



WATCH NIGHT



Occasion

On this night before God ushers in a new year, we gather in the tradition of the original watch-night services, Methodist prayer services that began spontaneously at Kingswood, England, April 1742. Some converted miners gathered and spent much of the evening in prayer and praise, as they tried to stay out of trouble. When some wanted John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, to stop these services, he stated that this practice had roots in ancient Christianity and he refused to forbid the vigil. The first watch-night services held in North America occurred at St. George's parish, Philadelphia, and at Wesley Chapel, New York City, in November 1770.*

The roots for *African American Watch Night Services*, also known as “Freedom’s Eve,” that we celebrate this evening, began December 31, 1862. African Americans gathered in churches and private homes throughout the United States as they anxiously waited to hear that the Emancipation Proclamation had become federal law. According to President Abraham Lincoln’s promise, all slaves in the Confederate States were legally free at the stroke of midnight, January 1, 1863. These newly freed people responded with prayers, shouts, and songs of gratitude and joy. Tonight we stand in that tradition and give thanks for these rich legacies of standing in watch for the New Year, for renewal, for new beginnings. May all that we do here reverberate through the years, linking with those who have gone before and those who will come in the future.

Welcome

On this 365th evening of *[date of the present year]*, we stand on the mountaintop looking over into the New Year of *[date of the new year]* with gratitude and thanksgiving. In anticipation and joy, we, the pastor, officers, and members of *[name of church]*, welcome you with open hearts to this Watch Night celebration. We gather in this vigil to focus on the blessings of the past year, and we pray to be in the mind of God as we launch into the New Year. We are overjoyed that, of all the places you could have been this evening, you have come to this sacred place, this sanctuary to worship God. We invite you to join us as we focus on God and the profound ways in which God has blessed us to see another year. We invite you to participate fully in this service of thanksgiving, that you might experience a powerful connection with God Almighty, and with the saints of Christ gathered here.

By celebrating this New Year together in worship, we resolve this evening to refocus our lives on God. Together we have come to watch the ringing out of the old year and the ringing in of the new. As watchers of the night, we invite you to pray that this year might bring more peace to the world, our loved ones, our society, and ourselves. As we watch the New Year come in, we invite you to think about how far you have come in a year. We celebrate our freedom that people have fought and died for, that we might be grateful for the gifts of liberty, access, accountability, and opportunity. As we watch tonight, we can remember our anticipation of this New Year, and bring that same kind of anticipation to each day. Then each day be-

comes an opportunity for us to wait on the Lord, and to watch each day for God's call on our lives; that is, how we do ministry. We invite you to think about who you are and whose you are in this grand moment of anticipation. We welcome you to this watch night service and to a year of watching with anticipation of deliverance. Welcome, welcome; Happy New Year.

Prayer

Eternal God of our blessed years, God of our hopes, who holds our tears, we come in thanksgiving and anticipation to bless and praise you for the gift of another year. Just as you had the shepherds watch by night at the birth of Jesus the Christ, we watch with all the company of heaven and our ancestral cloud of witnesses, as we greet the New Year. As we watch, we adore and worship you. As we watch, please touch our hearts, our bodies, and our minds, that we may be more loving stewards of all the gifts and graces you have bestowed upon us. Help us love you before all others. Bless us that we might learn to love ourselves and treat ourselves as the holy beings you created us to be when you pronounced us as made in your image, and made good.

As we greet this New Year, help us watch how we treat one another. May we confess the good and the bad that we have done, and the good and bad that have been done to us: first naming the wrong and the pain. When we have fully faced these wrongs, help us begin the process of forgiving ourselves. Help us place on the altar those things that we need to forgive ourselves for, and all of those persons we need to forgive who have done us wrong. As we forgive, help us learn from these situations, that we may watch with deep insight, so that we do not repeat our mistakes about what we do and whom we trust. Help us watch wisely and wait on you, for our renewal, our strength, that we may better serve you, and honor your light in our lives.

Litany

LEADER: We gather for this vigil, as a community, to greet the New Year in prayer and praise; in gratitude and hope as a covenant of grace.

PEOPLE: **With this covenant of grace, we accept God's invitation to renewed obedience to Christ; that as Christians, we vow to be more Christ-like in thought and deed.**

LEADER: Like Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Samuel Proctor, and Calvin O. Butts III have held the watch at the historic Abyssinian Baptist Church and been engaged in the socioeconomic and political development of Harlem, we stand watch here in our community, committed to serve the church and society.

PEOPLE: **This year, we commit to stand watch over our personal growth and the development of our church and community, for the enrichment of God's gifts to us, including the gift of freedom.**

LEADER: We give thanks for those who have kept watch over the thought and actions of nonviolence and passive resistance to help nurture our cause for civil rights, including the Reverend James Lawson, Fannie Lou Hamer, Bayard Rustin, Septima Clark, Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, Bernice Johnson Reagon, Ella Baker, and Jo Ann Robinson.

PEOPLE: **As a new day and the new year dawns, we give thanks for those who have worked for freedom and justice. We pledge to continue to keep watch for ourselves and for our community, in the quest for freedom from injustice, and freedom from sin.**

ALL: **As the old year ends and the New Year comes in, we stand together as community in gratitude for what God has done and for what God will do in our lives this new year.**

Vow of Commitment

This evening on the eve of a New Year, we recommit ourselves to our lives with Christ: a life of compassion, community-building, and caring for our children, youth, young adults, and adults. Standing watch as stewards of God's creation and God's church, we are blessed by God's tremendous generosity and know that with these gifts comes a great deal of responsibility. In the name of Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we stand to renew the vows we made to the Lord during our baptism. As we launch into a New Year, we are open to God's call and leading. We pledge to embrace the preached word, to teach through our lived example, and to listen for the majestic beauty of God in all creation.

As we glimpse into the New Year, we fret not about the past, nor will we obsess about the future. We pray to learn from our past mistakes and to have an attitude of gratitude in the present that we might fully experience God's grace, moment by moment. Knowing that God will never leave us or forsake us, we will work to live each day as it comes, knowing that we are building on the past and building for the future, by God's grace, not worrying about either. With the gift of the New Year is another opportunity for us to be the eyes and ears of God, for us to watch for those who yet need to hear the words of love and salvation and to listen that we might learn how to minister in each unique situation. With this Watch Night service, we praise and glorify the God of past, present, and future, so blessed to be alive to see another year.

Suggested Colors

Suggested colors for Watch Night are yellow and red. Yellow suggests liveliness, animation, radiance, good cheer, wisdom, knowledge, intelligence, inspiration, and a reflection of God's glory. Red symbolizes grandeur, life, courage, love, passion, and living blood.

Scriptures

I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. (Ps. 32:8)

You have granted me life and steadfast love, and your care has preserved my spirit. (Job 10:12)

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. (Matt. 7:15)

Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving. (Col. 4:2)

Poem of Reflection

WATCH NIGHT: REFLECTING, PRAYING FORWARD

*Between evening and midnight
Before the dawn of a new day
We watch by night
Awaiting the coming of a year
Never experienced before;
Of time untested, unborn
Due to burst forth in moments
As we pray and wait
On the Lord,
As we experience renewal of courage;
Yes, we wait on God.*

*Standing watch by night
Before the break of day
Time for reflecting
Giving thanks, breathing deeply
By God's grace, we did get over
The damage we did in the year past
We pray we didn't do too much harm;
We ask forgiveness for the wrongs we committed
Praying for healing of ourselves and those we wronged.
Reflecting, looking back, in gratitude.*

*Praying forward, we stand on the firm foundation
Of the loving mercy of God
Gifted to yet be alive,
Gifted to have an opportunity to serve
In hope, faith, and anticipation,
We have traversed mountains and valleys
To stand on the brink of today:
Happy New Year.*

* See <http://www.greenspun.com/bboard/q-and-a-fetch-msg.tcl?msgid=00BgLB>; Charyn D. Sutton, "Watch Night," The Onyx Group, December 2000; <http://www.onyx-group.com/WatchNight.htm>.