

EMANCIPATION BY THOMAS NAST

## WATCH NIGHT

## CULTURAL RESOURCES

**Saturday, December 31, 2011**

**Tara Lake, Guest Lectionary Cultural Resource Commentator**  
Independent Scholar of African American Studies, East Point, GA

### **I. History/Historical Documents Section**

Watch Night is a spiritual experience that for African Americans has long been tied to matters both deeply personal and highly political. The concept of Watch Night, in various forms, has been a part of American Protestant tradition—particularly Methodism—for over 200 years. Modern Watch Night Services are frequently observed on New Year’s Eve and have been described as a time to “welcome the new year with praise, thanksgiving, prayer, and confession.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet the service also has meaning deeply rooted in the African American experience. While some enslaved men and women observed Watch Night services prior to the issuance of President Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, the observation took on new meaning on the night of December 31, 1862—the night before the Proclamation became law in those southern states that had seceded from the Union. Before then, Watch Night had been one of a number of significant events in the Christmas holiday season for particular enslaved communities—who in some cases were given the week between Christmas and New Year’s as a bittersweet respite from a year of toil. The week represented the only time available to spend with loved ones held on other plantations. Many slaveholders did not provide holiday periods at all. As the final event on the holiday calendar, Watch Night became the most somber of the celebrations. The close of Watch Night always concluded with the pain of leaving loved ones, and in many places, New Year’s Day became known as “heartbreak day.”<sup>2</sup>

Upon the arrival of December 31, 1862, however, the celebration of Watch Night took on a new meaning. African American people who had been held in slavery knew that the morning ahead would bring a momentous change, delivering them from a life of physical bondage into a life of freedom.

### **Text of the President Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation<sup>3</sup>**

The Emancipation Proclamation

January 1, 1863

By the President of the United States of America:

A Proclamation.

Whereas, on the twenty-second day of September, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-two, a proclamation was issued by the President of the United States, containing, among other things, the following, to wit:

“That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the Executive Government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom.

“That the Executive will, on the first day of January aforesaid, by proclamation, designate the States and parts of States, if any, in which the people thereof, respectively, shall then be in

rebellion against the United States; and the fact that any State, or the people thereof, shall on that day be, in good faith, represented in the Congress of the United States by members chosen thereto at elections wherein a majority of the qualified voters of such State shall have participated, shall, in the absence of strong countervailing testimony, be deemed conclusive evidence that such State, and the people thereof, are not then in rebellion against the United States.”

Now, therefore I, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States, by virtue of the power in me vested as Commander-in-Chief, of the Army and Navy of the United States in time of actual armed rebellion against the authority and government of the United States, and as a fit and necessary war measure for suppressing said rebellion, do, on this first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, and in accordance with my purpose so to do publicly proclaimed for the full period of one hundred days, from the day first above mentioned, order and designate as the States and parts of States wherein the people thereof respectively, are this day in rebellion against the United States, the following, to wit:

Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana, (except the Parishes of St. Bernard, Plaquemines, Jefferson, St. John, St. Charles, St. James Ascension, Assumption, Terrebonne, Lafourche, St. Mary, St. Martin, and Orleans, including the City of New Orleans) Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia, (except the forty-eight counties designated as West Virginia, and also the counties of Berkley, Accomac, Northampton, Elizabeth City, York, Princess Ann, and Norfolk, including the cities of Norfolk and Portsmouth[]), and which excepted parts, are for the present, left precisely as if this proclamation were not issued.

And by virtue of the power, and for the purpose aforesaid, I do order and declare that all persons held as slaves within said designated States, and parts of States, are, and henceforward shall be free; and that the Executive government of the United States, including the military and naval authorities thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of said persons.

And I hereby enjoin upon the people so declared to be free to abstain from all violence, unless in necessary self-defence; and I recommend to them that, in all cases when allowed, they labor faithfully for reasonable wages.

And I further declare and make known, that such persons of suitable condition, will be received into the armed service of the United States to garrison forts, positions, stations, and other places, and to man vessels of all sorts in said service.

And upon this act, sincerely believed to be an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution, upon military necessity, I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind, and the gracious favor of Almighty God.

In witness whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed.

Done at the City of Washington, this first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty three, and of the Independence of the United States of America the eighty-seventh.

By the President: ABRAHAM LINCOLN  
WILLIAM H. SEWARD, Secretary of State.

## **II. Songs That Speak to the Moment**

Watch Night Services have historically included the singing of spirituals, the offering of prayers, and the preaching of sermons.<sup>4</sup>

Freedom songs and anthems, both religious and secular, also came to characterize the services. Increasingly, modern gospel songs have also been added to Watch Night Service Celebrations, but in many congregations, African American Spirituals remain prominent. African American Spirituals and Traditional songs are rooted in West and Central African melodies and rhythms but evolved as a distinct expression of the experience of slavery in the United States.<sup>5</sup>

Often coded with religious or folk metaphors, spirituals frequently expressed what could not be openly stated in conditions of slavery, and included songs of spiritual solace and tacit opposition to oppression. Thus, spirituals could be sung to comfort enslaved African people in the midst of the tribulations of slavery, and they could also provide important information to aid escape. In addition, there were a number of spirituals that evolved to directly express the desire for freedom, the pain of the slavery, or criticism of oppressors. While these songs had been sung privately to evade discovery by slaveholders, overseers, and patrollers, they became songs of open celebration and jubilee after the fall of slavery in the United States.

### **“Oh Freedom”**

“Oh Freedom” is sometimes referred to as a secular spiritual or early freedom song.<sup>6</sup> The spiritual had been sung in anticipation of the coming of freedom before Emancipation, survived as a protest song through the Civil Rights Movement, and is still sung in congregations and in cultural performance. At Watch Night Services, the song provided an opportunity to reflect on the circumstances that had wrought the song during the days of slavery, and a celebration of the new promise of freedom that came with the Emancipation Proclamation and the events that followed. “Oh Freedom” celebrates a determination to live a life as a free person, in spite of the costs of such a decision. Marking a “leaving behind” of the days of being consumed by mourning and crying, the words of the song hail the coming of a new existence characterized by singing in celebration. As African Americans prepared for new lives and, in many cases, made the decision to leave plantations, volunteer for the Union Army, reunite with loved ones, or start new lives as free people, “Oh Freedom” must have resonated with particular meaning.

See the video featuring Shirley Verrett’s 1966 recording of “Oh Freedom” followed by the lyrics.

YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XKlgL4SkqA&feature=related>

## **Oh Freedom**<sup>7</sup>

Oh freedom, oh freedom, oh freedom over me  
And before I'd be a slave I'll be buried in a my grave  
And go home to my Lord and be free

No more mourning, no more mourning, no more mourning over me  
And before I'd be a slave I'll be buried in a my grave  
And go home to my Lord and be free

No more crying, no more crying, no more crying over me  
And before I'd be a slave I'll be buried in a my grave  
And go home to my Lord and be free

Oh freedom, oh freedom, oh freedom over me  
And before I'd be a slave I'll be buried in a my grave  
And go home to my Lord and be free

There'll be singin', there'll be singin', there'll be singin' over me  
And before I'd be a slave I'll be buried in a my grave  
And go home to my Lord and be free

Oh freedom, oh freedom, oh freedom over me  
And before I'd be a slave I'll be buried in a my grave  
And go home to my Lord and be free

### **“Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel?”**

The Old Testament stories of deliverance had held special meaning for black people held in slavery. The spiritual “Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel?” references important Bible occurrences that spoke to the experience of enslaved communities seeking deliverance. Daniel's deliverance from the lion's den, for example, reminded people of God's power to provide protection from the unjust violence and the threat of death enslaved blacks faced daily. Relaying assurance in the Promised Land “Canaan's shore,” the spiritual must have taken on broadened meaning as Emancipation dawned. On Freedom's Eve, the Civil War was still raging and leaving destruction in the wake of each battle. In response to the Emancipation Proclamation and Lincoln's call for volunteers, numbers of African American men had already joined the Union Army. By war's end, 200,000 African American men would serve in the Union Army and the Union Navy, and at least 38,000 African American soldiers would die.<sup>8</sup> The image of apocalyptic circumstances, in which the moon ran down in a purple stream, the sun forbore shining, and the stars disappeared, was anything but farfetched. But as African Americans celebrated Jubilee and boldly faced the struggle for full freedom that lay ahead, they took solace in their Christian faith. They also declared their determination to hold on to their heritage and their right to freedom. The song lyric “Why Not Everyman?” spoke to an awareness of equality of all people under God, and to a determination to claim God's promise and to stake a claim as citizens in a hostile country.

See the video in which the Moses Hogan Chorale delivers a traditional interpretation of “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel?” The lyrics follow.

YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s01O0rPIsgk&feature=related>

See the video of the Howard University Gospel Choir delivering an innovative interpretation of “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel?” The lyrics follow.

YouTube: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=26a\\_pUQfkDc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=26a_pUQfkDc)

### **Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel?**<sup>9</sup>

Didn’t my Lord deliver Daniel,  
Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel?  
Didn’t my Lord deliver Daniel?  
An’ why not everyman.

He delivered Daniel from de lion’s den,  
Jonah from de belly of de whale,  
An’ de Hebrew children from de fiery furnace,  
An’ why not every man.

Didn’t my Lord deliver Daniel,  
Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel?  
Didn’t my Lord deliver Daniel?  
An’ why not everyman.

De moon run down in a purple stream,  
De sun forbear to shine  
An’ every star disappear  
King Jesus shall be mine

Didn’t my Lord deliver Daniel,  
Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel?  
Didn’t my Lord deliver Daniel?  
An’ why not everyman.

De wind blows east and de wind blows west  
It blows like de judgment day  
And every poor sinner dat never did pray ‘Il  
Be glad to pray dat day

Didn’t my Lord deliver Daniel,  
Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel?  
Didn’t my Lord deliver Daniel?  
An’ why not everyman.

I set my foot on de Gospel ship

An' de ship begin to sail  
It landed me over on Canaan's shore  
An' I'll never come back no more.

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,  
Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel?  
Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel?  
An' why not everyman.

### **“Walk Together Children”**

One of the most versatile of the African American Spirituals, “Walk Together Children” urges unity of purpose and reminds singers and listeners of the promise of a better day to come. As is the case with a number of spirituals, “Walk Together Children” offers layered meaning and emphasizes the coming reward. During slavery, the song was a joyful reminder of freedom and celebration to come, not only in Heaven, but also in earthly promised lands, including free states and territories. During the first “Freedom’s Eve,” with Abolition just hours away, and even in today’s African American congregations, “Walk Together Children” is a celebration of the victories already won and a promise of triumphs to come. “Camp Meetings” were church meetings, and indeed, the first Freedom’s Eve Watch Night services were a coming to pass of the promise of the Great Camp Meeting in the Promised Land—in this case, the newly freed states. This spiritual’s significance has continually evolved as congregations and freedom activists have altered the words and chorus to suit the moment and the movement, but it has particular meaning for the Watch Night Service.<sup>10</sup>

#### **Walk Together Children**<sup>11</sup>

Walk together, children,  
don't you get weary.  
Walk together, children,  
don't you get weary.  
Walk together, children,  
don't you get weary.  
There's a great camp meeting in the promised land.

Gwinter walk and never tire.  
Walk and never tire.  
Walk and never tire.  
There's a great camp meeting in the promised land.

Walk together, children,  
don't you get weary.  
Walk together, children,  
don't you get weary.  
Walk together, children,

don't you get weary.  
There's a great camp meeting in the promised land.

Gwinter sing and never tire.  
Sing and never tire.  
Sing and never tire.  
There's a great camp meeting in the promised land.

Walk together, children,  
don't you get weary.  
Walk together, children,  
don't you get weary.  
Walk together, children,  
don't you get weary.  
There's a great camp meeting in the promised land.

Gwinter shout and never tire.  
Shout and never tire.  
Shout and never tire.  
There's a great camp meeting in the promised land.

Walk together, children,  
don't you get weary.  
Sing together, children,  
don't you get weary.  
Shout together, children,  
don't you get weary.  
There's a great camp meeting in the promised land.  
There's a great camp meeting in the promised land.

### **III. Cultural Response to Significant Aspects of the Text**

Today's lection reads: "Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead" (Philippians 3:13-14). For enslaved women, men, and children in America, New Year's Eve and Watch Night Service had once been among the saddest nights of the year. The evolution of this day in the African American calendar is a testament to the power of change and transformation—spiritual, physical, and circumstantial—that can occur when a people determine to embrace what lies ahead.

In the United States, early Methodist leaders John Wesley (founder of the Methodist Church) and Richard Allen (founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church) are generally credited with the formulation of a number of traditions and rituals that were designed to encourage a recommitment to Christian faith and principles for the coming year.<sup>12</sup> Similar rituals existed among other religious groups, including adherents of the Moravian tradition, who settled or emerged in America.<sup>13</sup> Further, among many civilizations on the African continent and

throughout the world, traditions of remaining awake to greet the dawning of a new and significant day or season have been observed for generations.

Although such gatherings were held elsewhere and by other communities, Watch Night services became a survival mechanism for African American bondspeople. The service provided the mental and spiritual fortitude and solace needed to prepare for the distressing separation from parents, children, siblings, spouses, and friends that followed the Christmas holiday week on or near New Year's Day, known to many as "Heartbreak Day." These nights of prayerful tarrying and energetic festivities, according to scholar William H. Wiggins, were in some cases "celebrated on December 27 or 28 to allow the slaves ample time to return to their own plantations for another year of toil and separation from family and friends."<sup>14</sup> Wiggins notes that "(t)he first minutes of the New Year found them on their knees in prayer. But for the remaining hours of darkness they were one their feet dancing the Ring Shout..."<sup>15</sup> This nightlong celebration of West African- and Christian-derived prayer, ritual, and dance was followed by the inevitable, distressed parting from loved ones that could last for a year or more.

In December of 1862, word of the forthcoming Emancipation Proclamation altered perspectives of Watch Night Meetings in black communities, both enslaved and free. In the words of Dr. John Hope Franklin, President Abraham Lincoln's 1863 Emancipation Proclamation "gave hope to millions of blacks that a better day lay ahead, and it renewed the faith of thousands of crusaders who had fought long to win freedom in America."<sup>16</sup> Celebrations took on special meaning in African America's Year of Jubilee. For the largely white Methodist congregations, holding "covenant services" for the New Year, the term "Watch Night" had been heavily associated with the notion of watching for the presence or coming of God. For enslaved African Americans and black congregations and families, "Watch Night" was a blessed occasion of prayerful thanksgiving in anticipation of the legal freedom that would arrive with the stroke of midnight.

In their final hours of slavery, Black communities spearheaded special Freedom's Eve Watch Night services. In addition to Freedom's Eve Watch Night Services, African Americans and white abolitionists and well-wishers hosted services at sites throughout the country on Christmas Night, and on Emancipation Day, January 1, 1863. Dr. Franklin notes that African Americans and their allies throughout the country held Watch Night celebrations characterized by prayer, thanksgiving, and readings of the Emancipation Proclamation, which decreed several million African Americans free from the bondage of slavery, and which was heralded by some as "one of the great documents of all time."<sup>17</sup>

With the Emancipation Proclamation, Watch Night took on a new identity. No longer a date for sorrow and separation, New Year's Eve became Freedom's Eve, Emancipation Eve, and Jubilee Day on the African American calendar. Heartbreak Day became Emancipation Day, and millions of African Americans left yesterday's bondage behind them to claim the freedom that lay ahead. The Proclamation was not perfect, nor were its effects immediate. But for the majority of African-descended people in the United States—several million people—this Watch Night marked their final night of legal enslavement upheld by the federal government. For many, the Proclamation was a sign of God's promise and an impetus to forge ahead, escape bondage, and seize freedom. For others, it was the first step toward the freedom they now could hopefully watch for, and a sign that their prayers of so many Watch Nights past were now being answered.

While we will never forget the sacrifices of ancestors who toiled under the oppression of slavery, the memory of Freedom's Eve and the commemoration of Watch Night Services are potent reminders of the day African Americans put slavery and its attendant degradation behind and determined as a community to "strain forward" to the freedom that lay ahead.

#### IV. Stories and Illustrations

##### Recollections of "Freedom's Eve" Watch Night and Emancipation Services



The historical events surrounding the first Freedom's Eve had an enormous impact. Writers and diarists recorded these events to the best of their abilities, observing and recording significant moments as surrogates for newly freed African Americans, who had been legally barred—by physical punishment and even death—from learning to read and write while held as slaves. **Charlotte Forten**, a freeborn African American teacher volunteering on the South Carolina Sea Islands, recorded reminiscences of the joy of children who came to celebrate with her. One young girl, Amaretta, cried, "O Miss, all I want to do is sing and shout," according to Forten. "And sing and shout she did, 'til her heart's content."<sup>18</sup>

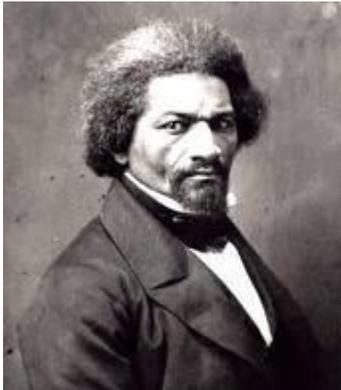


**Thomas Wentworth Higginson**, a white Unitarian Minister and abolitionist and the first Commander of the first Black Regiment in the Union Army during the Civil War, recalled hearing the celebration of African American soldiers as Emancipation approached. He described their "praying and 'shouting' and clattering with hands and heels."<sup>19</sup> Most of the men under Higginson's command had recently escaped from slavery in Florida and South Carolina, and some had come from a plantation in Georgetown, South Carolina. For them, the end of slavery was the fulfillment of a prophecy they had composed and sung months earlier while still enslaved:

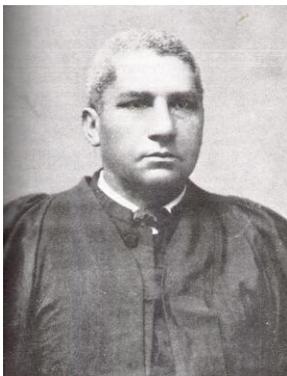
"We'll fight for liberty  
Till de Lord shall call us home  
We'll soon be free  
Till de Lord shall call us home."<sup>20</sup>

Many enslaved people recognized the hand of God in the events that had led to their freedom, and this lent a special sense of providence fulfilled to Watch Night celebrations. Pronouncements of the divine hand of God in abolition of slavery are found in a number of "Slave Narratives" collected by the Works Progress Administration and other groups. Tom Robinson, who was sold away from his mother before he reached eleven years of age, recalled that his mother would gather her children to kneel and pray. He testified that "She'd pray that the time would come that everybody could worship the Lord under their own vine and fig tree—all of them free... There she was praying, and on other plantations women was a'praying. All over the country the same

prayer was being prayed. Guess the Lord done heard the prayer and answered it.”<sup>21</sup> Julius Jones, a veteran of the Union Army who had been held as a slave in Tennessee, relayed his ascertaining of Emancipation this way: “[Abraham Lincoln] held a council right then. He ‘greed to take all the colored people. Said if they fought on his side he would set them all free. When [blacks] heard that free part, they all joined the army...Mr. Lincoln was sure a wonderful man. He did what God put him here to do, took bondage off the colored people and set them free.”<sup>22</sup>



In the north, **Frederick Douglass** joined others in what became an overnight watch and reading of the Emancipation Proclamation. He later wrote that “The effect of this announcement [of the Emancipation Proclamation] was startling beyond description, and the scene was wild and grand. Joy and gladness exhausted all forms of expression, from shouts of praise to sobs and tears...Rue, a colored preacher, a man of powerful vocal power, expressed the heartfelt emotion of the hour, when he led all voices in the anthem, ‘sound the loud timbrel o’er Egypt’s dark sea. Jehovah hath triumphed, his people are free.’”<sup>23</sup> Douglass recalled that the gathering celebrants did not want to leave the festivities. “About twelve o’clock, seeing there was no disposition to retire from the hall...my friend Grimes rose and moved that the meeting adjourn to the Twelfth Baptist Church, of which he was pastor, and soon that church was packed from doors to pulpit, and this meeting did not break up till near the dawn of day. It was one of the most affecting and thrilling occasions I ever witnessed.”<sup>24</sup>



**Bishop Henry McNeil Turner**, of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, recalled the nighttime celebration of Emancipation during his early years with Israel A.M.E. Church in Washington, D.C. “I may witness such a time again in heaven,” Bishop Turner wrote fifty years later, “but not in the flesh.”<sup>25</sup> Turner’s testimony told of a black man leaping for joy in a crowded hall, of women fainting and of men squealing. Dogs barked, he remembered, and horses ran wild in streets. At the dawning of Emancipation, the young pastor was surprised to find a throng gathered as his church long before sunset, and he hurriedly ran to procure a copy of the Emancipation Proclamation to read for congregants and guests. Bishop Turner wrote that the “...jubilation that attended the proclamation of freedom...I’m sure has never been surpassed”:

Rumor said that in several instances the very thought of being set at liberty and having no more auction blocks, no more forced parting of man and wife, no more separation of parents and children, no more horrors of slavery, was so elative and heart-gladdening that scores of colored people literally fell dead with joy...[N]othing like it will ever be seen again in this life.”<sup>26</sup>

Half a century later, Bishop Turner was still deeply moved by what he had witnessed as a young pastor. To emphasize the transcendent nature of that moment, the Bishop declared, “Our entrance into Heaven itself will only form a counterpart.”<sup>27</sup>

For African Americans held in slavery, Freedom's Eve was a new beginning and an opportunity for a people to embark on a new life. Charlotte Forten wrote: "Our hearts were filled with an exceeding great gladness; for although the government had left much undone, we knew that Freedom was surely born in our land that day. It seemed too glorious a good to realize, this beginning of the great work we had so longed for and prayed for."<sup>28</sup>

## V. Poetry for the Moment



Essayist, fiction writer, poet, and activist **Frances Ellen Watkins Harper** was born in Baltimore, Maryland in 1825. A free African American, she became an orphan while still a toddler, but is believed to have been taken in by the family of her uncle, minister and educator William Watkins. Harper began a career in domestic service and published a book of poetry at the age of 20. By age 26, she became the first woman hired by the Union Seminary of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. She became a full-time writer, abolitionist, and antislavery speaker around 1853.<sup>29</sup> This poem is one

of the writings she published in response to the Emancipation Proclamation and the abolition of slavery.

### President Lincoln's Proclamation of Freedom<sup>30</sup>

By Frances E. W. Harper

It shall flash through coming ages;  
It shall light the distant years;  
And eyes now dim with sorrow  
Shall be clearer through their tears.  
It shall flush the mountain ranges;  
And the valleys shall grow bright;  
It shall bathe the hills in radiance,  
And crown their brows with light.

It shall flood with golden splendor  
All the huts of Caroline,  
And the sun-kissed brow of labor  
With lustre new shall shine.

It shall gild the gloomy prison,  
Darken'd by the nation's crime,  
Where the dumb and patient millions  
Wait the better coming time.  
By the light that gilds their prison,  
They shall seize its mould'ring key,  
And the bolts and bars shall vibrate  
With the triumphs of the free.

Like the dim and ancient chaos,  
Shrinking from the dawn of light,  
Oppression, grim and hoary,  
Shall cower at the sight.

And her spawn of lies and malice  
Shall grovel in the dust,  
While joy shall thrill the bosoms  
Of the merciful and just.

Though the morning seemed to linger  
O'er the hill-tops far away,  
Now the shadows bear the promise  
Of the quickly coming day.

Soon the mists and murky shadows  
Shall be fringed with crimson light,  
And the glorious dawn of freedom  
Break refulgent on the sight.

## **VI. Making It a Memorable Learning Moment**

Early Watch Night Services featured a traditional evening of spirituals, sermons, and prayer that lasted until midnight or until dawn. Traditionally, these services featured the leaders, members, and choirs of one to two congregations. Home pastors and preachers were the likely speakers of the evening. Over the years, however, Watch Night Services have evolved dramatically in African American congregations. In the post-World War II era and throughout the late 1960s, Watch Night Platform Services became increasingly popular. While more elaborate services, sometimes featuring singular guest speakers and choirs, have become increasingly popular in many congregations, Platform Services are an option that hearkens back to more intimate service structures.

### **Format:**

Watch Night Platform Services were generally designed to be lively, often beginning at or after 10:00 PM on Watch Night or Freedom's Eve. Observances may have unofficial starts earlier in the evening, when church leaders and congregants may choose to arrive earlier to tarry in prayer and prepare for the service by singing older, traditional spirituals and hymns. As the service is called to order, a pastor or home preacher may assume the role of Master/Mistress of Ceremonies, or s/he may appoint this role to another member of the ministerial staff. Over the course of the evening, approximately 4–7 members of the ministerial staff or guests (often from local or affiliated churches) come forward to deliver brief sermons, ranging in length from 7–15 minutes. These sermons are usually connected to a broader theme or are based upon individual themes or verses that have been assigned to each speaker. In between sermons, soloists and choirs render selections, or congregational songs or hymns are sung.

The service is timed to allow for the preaching of all sermons and a period of at least 10–15 minutes after the last sermon and song. During this final period, the pastor, guest, or home preacher addresses the congregation, summing up the major themes of each speaker and, if possible, tying all sermons and selections to a general theme for the evening. This theme can encourage a grateful heart, a recommitment to faith, a reverence for the sacrifices of forebears, or a call to embrace the church mission of the coming year. After this summation, the pastor, guest, or home preacher leads the church into prayer as the final moments of the year approach. The church can be invited to pray while standing, while gathered at the altar, or while kneeling at their seats. As the clock approaches midnight, discernment can be applied. Should the prayer end before the New Year arrives, the Mistress/Master of ceremonies may choose to lead a countdown to the stroke of midnight, or s/he may appoint another church leader to do so. Congregations may also choose to remain in prayer as the New Year arrives.

### **Stroke of Midnight:**

Customarily, the stroke of Twelve or the end of the prayer signals an occasion for celebration in Thanksgiving for freedom from bondage, preservation from one year to the next, life itself, and the witnessing of a New Year. The Music Ministry, church leadership, and congregants are invited to offer thanks, praise, and song for as long as the congregation and leadership desire.

### **Optional Fellowship:**

Platform services can be paired with Fellowship dinners or early breakfasts. Meals served as part of the Watch Night Services include large traditional breakfast featuring pancakes or biscuits or the traditional African American meal of the New Year—collard or turnip greens, yams, and black-eyed peas.

## **VII. Other Watch Night Resources**

- The United Church of Christ published a guide titled “Behold, A New Thing: Ideas for Celebrating a Service of Watch Night” in 2002. This guide includes suggestions for worship songs, a testimony period, and prayers. It also includes an original poem titled “Watch Night,” written by the late Charyn D. Sutton. The PDF is found at the following link: [www.ucc.org/worship/worship-ways/pdfs/2007/07Behold-A-New-hing.pdf](http://www.ucc.org/worship/worship-ways/pdfs/2007/07Behold-A-New-hing.pdf)
- Visit the companion website for the 2005 PBS documentary “Slavery and the Making of America,” which includes selected recordings of African American’s testimonies from their experiences in slavery. Online location: <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/>
- For additional information on Watch Night Celebrations and Recollections, services, consult these books:
  - William H. Higgins, Jr. O Freedom!: Afro-American Emancipation Celebrations. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987.
  - Mitch Kachun. Festivals of Freedom: Meaning and Memory in African American Emancipation Celebrations, 1808–1915. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006.

- Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steven F. Miller. Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk about Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Emancipation. New York: The New Press, 1998.

### **VIII. Watch Night Service Audio Visual Aids**

- Thomas Nast’s iconic Emancipation drawing which serves as the image for this unit. Online location: <http://faculty.isi.org/media/images/originals/Emancipation.jpg>
- The Adinkra symbol, Fawohodie, symbolizes “independence, freedom, and emancipation.” Online location: <http://www.adinkra.org/htmls/adinkra/fawo.htm>
- The Moses Hogan Chorale delivers a traditional interpretation of “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel?” Online location: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s01OOrPIsgk&feature=related>
- The Howard University Gospel Choir sings “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel?” Online location: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=26a\\_pUQfkDc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=26a_pUQfkDc)
- Greater Atlanta Adventist delivers an innovative rendition of “Walk Together Children.” Online location: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Q9VhEsuCY0>
- A week after the first Watch Night Service, a group of newly freed African Americans travels to Union encampment in North Carolina. Online location: <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/multimedia/12531>
- An illustration depicting Emancipation. Online location: <http://www.africanaheritage.com/graphics/images/EmancipationIllustration.jpg>
- Abraham Lincoln and his Emancipation Proclamation. Online location: <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/pga.02797/>

### **Notes**

1. “The African American Odyssey: The Civil War.” LOC.gov. Library of Congress. Web. 21 Mar. 2008. Online location: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/aahtml/exhibit/aopart4.html> accessed 6 August 2011.
2. Higgins, William H., Jr. O Freedom: Afro-American Emancipation Celebrations. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987. 26.
3. “The Emancipation Proclamation, January 1, 1863: A Transcription.” National Archives and Records Administration. Web, n.d. Online location:

[http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured\\_documents/emancipation\\_proclamation/transcript.html](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured_documents/emancipation_proclamation/transcript.html) accessed 6 August 2011

4. Higgins, William H., Jr. O Freedom: Afro-American Emancipation Celebrations, 26.
5. Gates, Henry Louis Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, eds. The Norton Anthology of African American Literature, 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 2004.
6. Ibid.
7. "Oh Freedom." African American Spiritual. Public Domain.
8. Franklin, John Hope and Alfred A. Moss, Jr. From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans, 7th ed. New York: McGraw Hill, 1994. Also, Hine, Darlene Clark, William C. Hine, and Stanley Harold. The African American Odyssey, 3rd ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2006.
9. "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel?" African American Spiritual. Public Domain.
10. "Walk Together Children" by Val Limar Jansen and Frank Jansen. Online location: <http://www.spiritandsong.com/compositions/78532> accessed 6 August 2011.
11. "Walk Together Children." African American Spiritual. Public Domain.
12. "The John Wesley Covenant Service." Zephyrhills Wesleyan Church. Web, n.d. Online location: [www.zhillswesleyan.org/Covenant\\_Service\\_for\\_printing.pdf](http://www.zhillswesleyan.org/Covenant_Service_for_printing.pdf) accessed 6 August 2011
13. "Our Heritage." Home Moravian Church. Online location: <http://homemoravian.org/tradition/our-heritage/> accessed 6 August 2011
14. Higgins, William H., Jr. O Freedom: Afro-American Emancipation Celebrations, 26.
15. Ibid., 26–27.
16. Franklin, John Hope and Alfred A. Moss, Jr. From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans, 208.
17. Ibid.
18. Forten, Charlotte. "Life on the Sea Islands: Part II." The Atlantic Monthly 13.80 (1864), Project Gutenberg. Web. 16 Nov. 2006. Online location: <http://infomotions.com/etexts/gutenberg/dirs/1/9/8/2/19827/19827.htm> accessed 6 August 2011
19. Higginson, Thomas Wentworth. Army Life in a Black Regiment (1869). Project Gutenberg. Web. 23 Mar. 2009. Online location: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/6764/6764-h/6764-h.htm> accessed 6 August 2011

20. Ibid.

21. Berlin, Ira, Marc Favreau and Steven F. Miller. Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk about Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Emancipation. New York: The New Press, 1998. 276.

22. Ibid., 245.

23. Douglass, Frederick. Life and Times of Frederick Douglass (1892). UNC-Chapel Hill University Library: Documenting The American South. Web. 2004. 429. Online location: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/dougl92/dougl92.html> accessed 6 August 2011

24. Ibid., 429–430.

25. Turner, Henry M. “Reminiscences of the Proclamation of Emancipation.” African Methodist Episcopal Church Review 29.3 (1913): 211–214. Ohio Historical Society. Web, n.d. 213. Online location: <http://dbs.ohiohistory.org/africanam/det.cfm?ID=2356> accessed 6 August 2011

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Forten, Charlotte. “Life on the Sea Islands: Part II.”

29. Gates, Henry Louis Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, eds. The Norton Anthology of African American Literature.

30. Harper, Frances E. W. “President Lincoln’s Proclamation of Freedom,” (1863). Poets Corner. Web. 2001. Public Domain. Online location: <http://www.theotherpages.org/poems/2001/harper0103.html> accessed 6 August 2011.