



## WATCH NIGHT

### CULTURAL RESOURCE

**(A Special Watch Night sermon snippet is provided on video below.)**

**Wednesday, December 31, 2008**

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*Before this time another year*

*I may be gone*

*In some lonesome graveyard*

*Oh Lord, How Long?<sup>1</sup>*

#### **I. Introduction**

The legendary virtuoso preaching master, Reverend Clarence LaVaughn Franklin, known by most as Rev. C. L. Franklin,<sup>2</sup> was born in Sunflower County, Mississippi, on January 22, 1915. By his recollection, he began preaching at 15 or 16 years of age, and was ordained two years later. He built a major church and radio ministry in Detroit. Most

know him by his recordings, and some were blessed to hear him in person when he toured with the Ward Singers or did revivals. He was also the father of soul singer, Aretha Franklin.

His sermon, “*Watchman, What of the Night,*” recorded by Chess Records, is based on Isaiah 21:11-12. As he developed his sermon, he dealt with issues concerning the role and definition of those assigned to stand at their post as guardians watching throughout the night. Taking into account the special legacy of African Americans, Rev. Franklin takes us through the night into a contemporary day where we face darkness greater than the night we have just moved through . . . and he calls us to constant attention and action even as we ask in the question/cry of the African American gospel ballad chorus above, “How Long? How Long?”

## **II. Watchman What of the Night? By Reverend C.L. Franklin**

*The burden of Dumah. He calleth to me out of Seir, Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night? The watchman said, the morning cometh, and also the night: if ye will enquire, enquire ye: return, come. Isaiah 21:11-12*

This passage, according to all authoritative commentaries, is a prophecy of the doom of Edom. It is a prophecy of the aggression and the ultimate triumph of the military forces of Persia over Edom. This military victory that brought on for Edom such a dilemma that Edom cried out in her confusion and frustration, having experienced this transition, “Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, will our plight be better or worse now that we are under a new government, now that we are in the orbit of a new political power? What will our lot be?”

Watchmen, in the scheme of oriental things, were important people. They watched the cities; they watched the communities; they stood upon lofty walls; and the security of these communities depended upon the alertness of these watchmen: for while the city slept, these watchmen watched. They watched for invading armies; they watched for what you would call raids on the part of raiding bands; and they gave the city, or the respective community, notice of the approaching enemy. So that the figure here, on the part of either Isaiah or that anonymous writer that is given the credit of having written that part of the book of Isaiah after the exile—either Isaiah or the anonymous Isaiah—is saying in this chapter, that because of the plight of Edom, which is referred to here in terms of Dumah, the burden of Dumah, for Dumah was a place in Edom, and this Hebraic prophet declared that in a vision, the dilemma of Edom reached him as he stood upon the lofty wall of vision, and in vision he heard the cry of frustration, and the cry of oppression, coming out of Dumah, and out of Edom, and the cry was an inquiring cry: “Watchman, what of the night? What of the times? What time of history is this? What time of trouble is this?” For after all, history is God’s big clock. For a day is but a thousand years in terms of eternity. (I wish somebody here would pray with me.)

History is but a day is but a thousand years--i.e., a thousand years is but a day --so that history is God's big clock; and inasmuch as we cannot see within the next five minutes, in our system of time—in God's system of time, in God's clock of history, we can't see---we must call out to our men of vision, we must call out to our prophets, as Edom or as the Edomites did in those long days, or bygone days: to men who can pierce the future; men who can interpret the future; men who can see beyond now; and inquire of them, "Watchman, what of the night? What time is this? What time of history is this? What hour in God's purpose and in God's plan in this? Like the Edomites, what will our lot be?" The future is uncertain to us, and we are blinded by the night, we are blinded by the mystery of history, we are blinded by the density of time. (I wish you'd pray with me.)

For to us, it is like it was with John; for John said, he saw an angel standing with a scroll rolled in his hand, and it was sealed on all sides, and nobody could break the seals or read the writing therein, but the lambs. So we know that history is God's scroll, already sealed, written within and without; and we cannot read the writing, and we cannot break the seal; only God can reveal it to us, or reveal it to his men of mystery. And so, as the Edomites did, thousands of years ago, with the anxiety of the future, with questions of the future, we inquire to the men of vision, who walk upon the lofty walls of God's inspiration, "Watchman, what of the night?" (I don't believe you know what I'm talking about.)

For, after all, my brothers and sisters, we are living in times that are like the night times. We don't know what the morning will bring. We don't know. We know that Africa is rumbling, that Africa is awakening like a sleeping giant, and that on the horizon we see the Gold Coast emerging as an independent nation. We see the Sudan that has come into independence as a young nation. We see Egypt, having seized and nationalized the Suez Canal. We have seen the English and the French and the Israelite military forces rush across her borders, and then be stopped by the mild force of the United Nations in order to pull out and go back to their own lands. We see Hungaria [Hungary] on the march, defying the pressure and the desire of international Communism to subjugate her. We have witnessed over a hundred thousand of Hungarian citizens fleeing across the Hungarian borders to Austria. We see tension in Germany between East and West Germany. We see Poland resisting those who would deny her sovereign independence. (I wish somebody would pray with me.) We have heard it said that no more is the Big Four America, England, France, and Russia, but rather America, Russia, India, and China. (I wish you'd pray with me a little while.)

We see these signs, watchman, on the horizon of time. We've seen changes take place in China. We see India, the second great manpower pool in the world, come to a position of international neutrality. (I wish somebody would pray with me.) We see oppressed people, not only abroad, but in our own lands, becoming impatient, for full citizenship. Not only Africa, not only Egypt, not only the Arab world, not only Germany, not only China, not only India, but we see

Montgomery, Alabama, we see Florida, we see other parts of our own land impatient for world brotherhood and full citizenship.

We don't know all what these signs mean. We see them, but we are too blind to properly interpret them. And so we call out to our prophets, to our preachers. We call out to our educators, to our philosophers, to our statesmen. We call them watchmen, and we inquire of them, as we view these conflicting signs, "Watchmen, what of the night? What of these times?" (I don't believe you are praying with me.) "What time is it? And what shall we expect, as history unfolds in this new year?" (I wonder, are you praying with me?) "What shall we expect?"

The writer here gives us a picture of Oriental travelers who had traveled the deserts in the cool of the evening, and as the night had fallen, they came to the foot of a mountain range. And as they came to the mountain range, they decided to camp rather than to risk traveling in the mountains, rather than to risk the treachery and the dangers of the mountains. They decided to camp in the shadow of that mountain for that night, and wait until the morning comes. The night was long, the night was anxious; the night was trying as they waited to resume their journey the next morning. As they camped, the night was dark. They looked on the mountain ranges. They could see the cedars that crowned the top of the mountain like gory monsters in the dark. They could see jagged edges of the mountain cliffs; they could hear the water running from mountain springs that made a menacing noise late in the night. (Pray with me if you please.)

The campers became anxious and restless during the night, for indeed, the night was dark, and indeed, the night was trying. And they called out to their watchman, hour after hour, "Watchman, what of the night?" And no doubt when they had checked the time, they went again, feeling that the time had come, and it was time to arise, and it was time for the sun to be up, and time for daylight to break upon men so that they could see their way in resuming their journey.

*And as they went to the watchman*

*And thought it was about time*

*time for the morning light to come*

*Why, they noticed that though*

*the morning light was breaking*

*Great God,*

*and though the darkness was dispelling,*

*that a new blinding,  
a new blindingness was settling over them.  
Then you hear them say,  
“Watchman, what of the night?”  
“Why?  
The morning comes and so does the night.”  
What a confusing statement is this.  
Why?  
What does it mean by “the morning cometh  
and so does the night?”  
Does he mean to say that  
Night follows the morning?  
for, studying his language,  
that seems to be what he’s saying.  
But we know morning  
is not followed by the night.  
Morning is followed by the noon,  
and then by the afternoon,  
and then by the evening,  
Oh Lord.  
But the inquirer,  
Great God,  
realizes that though the darkness of the night*

*has flown away.*

*He's blinded by new darkness,*

*and what darkness is this:*

*Well, what he is saying,*

*and what he is alluding to,*

*is this:*

*Well, when the sun rose*

*Great God,*

*and spread its warm rays in the valleys,*

*where the travelers were,*

*the cool morning air mixed*

*with the warmth of the morning sun,*

*and this conflict in atmospheric conditions*

*created a fog.*

*O Lord.*

*And the fog was more blinding*

*than the night.*

*O Lord.*

*For in the night*

*they could see the --top of the mountain.*

*In the night*

*they could see --the jagged edges of the mountain ranges.*

*(I wish somebody knew what I was talking about tonight.)*

*O Lord.*

*In the night*

*they could see--the outlines of the cedars  
that stood on the mountaintop.*

*But when the morning came,*

*Great God,*

*and when the sun rose,*

*and the heat mingled with the cool air of the morning,  
and created the fog.*

*O Lord.*

*The fog hid the mountain,*

*the fog hid the mountain clefts,*

*the fog hid the cedars*

*that stood on the mountain.*

*O Lord.*

*So, though the morning has come,*

*other confusion has arisen*

*that's even worse than the night.*

*O Lord.*

*As we look out*

*on history today,*

*and as we look out  
on world situations  
the night of slavery has passed.  
Great God.  
And the night  
of many other oppressing things--has passed,  
but other foggy conditions are arising,  
Yes,  
and we want to inquire,  
of those that can see,  
Yes,  
we want to inquire  
of those who are standing  
in the lofty places,  
O Lord,  
those that God would lift on higher ground,  
“Watchman, what of the night?”  
O Lord.  
“Oh, watchman!  
It’s mighty dark.  
And how long  
will the darkness last?  
How long*

*will we go through this night?*

*How long*

*will we blunder through this fog?*

*O Lord.*

*Ohh!*

*When will the skies clear?*

*O Lord.*

*Watchman!*

*We've waited a long time.*

*Watchman!*

*We've been restless a long time.*

*Watchman!*

*( I don't believe you know what I'm talking about tonight.)*

*Yes.*

*"We've waited a long time."*

*Ohh!*

*How long, how long, how long,*

*Watchman!*

*Will we be oppressed?*

*And will we be cast down?*

*And watchman!*

*Would you tell us?*

*And give us a little light?*

*And watchman!*

*Will you give us new hope?*

*And Ohh!*

*O Lord,*

*Oh yes,*

***We've sung***

***We have prayed,***

***We have waited,***

***And we have watched;***

***Tell us how long.***

*Oh lord.*

*Watchman!*

*Our fathers waited,*

*Our grandfathers waited,*

*And their fathers waited,*

*The slaves waited,*

*Tell us how long!*

*Ohh!*

*How long,*

*Just how long?*

*And--we have shed tears,*

*Yes we have,*

***We've sung-- "Pharaoh's army got drowned,"***

*we've sung "Steal away to Jesus,"*  
*we've sung--"We're going to eat at the feasting table,*  
*one of these old days."*  
*Ohh! how long--just how long?*  
*Ohh! --good Lord,*  
*How long?*  
*O Lord.*  
*Ohh, a few more days.*  
*(Did you hear me?)*  
*A few more days.*  
*A little while to wait.*  
*And a little while to pray,*  
*A little while to labor,*  
*A little while to sing.*  
*We're blundering in the dark,*  
*We're toiling in the light,*  
*O, tell us, watchman,*  
*Oh, we're waiting on an answer,*  
*Oh, how long?---*  
*How long?---*

### **III. Watch Night Video**

Reverend E. Dewey Smith, Pastor of Greater Traveler's Rest Baptist Church in Decatur, Georgia, in the whooping style of C.L. Franklin, closes a Watch Night service in 2005. His sermon was titled "It's Time to Get Up." To dramatize the message, he wore a

physician's outfit and used defibrillator paddles with Bibles attached. Here, we provide the conclusion of the message.

#### **IV. Watching For the New Year**

We began The African American Lectionary with December 31, 2007 waiting for the new year to begin. We close this first year again in watch—waiting for the next cycle. With our calendar, December 31 signals the end of the old and the promise of the new. In addition to our way of organizing time, there are other cultural calendars that are significant to other cultures in ordering time and their lives. To a large extent, our calendar is dominant in that it governs the time line for marking civil affairs of the planet. For Christians, it is important to know that this version of ordering time reflects contributions from earlier calendars and treats all time as sacred and no time as ordinary.

Many cultures begin their new year with great celebrations, feasting and partying. This is also true with many within African American communities. However, Watch Night Service is a special way to move across the line of time that marks the end of one year and the coming of a new year. This night finds many Christians in church on their knees in gratitude for the completion of another leg in the journey and recommitting to a sacred partnership with the Almighty for whatever is to come in the new cycle before us.

*Guide my feet while I run this race*

*Guide my feet while I run this race*

*Guide my feet while I run this race*

*Oh, I don't want to run this race in vain.<sup>3</sup>*

For African American Christians, crossing this line of time is a time to remember the night their ancestors watched and waited for the arrival of January 1, 1863, and the application of the Emancipation Proclamation by President Abraham Lincoln. This observance is significant as a part of the fabric binding multiple and extended efforts to undermine and destroy the legal system of slavery within the United States of America. We are called to mark this time as a reminder of the importance of not accepting that which is evil in our midst. The 19<sup>th</sup> century struggles against slavery as morally wrong and indefensible remain an important element in the evolutionary journey of this nation, and the concept and quality of freedom around the world.

*I'm your child while I run this race*

*I'm your child while I run this race*

*I'm your child while I run this race*

*Oh, I don't want to run this race in vain...*

## **V. Watch Night Poetry**

### **Watching and Waiting**

I was dreaming one night and I could swear I heard two old people say:

Old Person One: Are you watching and waiting?

Old Person Two: Watching and waiting for what?

Old Person One: Change.

Old Person Two: Change? What change?

Old Person One: Change in the White House, the country and the world.

Old Person Two: That's a lot of change.

Old Person One: We need a lot.

Old Person Two: Where you gone watch and wait for this change tonight?

Old Person One: Same place as always, at the church house, till midnight, on my knees.<sup>4</sup>

## **VI. Calendar Notes**

*Time oh time, time is a winding up*

*Time, oh time, time is-a winding up*

*Destruction in the land*

*God gonna move His hand*

*Oh time is-a winding up.*<sup>5</sup>

Our civil method for marking time has mixed origins.<sup>6</sup> Albert Van Helden of Rice University's Galileo Project provides an overview: Our division of the hour into minutes and seconds comes from the Mesopotamians; the 24 hour day originated with the Egyptians; the seven-day week originated in the ancient Near East, while the names of our days of the week are from the Greeks of the Hellenistic period. Our civil calendar is based on the motion of the sun alone, but our various religious cycles are based on a combination of the motions of the sun and moon.<sup>7</sup>

The first day of our week, sun-day, we owe to a long practice of honor, worship, and acknowledgement of the sun as the source of light and life on our planet, our home. Many of the Old Testament struggles between the prophets and the Hebrew people was because of the tendency of the people to slip back into rituals giving honor to the sun as their source of existence in violation of the first law of the Commandments.

In ancient times, the Sun as deity is central and known by many names: in Egypt, the names Ra and Osiris; in Phoenicia Canaan, Baal, Melkarth, Shamas, Adoni, and Moloch; in Syria, Tammuz and Elagabalus; by the Moabites, Baal-peor and Chemoshi; by the Babylonians and Assyrians, Bel and Shamas; by the Medes and Persians, Ormuz and Mithra; among the ancient Indians as Mitra, Mithra, Mitthras; in Greece, Adonis, Apollo, Bacchus and Hercules—among all of these peoples and in many forms, the sun was honored in a high place.

Most of these cultures also honored a sister deity, sometimes this source was the moon, sometimes the earth itself, sometimes the atmosphere; this is the female principle in nature. In some forms, the idea of a male and female were blended, as in the concept of Baal.

Within these cultures it was the life-giving functions and powers of the sun that were worshipped rather than the sun itself. As humans identified the sun as the source of the atmosphere: rain, plants, fruits, etc., worship evolved around the principles of the cycle of life, and the presence of reproduction in nature.

In particular, ancient cultures paid particular attention to the journey of the planet around the sun and most measured what we call a year by their calculations of that journey. As the days grew shorter and the nights grew longer, it was believed that the sun was getting weaker. Very special observances were created to mark this time. Initially, it was believed that it would be an end to all things, eventually it became known as a period through which one had to pass. The special observances could be called festivals in some cultures—with an emphasis on lights and those plants that stayed green throughout the cycle—never-dying. In Egypt, the calendar had a number of days where everything stopped and it was as if everyone was focused on the waning strength and length of sunlight, watching for the signs that it was growing stronger again as the days began to lengthen and there was promise of another year.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Gregorian Calendar**

The Gregorian calendar is the international standard for civil use. The original function of this calendar was ecclesiastical, and it continues to order the ceremonial observances of the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches. Writing for the *Explanatory Supplement to the Astronomical Almanac*, L. E. Doggett explains:

The Gregorian calendar resulted from a perceived need to reform the method of calculating dates of Easter. Under the Julian calendar the dating of Easter had become standardized, using March 21 as the date of the equinox and the Metonic cycle as the basis for calculating lunar phases. By the thirteenth century it was

realized that the true equinox had regressed from March 21 (its supposed date at the time of the Council of Nicaea, 325 AD) to a date earlier in the month. As a result, Easter was drifting away from its springtime position and was losing its relation with the Jewish Passover. Over the next four centuries, scholars debated the “correct” time for celebrating Easter and the means of regulating this time calendrically. The Church made intermittent attempts to solve the Easter question, without reaching a consensus.

...Pope Gregory XIII convened a commission to reform the calendar and their recommendations were instituted by papal bull, February 24, 1582. The new calendar sent out through the Roman-Catholic world, was first rejected by Protestant states, but gradually grew into accepted practice. The Eastern Orthodox churches continued to use the earlier Julian calendar.<sup>9</sup> As international communications and trade developed, the Gregorian calendar became the standard.

Whatever our understanding of the ordering of time, like many cultures and peoples—ancient and contemporary, we come to the end of a cycle and pause in reflection, in gratitude and meditation. The African American ritual of Watch Night Service is our way of seeking a new alignment with the universe and the God of our understanding as we ready ourselves for the NEW day with its unique ‘moments of darkness’ which unfolds before us.

### **Another Day’s Journey**

Lead: It’s another day’s journey and I’m glad

Response: I’m glad about it

I’m glad,

I’m glad about it

Oh---I’m so glad

I’m glad about it

It’s another day’s journey and I’m glad

I’m glad about it

All: I’m so glad to be here.

Other lines:

I got my health and strength and I’m glad...

I beat old Satan running, and I'm glad...

It's an uphill journey, and I'm glad.<sup>10</sup>

**All of God's Children Got a Race to Run**

Lead: You better run on

Response: You got a race to run

People run on,

You got a race to run

Oh----, run on

You got a race to run

All: All of God's children got a race to run

Other lines:

You better fight on...

You better sing on...

You better pray on.<sup>11</sup>

**Notes**

1. African American traditional gospel ballad song.
- 2.. Reverend C.L. Franklin, Give Me This Mountain: Life History and Selected Sermons. Jeff Todd Titon, ed. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989. pp. 166-174
3. African American spiritual.
4. "Watching and Waiting." Written by Martha Simmons. Used with permission.
5. African American spiritual.
6. Doggett, L.E. "Calendars." Explanatory Supplement to the Astronomical Almanac. Ed. Seidelmann, P. Kenneth. Mill Valley, CA: University Science Books, 1992. Online location: <http://astro.nmsu.edu/~lhuber/leaphist.html> accessed 1 October 2008; *Related sources: Coyne, G. V., Michael A. Hoskin, and O. Pedersen. Gregorian Reform of the Calendar: Proceedings of the Vatican Conference to Commemorate Its 400th Anniversary, 1582-1982. Citta` del Vaticano, Europe: Pontificia Academia Scientiarum, 1983; Meeus, Jean and Denis Savoie. "The History of the Tropical Year." Journal of the British Astronomical Association. 102 #1 (1992): 40-42.*
7. The Galileo Project. Online location. <http://galileo.rice.edu/chron/gregorian.html>. accessed 1 October 2008
8. Ibid.
9. Doggett, L.E. "Calendars." In Explanatory Supplement to the Astronomical Almanac. p. 9.
10. African American traditional gospel song.
11. African American congregational song.