



## WATCH NIGHT

### LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

**Friday, December 31, 2010**

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**Lection - Jeremiah 29:11** (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 11) For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

#### **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

What's considered Watch Night Service in the black church tradition might be otherwise understood as a church service on New Year's Eve. But this African American tradition is perhaps one of the greatest cultural touchstones for what it means to be black and Christian in America. Passed down by our ancestors, Watch Night Service is one of the last vestiges retained from chattel slavery by African American Christians. Several accounts are given attesting to the fact that enslaved blacks could not sleep on December 31, 1862, because they were waiting in

anticipation all night long, awaiting to receive word of the Emancipation Proclamation — words that would change their status, their lives, and the destiny of their children’s future from the shackles of chattel slavery.

As we look towards a new year amidst the uncertainty of our present plight, this liturgical moment affirms the presence of God not only in overcoming the trials and tribulations of our ancestors but it also instills hope for God’s purpose in shaping our own immediate future.

## **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Jeremiah 29:11**

### **Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter**

Have you ever heard the saying: “Never ask someone if they're from Texas. If they are, they'll let you know soon enough, and if they aren't, well... there's no sense in embarrassing them.” Well, here it has particular poignancy. I’m a Texan. And growing up as a Missionary Baptist, we had Watch Night service, but I saw it as church service on New Year’s Eve, akin to the Christian costume parties that we would have in surrounding fellowship halls while other children went “Halloween, trick-or-treating.” To me, this was what “Christians” did on what otherwise were considered “carnal” nights. But Juneteenth, well that was something altogether different, it was a black Christian party where there was no separation between the sacred and secular and in the stretch of one jam-packed day everything from praise to prayer, party to performances took place to mark the dream of freedom that came to all the enslaved, except those who were enslaved in Texas. You see, those enslaved in Texas did not receive this word of the Emancipation Proclamation until June 19, 1865 (a painful history which stuns me still today)! Because of that, June 19th, referred to as Juneteenth Day when I was growing up, was my watch day and night reality. But now that I am older and wiser, I realize there’s nothing to celebrate about one’s enslavement or release from it. Our ancestors knew this quite well—for them that night was a solemn and sacred night. Instead of partying and parading, they prayed to God and gave praises to God because they knew it was God that made the seemingly impossible possible and there was nothing carnal about it. And it’s in this spirit and posture that we commemorate this ritual and this part of our present past.

### **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

Jeremiah was known as the weeping prophet. This signature character trait of the weeping prophet was so pronounced that the eponym “jeremiad” was given to classify literature in which the author unceasingly laments his or her dismal plight brought on by social decline and moral depravity and, thus, foretells of the impending doom of society. But in our biblical passage to commemorate Watch Night, there’s a break in Jeremiah’s predictable posture and it is filled with hope. Speaking first with the words of God, instead of saying “thus says the Lord,” Jeremiah proclaims “For surely I know the plans I have for you” (v. 11a). These words speak both the immediate attention and ultimate certainty of divine providence amid human conditions.

According to Hebrew Bible scholar, Charles Feinberg, Jeremiah denotes God’s ultimate purpose for the children of Israel, reminding them that their captivity and enslavement in Babylon under

the duress of the seemingly perpetual reign of Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom will come to an end. This promise, Feinberg tells us, is a "gracious promise."<sup>1</sup> As Hebrew Bible scholar Renita Weems states, mercy is something that God gives to all, but grace God gives to the faithful. So this gracious promise is the gift of restoration that God gives to God's people.<sup>2</sup> Although they had been in bondage for seventy years, God gives a good word to a people caught in a bad situation. Here, imminent doom is trumped by divine transcendence. Prophecy of disaster is replaced with a promise of well-being. Jeremiah conveys to the children of Israel that Babylonian rule, which had existed for more than three generations, is coming to its end.

According to Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann, while the previous verses (vv. 5-9) assert the oppressive reality of their circumstances, this verse moves beyond exile and captivity into hope and restoration. "This is one of the most powerful, intense, and freighted announcements of return in all of Scripture."<sup>3</sup> Not only did it seem to the Israelites that Nebuchadnezzar had intended evil for them, but that God had as well. But the prophet Jeremiah proclaims that God's word is not only indicative of God's knowledge of and presence amidst their plight but that God's fundamental interest is in and for their good: "plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope" (v. 11b). The God that was once seen as absent and vengeful is a God on the side of the oppressed, poignantly present and newly available. This divine activity is not merely a contradiction to all other dismal accounts but this points to a God of "homecoming" who "moves through, past, and beyond judgment to assert [God's] final resolve" into a destiny that will not be denied nor defeated by particular circumstances. As Bruggeman states, "This is an assertion of the gospel: God is available in the midst of despair and will override both the despair and the circumstances which generate it."<sup>4</sup>

## **Celebration**

This passage seems appropriately poignant for Watch Night because God is using Jeremiah as a mouth piece to us: descendants of enslaved Africans who were brought in the belly of slave ships called "Jesus," "the Virgin Mary," and "John the Baptist"; the grandchildren of sharecroppers; parents to children left behind in mis-educational systems; victims of Jim and Jane Crow and still the last hired and first fired; saying, "I'm watching you as you're awaiting your destiny, trying to see what's going to happen you, but don't look to your circumstances to discern your future, look at me watching you." And so it is, akin to Zora Neale Hurston's novel, Their Eyes are Watching God, amidst calamity and flooding waters, the characters made up of friends and family in the novel felt hopeless and helpless to the death-dealing circumstances of homelessness, racism, classism, and sexism that engulfed them, and the narrator states:

The wind came back with triple fury, and put out the light for the last time. They sat in company with the others in other shanties, their eyes straining against crude walls and their souls asking if He meant to measure their puny might against His. They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God.

But when this happens, the "auld lang syne" that we should shout and sing isn't the one held up in a champagne toast about friends and good times, but should be the "old long since" hymn that our church mother and fathers once sang when they, too, faced terribly difficult times. They

sang: “When the load bears down so heavy and the weight is shown upon my brow, there’s a sweet relief in knowing the Lord will make a way somehow.”<sup>5</sup>

### **III. Descriptive Details**

The descriptive details in this passage include:

**Sights:** Seeing enslaved Africans and Israelites freed from bondage and captivity;

**Smells:** The stench of burning refuse turned into the fragrance of burning incense, fiery smoke taken over by an ocean breeze; and

**Sounds:** Howling winds, tumultuous storms, cries and prayers for help drowned out by a new day breaking of peace, birds chirping, children playing, glorious music, prayers, praise and shouts of freedom.

### **Notes**

1. Feinberg, Charles L. Jeremiah: A Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982. pp. 198-9.
2. Weems, Renita. “Let the Redeemed of the Lord Say So!” Sermon. Ray of Hope Community Church, Nashville, TN: 20 Sept. 2009.
3. Brueggemann, Walter. A Commentary on Jeremiah. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998. pp. 258-9.
4. Ibid.
5. “The Lord Will Make a Way Some How.” By Charles Albert Tindley.