

Watch Night

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Freedoms Eve

The Black Experience: Moments and Movements

By

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The roots of the Watch Night service are often traced back to the Moravians with the first such service in 1733. This liturgical movement was appropriated and expanded by the Wesleyan tradition as early as 1740 with the first service in the United States reportedly taking place on 1770 in Old St. George's Church Philadelphia. Sometimes called Covenant Renewal Services, these watch services continue to this day in multiple Christian traditions, in multiple ways at multiples times. The primary Watch Night was New Year's Eve as this moment provided an opportunity to review the year that was passing, make confession, express gratitude, and make resolve in preparation for the year that was ahead.

The meaning of the watch moment was redefined by God's people of a darker hue who operated with a very different theological perspective than that which was being propagated by compromised Christianity. Like the nascent Christian community which was birthed in the context of social and religious oppression, the children whose ancestors had been kissed by the sun of Africa reinterpreted and reimagined an existing moment of celebration through the lens of a particular condition of existence.

For the African American community, Watch Night became and remains "Freedom's Eve". On September 22, 1862, President Lincoln used the occasion of the Union "victory" at Antietam to issue the preliminary proclamation which freed all slaves in the rebellious states on January 1, 1863. Anticipating the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, on December 31, 1862, enslaved and free children of Africa gathered in visible and invisible assemblies to shout "their troubles over". While the final negation of slavery in all states was not established until the execution of the 13th Amendment on December 6, 1865, December 31, 1862 was the threshold moment of crossing into to the truth that would set us free.

Freedom's Eve was the doorway to the second coming of the Advent season. Christmas celebrated the coming of the Christ, Freedom's Eve celebrates the incarnate expression of the Son's presence that dispels darkness with light and sets the captives free. Freedom's Eve provides a "foretaste of glory" experienced in the ultimate second coming when every chain is broken and all God's children can sing "free at last".

Many litanies and worship guides are available pertaining to Watch Night services. What I share is a theological interpretation of the movements in the celebration of Freedom's Eve.

- I. Adoration
- II. Aggravation
- III. Association
- IV. Affirmation
- V. Anticipation
- VI. Activation
- VII. Acclamation

(The video will explain and analyze these movements in the service and conclude with a correlation with and application to Habakkuk).

While this interpretation emerges from the soul of Black worship, its expression is not limited to people of color. These moments in the Freedom's Eve celebration invite all people of all traditions to get on the Freedom train and journey together to creation reunion. Freedom's Eve remembrances and celebrations will never grow old nor irrelevant until the fullness of freedom is experienced by all creatures and creation. This moment in the history of our nation invites us all to gather on Freedom's Eve and acknowledge, watch, pray, prepare, and commit to a better and brighter day.