



WATCH NIGHT

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

(A Special Watch Night sermon snippet is provided on video in the Cultural Resource unit.)

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Lection – Genesis 37:5-11, 19-20 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 5) Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more.

(v. 6) He said to them, “Listen to this dream that I dreamed. (v. 7) There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered round it, and bowed down to my sheaf.” (v. 8) His brothers said to him, “Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?” So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words. (v. 9) He had another dream, and told it to his brothers, saying, “Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.” (v. 10) But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him, and said to him, “What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and

your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?” (v. 11) So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

(v.19) They said to one another, “Here comes this dreamer. (v. 20) Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits, then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.”

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

In many African American churches, Watch Night is a significant worship service in which Christians gather on New Year’s Eve to look back over the past year and look forward to a new year. It is typically a time of thanksgiving for God’s goodness and provision in the past and present, remembering “how we got ovuh.” Through testimony, scripture, and song, African Americans declare God is good all the time and all the time God is good. Despite the burdens of the old year, there is hope for divine blessings in the New Year while holding to God’s unchanging hand. On this night, people watch and wait for the midnight hour, commencing the New Year, just as enslaved blacks watched and waited for freedom on “Freedom’s Eve,” December 31, 1862.

Culturally, Watch Night commemorates when African Americans and others gathered to watch and wait for President Lincoln’s official enactment of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. This proclamation declared that slaves in those states rebelling against the Union in the Civil War must be freed. Thus, this night of worship celebrates historical and existential freedom and acknowledges that waiting, even for freedom, and watching, is a part of our cultural and spiritual history. Waiting and watching the night is critical for Christians because it implies that we are waiting and watching for what God will do next for if God’s eye is on the sparrow, we know God watches over us. But this does not mean that waiting was or is easy.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Genesis 37:5-11, 19-20

Part One: The Contemporary Context of the Interpreter

Today is less than sixty days before the 2009 Presidential Inauguration. I can’t wait to see what happens on that day. I’m watching for something new, waiting with much excitement, wishing it were today, but it is not. I realize I must wait, and waiting is not always easy, because I can taste change and want change now, desiring something different for my family and friends, even for the world.

The same was true when I was a little boy. Waiting for the clock to strike midnight was not easy for me when I attended Watch Night services. All of the singin’ and testifyin’ could not stop my anticipation for the New Year, but all of my desires could not speed up the old year either. I had to wait and listen to the songs of Zion and hear the pastor preach though I wanted to reach midnight. I just wanted to get to the New Year without much reflection on the old. The old year was done and I wanted to move on to what was ahead of me, to what was new, yet I could not rush it. I could not escape the old year. I had to wait on the Lord until the midnight hour, even in the midnight hour, while some folks “prayed through.” Waiting was not easy.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Joseph experiences his own “midnight hour” of sorts through which he learns about waiting. He is seventeen years old and his father Israel loves him more than his other children (vv. 2-3). He is the apple of his father’s eye, so Israel makes him a long robe with sleeves, what has been traditionally known as the coat of many colors (v. 3). It is a sign of favor, and his brothers frown on him for it. When they realize that their father loves Joseph more than them they hate him (v. 4), but their hatred only increases temperature when Joseph begins dreaming of the future and dreaming of a different distribution of power within his family. Martin Luther King, Jr. had a dream, and when he dreamed many hated him for his dreams, because he had a prophetic vision for change. He dreamed of a different world where character would be more important than skin color. His dream is only partially fulfilled, thus we still wait and watch for the completion of his dream. Joseph has to wait for his dreams to be fulfilled, too.

His dreams get him into more trouble with his brothers. In this passage his dreaming is emphasized (vv. 5, 6, 8, 9, 10), but so is his brothers’ hatred towards him (vv. 5, 8). If he had dreamed of the status quo everything would be fine, but his dreams suggest that life will not remain the same. It will change. This change is what disturbs Joseph’s big brothers. It is a change they don’t believe in. They hate him because little brother has a vision of them bowing down to him. “Are you indeed to reign over us?” they ask, full of nervous hate. Can a black man rule over (i.e. be president) a majority white country? “Are you indeed to have dominion over us?” These brothers did not like the idea. Rather, they love to hate him, and this hate leads them to give Joseph hell, literally.

They hate him so much that they want to kill him and his dreams for the future. They decide to throw him into a “pit” (*bor*) which in Hebrew refers to the underworld, hell. Before Joseph experiences his dreams, he has to wait in hell because his dream was his brothers’ nightmare. Freedom for slaves was their dream, but a nightmare to those who benefited from the slave system. Thus, fighting for freedom was not an easy task. Waiting for freedom was not easy. The hate of his brothers means he has to wait, and waiting in hell is no picnic.

His brothers can’t handle his dreams, his vision of God’s new order and different distribution of power. Nor can they stand the sight of him because it reminds them of their future, so they take him out of hell, the pit, and sell him into another one, Egyptian slavery (v. 28). This means that Joseph has to wait for his dreams to be fulfilled, and waiting is not easy. It can be the pits sometimes. Dreams don’t happen overnight; there are many midnights to endure. Joseph had to wait and watch. The enslaved had to watch and wait for years until “official” freedom arrived. We still wait and watch for freedom from racism and other forms of discrimination. We still wait for a restructuring of the prison system where a disproportionate number of African American men reside compared to other ethnic groups. We still wait for peace on our streets rather than insane violence. We still wait for affordable healthcare. We still wait for the same quality of educational resources for inner city children as for other children. We still wait, even though it isn’t easy. But even as we wait, we hold to God’s unchanging hand and sing in the words of the South African freedom song, “Freedom is coming, freedom is coming, freedom is coming, oh yes I know.” We know because freedom eventually comes for Joseph and, thank God, for our enslaved ancestors too.

Celebration

Pits do not necessarily destroy us or our dreams. Waiting does not kill us. We are still alive. God uses Reubens to keep us alive (v. 21). A dream deferred is not a dream denied. Wait on the Lord and be of good courage. Yes! Rough times are coming, but sweet change is also coming. Yes. Some old enemies and old problems will come back for another round. But, we are better now, stronger, so much better. A New Year is coming with new possibilities. I can hardly wait.

Descriptive Details

Some of the descriptive details in this passage include:

Sounds: listen to Joseph tell his dreams, hear the tone of the brothers' response to his first dream, listen to Joseph's father's rebuke to him, hear the brothers' plot to kill Joseph and throw him into a pit;

Sights: see the hate on Joseph's brothers' faces, see the brothers' sheaves bow down to Joseph's sheaf, see the sun, moon, and stars bowing down to Joseph, see Joseph's brothers conspire to kill Joseph and throw him into a pit; and

Smells: the corn-like smell of the sheaves in the field, the stench of the inside of the pit.

III. Sermonic Suggestions

- It may be helpful to weave Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech into the sermon.
- Also, Langston Hughes has several poems about dreams. You could utilize these poems at several key points in the sermon. Particularly, consider "Dreams," "I Dream a World," and "Dream Deferred."
- You can also interweave Isaiah 40:28-31 into the sermon, especially in light of Joseph's situation. This will keep the theme of waiting interwoven throughout the sermon which will help provide sermon unity. It will also connect waiting with a sense of hopefulness because "they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength . . ."
- **View the special Watch Night Video snippet in the Cultural Resource section of this material for an example of a creative approach to a Watch Night sermon.**