

FROM MOURNING INTO JOY  
Jeremiah 31: 7-14

In this stunning prophetic text in Jeremiah, the word of God addresses two groups of people: Israel in Babylonian captivity and all the nations. Both are summoned to take note of the momentous events soon to take place on the world stage. God is about to make history once again, much like the Exodus when captive Israel broke free from Pharaoh's bondage. Now captive Israel will be freed from Babylonian bondage and come home to their promised land-yet again! The Lord proclaims, "I am going to bring them from the land of the north and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth." This is astonishing news not only for Israel, but also for all the nations.

The word of God addresses Israel in her deplorable state of captivity. Who is addressed? The "blind and the lame", "those with child and those in labor", "young women", "young men and the old"-the remnant of Israel will return, redeemed and ransomed from their slavery. And the nations will take note with amazement as God gathers the scattered sheep of the house of Israel into one flock. God their shepherd will liberate them "from hands too strong for him". That is to say, God did for Israel what this captive nation could never have done for itself. God brought them to freedom, restored them to their homeland, and gave them a "future and a hope." All this is God's doing, God's amazing intervention yet again in the lives of the chosen people.

Jeremiah describes the reaction of the people of Israel to this fresh new word of God. When they "walk by brooks of water" and see the land filled with grain, wine, and oil, the ample flocks and herds, the watered gardens, they will "sing loud with gladness". "They shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord". Those who came in weeping from the long journey home, will "sing aloud on the height of Zion."

God says to the newly released people coming home, "I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow." And so the people will be satisfied with the bounty of the Lord. Think of the happiness moment of your life and multiply it to include the entire nation, a nation coming alive, rejoicing in its newfound freedom, blessed beyond imagination. If you see that wonderful movie "Invictus", you will watch an entire nation-this time, South Africa-break out in jubilation when something

utterly unexpected happens. That's what it means for our mourning to be turned into joy.

This weekend our nation is happily welcoming a New Year, hopefully putting behind us some of the difficulties of 2009. Many feel the need to turn the page and look in hope for better days in 2010, especially those unemployed or engaged in warfare in the Middle East. We all want to experience that "future and a hope" when our mourning will be turned into joy. I think the New Year is always a good time to look forward, always trusting that God can speak yet again and make all things new, not only in our lives but in the lives of people around the world.

There is a custom in the African-American church on New Year's Eve that gives voice to this hope. It's called a "Watch Night Service". This special service celebrates what happened in African-American churches throughout our war torn country on December 31, 1862. The Civil War had already ravaged our country and much suffering was still on the horizon. Yet on that New Year's Eve 147 years ago, African-Americans gathered across the South in churches and private homes to celebrate the astonishing news, the news of their impending freedom. On that Freedom's Eve, the people joyfully anticipated the Emancipation Proclamation that was issued the very next day, January 1, 1863. On that day all the slaves in the Confederate States were declared legally free.

Eagerly awaiting the good news of freedom, there were glad prayers and songs of joy. Throughout the South people fell to their knees and thanked God that they were in the words of the old spiritual, "Free at last, thank God almighty, I am free at last." Ever since that momentous night, African-Americans have gathered in churches on New Year's Eve to give thanks, praising God for another year of freedom. And even during the dark days of Jim Crow laws in the Old South, the African-American church still gathered every New Year's Eve to give thanks for the Emancipation Proclamation.

The New Year in the life of the church should be welcomed with shouts of joy and thanksgiving for news of our freedom, our hard-earned freedom in Christ. We have been bought with a price and set free to love and serve the Lord with gladness. The church celebrates the proclamation of freedom given to the children of Israel in Babylonian captivity. We remember their joy and jubilation. The church celebrates the proclamation of freedom given to African-Americans in slavery within our own country. We remember their joy and jubilation, their continuing Watch Night Services on Freedom's Eve.

We need to celebrate our freedom in Christ, a freedom that turns our mourning into joy. As we begin the Year of our Lord 2010, let us live as free people, free in Christ. We have been freed from bondage to our sin, our addictions, our failures, and our regrets. Here at this table of peace and hope, our freedom is sealed in bread and wine, symbols of our liberation and renewal in Christ. Here we are freed yet again to love and serve the Lord gladly, always finding new opportunities to give of ourselves freely.

Freely we have received, freely we give. And so we offer ourselves in service to Christ and to one another anew. Pastors, elders, deacons, members of the body of Christ, we are all called to love one another. We are called to share what we have with those in need. Always and forever abounding in joy and thanksgiving.

So in this New Year, I invite you to be joyful and grateful. You are free in Christ, free from the bondage of the past, free to open your hearts to new possibilities ahead. Live as free people, grateful people, servant people. Our mourning has been turned to joy. Thanks be to God. Amen.