakthrough.

Such were the people that the prophet Deutero-Isaiah ministered to in the words of the text when he declared, “Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel...Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed or myself so that they might declare my praise.”

The prophet was telling those to whom he ministered that they were at a **turning point** in their life. They were not to dwell on either past pain, and they would not have to rely on their past remembrance of the miracles of God. Their God was a very present help in their times of trouble, and their God was about to do something new in their lives that would make their faith not simply a history lesson but a living record of the power and the presence of God. They would see God work miracles in their own lives and circumstances that would give them their own testimonies and experiences with God whose power and presence is from everlasting to everlasting.

For too many of us, this past year was just like the year before, and if we are not careful the next year will be just like the one we have come through. However, this Watch Night we dare to proclaim a word of hope and change for the New Year. The God whom Deutero-Isaiah proclaimed is our God. This year can be more than one for making great resolutions, with weak follow through. This year can be more than one that begins with good intentions but ends in abysmal failure. If we are willing to let go of some things in our past, **this year can be turn around time** for real and for good.

Chapter 42:10 of the Book of Job states, “And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends; and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before.” Job was restored and given double his losses not simply because he endured his trials without breaking. Job received double for his trouble when he was able to let go of any animosity he felt towards those who had falsely accused him when he was undergoing his season of suffering and pray for them. He shook off the pain of the past so that he could receive the promise of the future. He shook off the bitterness of the past so that he could receive new breakthroughs in a new season of his life.

In the same way, the word of the Lord says to us what he said to the people of the Covenant so long ago, “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.” Whatever has happened to us is history. Whatever heartbreak or disappointments, or problems or betrayals we encountered this past year, we made it through; we have survived. Instead of allowing the past to cloud our vision and steal our joy, we are invited to hear this word from the Lord, “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” The God of our mothers and fathers who walked with them in days past and gone, and who brought us through whatever we have faced this past year, is still on the throne. His power has not been abated and his arm has not been shortened. The blood of Jesus still saves to the utmost, and the Holy Spirit as the abiding presence of God to strengthen us for the living of these days.

Whatever new challenges or new foes or new problems arise in the coming year, we can still face it with the assurance of victory, because our God does new things in new places to help the people of faith face new challenges, attain new victories and form new testimonies. The witness of the prophet Jeremiah still holds true, “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. ‘The Lord is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I will hope in him.’” Our God is able to meet every crisis with new creativity. Our God is able to meet every problem with new provision. Our God is able to meet every mountain with new miracles. God is able to meet attacks with new anointing. God is able to meet new trouble with new triumphs.

The sacrifice of the Lord Jesus on Calvary was a new revelation of God’s love. His resurrection from the dead, never to stoop anymore, was a new revelation of divine power. The coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost was a new revelation of God’s manifest presence. The second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ at the end of time will be a new revelation of God’s conquering glory.

This year can be our turn around time because we serve a God who continually does new things in our lives when we are willing to let go of the past and lay hold upon the future with faith in God who continues to do all things well. I would submit to you that the word spoken so long ago by the prophet to another people in another time and at another place in history is still a viable, fresh, living and relevant word as we face another year.

Celebration

As the New Year swiftly approaches let us hear again the word of the prophet, “Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.” I give praise unto God for this past year and the mighty things of the new year that God will bring.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sights: A new thing springing forth; a way made in the wilderness; wild animals; jackals and ostrich; water in the wilderness; rivers in the desert;

Sounds: The rushing waters of a river; wild animals making sounds to honor God; the thirsty people of God drinking water provided in a dry place; and

Emotions: The excitement felt because God is doing something new!

Notes

1. This description of the liturgical moment, with slight revisions, was provided by Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon for the cultural resource unit for Watch Night in Year Two of The African American Lectionary.