



WATCH NIGHT CULTURAL RESOURCES

Monday, December 31, 2012

Ralph Wheeler, Guest Cultural Resource Commentator
Attorney, Civil Rights Activist, Storyteller

I. Introduction

As it is for many people around the world, New Year's Eve (the day before New Year's Day), especially the time approaching midnight, is an important time of the year for most Americans. At that time, celebrations big and small, public and private, traditional and non-traditional are held all over the Country. Millions of people, who on any other night would be sound asleep, are instead, on New Year's Eve (near midnight), wide awake—many with their children, some with their neighbors, others with their friends, and still others with their fellow congregants or office colleagues.



Year after
sometimes in
other times at
“watch” the old year out and the New Year in and to celebrate the beginnings of new hopes and new dreams.

year, they gather,
the same place and
different places, to

Following the annual practices of African American churches, Watch Night has been a mainstay on The African American Lectionary’s black church calendar since the Lectionary went online as a major resource for African American Christians and congregations. This year, on Watch Night (December 31, 2012), The African American Lectionary provides members of African American denominations, congregations, and communities with an opportunity to examine their lives to determine where they have fallen short and to cry out to the Lord for forgiveness, correction, courage, and direction—all for the sake of our children. The call is for an urgent cry of intervention for our children and for God to give us the ability to live 2013 as better guardians and better examples of Christ than we were in 2012.

Again this year at Watch Night services, every black Christian is urged to focus his or her attention, hopes, and re-commitments on the children of the village. We are urged to cry out to God for the children. God’s intervention is entreated as a remedy for the ills faced by our children and for our failings as guardians.

II. Watch Night: The Historical Perspectives and Documents

At some point, the Watch Night tradition began to have, and continues to have, special significance for African Americans. Each year, Watch Night services are held across the nation in thousands of African American churches, regardless of denomination.

In times of old, black Christians, old and young living in cities and rural hamlets, traveled in the dead of winter by car, bus, train, foot, horseback, buggy and wagon to attend watch night services—many at churches, structures, and “church meeting houses” that were lighted by coal oil, heated by wood-burning heaters, and serviced by outside toilets. Watch Night was and is an important tradition for black Christians.

The historical roots of Watch Night celebrations in the African American community are difficult to untangle. They are buried in more than two full centuries of fused American and African American culture and history, causing the beginnings of this tradition to be disputed.

Some trace its roots back to a Moravian Christian sect located in what is now called the Czech Republic.¹ Others try to connect Watch Night roots to the Methodist Movement of 1733. And, some cultural historians contend Watch Night services in the black community were birthed December 1862, as an outgrowth of the Freedom Eve’s celebrations, when blacks and whites waited for news of whether President Lincoln would issue the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing slaves in those States that were at war with the United States.²

Admittedly, the Watch Night services of 1862, whether held at all black, all white, or racially mixed Methodist churches, Baptist churches, or churches of other denominations, were important Watch Night services; however, clear and convincing evidence is still lacking to allow us to definitively declare them to be the first African American Watch Night services.

Prior to December 1862, African Americans had watched and waited for other announcements of freedom from their government. Those announcements did not come. For example, they watched and waited for an announcement of emancipation during the summer of 1862, but President Lincoln did not issue any emancipation proclamation that summer.³

Also, there were times when announcements of freedom were issued but subsequently revoked or nullified. In their momentous work on slavery, From Slavery to Freedom, historians John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr. write:

“As ... [Lincoln] evolved his plan on emancipation, he was viewed ... unfavorably because he felt it necessary to restrain enthusiastic officers who emancipated slaves without his authorization. In 1861 Gen. John C. Fremont proclaimed military emancipation in Missouri, but Lincoln had to modify his action in keeping with the Confiscation Act. In 1862 Gen. David Hunter proclaimed that slaves in Georgia, Florida, and South Carolina were to be forever free. When Lincoln learned of this order ten days after it was announced, he immediately issued a proclamation nullifying it ...”⁴

Further, any serious examination of the beginnings of African American Watch Night services must, I believe, start at the beginning. The beginnings did not start in either 1773 or 1862. The beginnings have neither Methodist nor Moravian DNA. To say otherwise is to ignore the:

- a. landside cries, protests, revolts and uprisings of our captured ancestors;
- b. ancestral cries and wails that rose to the heavens from the bowels of slave ships;
- c. connections that our ancestors made with a Christian God even while they suffered at the hands of fellow “Christians” in a country that was birthed half free and half slave;
- d. the beliefs and faith that our ancestors held onto while they “watched” and “waited” day after day, year after year, century after century for deliverance;
- e. watching and waiting that occurred in huts and brush harbor churches of an enslaved people, long before President Lincoln was born and even before there was a United States Constitution;
- f. “Invisible Institution” that had its beginning roots in the belly of Africa;
- g. coded Spirituals that were created and transmitted as joy builders, heart up-lifters, and heavenly pleas;
- h. prayers at midnight, dawn, and mid-day that were prayed to a Christian God whose silence must have caused some to ask: “Lord, how long?”;
- i. watching and waiting for Godly intervention to stop the beatings, hangings, and murders of our ancestors;
- j. watching and waiting for Godly intervention to prevent and stop the unabated rape of our ancestral mothers, grandmothers, sisters, aunts, and cousins; and
- k. watching and waiting for Godly intervention to prevent and stop the sale of their children and destruction of their families.

Can we yet count the Watch Nights that our ancestors endured prior to ever hearing of the Moravian Christians, Methodism, or President Lincoln and his Emancipation Proclamation? Moreover, shall we dare ask how many Watch Nights our ancestors endured before the border states’ slaves were set free, before all blacks got the right to vote, before they got the right to a public education, and before they began to enjoy other economic and political rights of American citizens? Let us count the nights. Let us recall their laments.

Further, any serious investigations that attempt to pin an actual date on the beginnings of Watch Night must also consider the evolving purposes of the tradition and the conditions that made Watch Night necessary. Each significant period of African American history surely has had an effect on African Americans’ evolving purposes for and institutionalization of Watch Night as a

sacred tradition. For example, are we willing to say the purposes and emphases of Watch Night always have been fixed or are the same for all periods of our history: (a) the original capture of our ancestors; (b) the middle passage; (c) the plantation experience; (d) the thirteen original colonies experience; (e) the sharecropper experience; (f) the separate but equal experience; (g) the Jim and Jane Crow experience; (h) the Civil Rights era experience; (i) the affirmative action experience; and (j) the prison-industrial complex era experience? If we look closely, we will come to understand that Watch Night and the reasons and needs for it have evolved with the times.

Some of the modern purposes of Watch Night are to:

1. conduct a vigil to usher out the old (current) year and welcome the dawning of the New Year;
2. thank God for bestowed mercies, granted grace, fulfilled promises, and received blessings;
3. lay forth our expectations and hopes for the New Year;
4. seek forgiveness for our transgressions and seek strength to do better in the New Year; and
5. praise, honor, and glorify God, through Jesus Christ, for our family, friends, community, nation, and world.

Regardless of where or when the African American Watch Night tradition began, the tradition, over the years, has taken hold as a unifying cultural phenomenon. African Americans all over the country and in churches of all denominations, social clubs, convention halls, public spaces, and private homes now celebrate Watch Night annually. Their methods of celebration may differ but many of their reasons for celebration are similar.

In the present instance, we are encouraged to use Watch Night to cry out to God for all African American children and to recommit ourselves to improving their condition.

A more thorough analysis of the traditional arguments regarding the history of Watch Night and its related cultural underpinnings can be found in the African American Lectionary Cultural Resources 2007, 2008, and 2009 Watch Night units that were prepared respectively by Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon, William Wiggins, Jr., and Jonathan Langston Chism.⁵

III. Lamenting for the Children



a. **An Overview of the Conditions and Needs**

The Children of the village are in trouble. The signs of trouble are everywhere. If we listen closely, we can even here them crying out for help. They are shouting at us through: their music, sexual exploits, gunfire in the streets, rejection of our mores and values, embracement of short life spans for themselves and others, colossal low school achievements, and the public broadcasting of their life and personal failures on social media and television. The children of the village are in trouble. Their needs are great. Time is of the essence.

We are their guardians and are responsible for their well-being. They are our children. The negative declines are occurring on our watch. It is time for us to cry out to God for our children. “Portrait of Inequality 2011: Black Children in America”⁶ details the following negative conditions and demonic forces with which village children are wrestling:

- Over 70 percent of black babies are born to unmarried mothers, more than twice the rate for White babies and higher than any other racial or ethnic group.
- Black babies are more than twice as likely to die before their first birthday as white babies.
- Black children are 63 percent more likely than white children to be uninsured.
- On average, black children arrive at kindergarten and/or first grade with lower levels of school readiness than white children.
- Black children spend more time on average watching television daily, are less likely to have regular mealtimes, and have far fewer books than white children.
- In fourth grade 85 percent of black children cannot read or do math at grade level.
- In twelfth grade 84 percent of those black students who have not dropped out of school cannot read at grade level and 94 percent cannot do math at grade level.
- Black students consistently score the lowest of any racial/ethnic student group on every section of both the SAT and the ACT college entrance exams.

- Black males age 18 and over in 2008 represented only five percent of the total college student population but 36 percent of the total prison population.
- Nearly half of black households with children live in asset poverty, meaning they would be living below the poverty level within three months of losing their jobs or other income.
- Black children have the highest rates of abuse and neglect. In 2009, nearly 30 percent of deaths from child maltreatment were black children.
- More than half of the males 15 to 19 killed by firearms in 2007 were black.
- The number of black children and teens killed by gunfire since 1979 is more than 10 times the number of black men, women, and children of all ages lynched in American history.
- In 2008, blacks constituted 17 percent of the youth population (10–17). They constituted: 31 percent of all juvenile arrests; 26 percent of all juvenile arrests for drug abuse violations; 52 percent of all juvenile arrests for violent offenses; and 58 percent of all juveniles sent to adult prisons.
- Fewer than 40 percent of all black children live with two parents, compared to about 75 percent of white children.

These dismal statistics do not bode well for either black children or the black race, yet they are not immutable.



b. Real Change Is Possible

The negative conditions and evil forces that afflict and torture our children can be overcome. The problems they have are solvable. Their dreams and futures can be reclaimed. Their foundations

can be repaired. Their vision can be restored. Their lives can be reoriented. They can be healthy again.

Real change is still possible, if we only believe, embrace, and judiciously employ the resources that we have, and utilize the tools and weapons that are available to us. Burying our head in the sand, however, is not an appropriate response.

A recent study by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (the CDC) hammers home this point. That study shows that: “Black teenagers in the United States have become much less sexually active over the past two decades, and those who do have sex appear to be more likely to use condoms...” The new CDC study indicates that: “[o]verall teens of all racial and ethnic groups are about as sexually active as they were a decade ago. And the rate of condom use by teens—just six in 10 used them the last time they had sex—hasn’t changed much since the 1990s.” However, in the case of African American teens, the CDC was surprised to find that: “[b]y contrast, the numbers for black teens are strikingly different. The percentage who reported ever having sex fell from 82 percent in 1991 to 60 percent in 2011.”¹⁰

Those numbers, according to the CDC, “... coincide with drops in teen pregnancy and births.” While the study does not indicate why black teens have changed their sexual practices, the CDC indicates the behavioral changes could have resulted from: “[i]ncreased education about HIV/AIDS among blacks, leadership in the black community, and a public health focus on black Americans could explain the change ...”¹¹

Undoubtedly, black churches, although most have been extremely slow to speak out about the HIV/AIDS crisis, had something to do with helping to bring about these behavioral changes among black teens. A number of black churches, especially large ones, have been on the forefront of fighting HIV/AIDS. With proper focus, leadership, and money, coupled with God’s help, significant gains and strides can be made with many of the other ills that plague black children and youth. Watch Night can be a starting point.

To plant and nurture new seeds of hope, envision new possibilities of change, and create and find new ways to overcome the negative conditions that are stealing our children, sapping their energies, and festering their dreams, we can begin by looking at two great examples who, under extreme conditions, became overcomers. The conditions they faced were a billion times more negative, difficult, and unrelenting than the ones currently faced by us and our children, yet they were successful.

The first example is Jesus. When faced with the greatest and most painful situation of his life—death upon the cross—he cried out to God, his Father. He lamented honestly to his Father about his despair and the other conditions that faced him. And he prayed openly. His Father answered, and ultimately he was endowed with all powers—those necessary to defeat his current challenges and those necessary to fulfill his dreams and his mission. He cried out. His enemies were defeated, including death and the grave.

The second example is our ancestors. When snatched from their homeland, transported in chains to a foreign land to live and work as slaves under violent conditions unmatched in human

history, and stripped of their languages and dialects and made to speak a foreign tongue, they cried out to God.

They lamented honestly to their God about the dehumanizing conditions they faced—broken homes, prohibitions against marriage and learning to read or write, beatings, hangings, rapes, torture, and children and family members being sold as chattel. They cried out to God openly and privately—sometimes in coded language, since praying often was not allowed.

In spite of this, they—our ancestors—invented a new religion, torn and quilted from broken memories of African theologies and the traditions of their masters. They created new forms of music blues, jazz, gospels, and spirituals. They encouraged themselves. They envisioned freedom, believing it would come, even though their condition spoke vehemently otherwise. Listen to an eyewitness account: Miss Susie King Taylor, a black Civil War nurse, gives her personal account of one of her slavery experiences about freedom. This account depicts how strongly our ancestors believed freedom would come and how earnestly they believed God would be their deliverer:

“I remember, one night, my grandmother went out into the suburbs of the city to a church meeting, and they were fervently singing this old hymn.

Yes, we all shall be free,
Yes, we all shall be free,
Yes, we all shall be free,
When the lord shall appear.”¹²

They never stopped believing. They never stopped crying out to God. Ultimately, their God answered and freedom did come.

This Watch Night and every day and night thereafter we must cry out to God to deliver us and our children from our life-smothering conditions. We must lament honestly to God. We must pray openly to God. We must encourage ourselves. We must envision a new village with healed children.

Then, we too can invent a new language and put it in the mouths of our children. We too can create a new music and give it to our children. We too can refashion our religion and theology to minister to our children. We too will be able to envision a new freedom, one where are children are whole and new. Ultimately, God will answer. Then our enemies will be defeated and our children will be able to tell their children’s children about us and how they were healed. We must cry out to God for all children of the village.

IV. A Prayer Group Experience



Approximately twenty-five years ago several of my friends and I started an intercessory prayer group in Marin City, California. Later, several other friends joined us. We each came from different religious orientations (Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Prysbertarian, Church of God, and Church of God in Christ). Religious affiliation was not and is not a concern of our Prayer group. For twenty-five years, we have met monthly, in members' homes, rotating from Marin City to Oakland. Our sole purpose is intercessory prayer work. Prayer is a long-standing African American cultural resource. It changes things.

While children are not the only concern of our prayer group, crying out to God for children has been one of our primary prayer focuses—because the need is so great. At times, parents and guardians have brought their children to us for prayer. At other times, the names of children, along with their prayer concerns and needs, have been brought to the prayer group for prayer. On a few occasions, children have sought prayer for themselves and their families. Over the years, we have prayed and continue to pray for many children in different parts of the country and a few other parts of the world, as some of our members have friends in other countries. We also pray for local, state, national, and world conditions that affect children—named and unnamed. We cry out to God for fair and just government policies that speak to the needs of children.

Too, at special times, including Watch Night if the Holy Spirit moves us, we have focused prayers for children who are: incarcerated; involved in gang activities; raising themselves; alcohol- and drug-addicted; involved in human trafficking; located in war torn countries; living in countries and places without clean water and insufficient food supplies; homeless; living in abusive situations; mired in poverty and living with a spirit of lack; in school; school dropouts; and who are seeking love in all the wrong places.

Further, when schools are about to re-open after summer vacation, we pray for children everywhere. We pray that they will have a successful school year and we pray against all negative forces that would seek to come against them in their educational environments.

Over the years, God has answered our prayers and has been moved to: heal several seriously ill children; restore runaway children to their parents; return troubled foster care children to reformed and healthy environments—sometimes with their parents and sometimes with other loving guardians; provide scholarships, jobs, housing, and other resources that were needed by the children who were the focus of our prayers; heal broken relationships between children and their parents; and open doors for children that needed to be opened.

Moreover, one of the major blessings of our prayer work over the last twenty-five years is to have witnessed a number of the children we have prayed for grow up to finish school and college and start families of their own, as successful adults. Now, we pray for their children.

Our prayer work is not always easy. It is serious work. The conditions and situations brought to the prayer group are often complex, thought to be hopeless, and laden with years of neglect, anger, and failure. Often people have tried everything else before they turn to God and prayer. Then they are often seeking immediate results.

However, our faith is independent of all of that. We believe regardless of the other individual's level of faith and despite the complexity of the problem. Our faith, though sometimes smaller than the size of a mustard seed, anchors us, puts the person's prayer needs in perspective, and constantly reminds us that all things are possible if we believe.

Yet, there are bright lines. In this capacity, we are not lawyers, doctors, social workers, counselors, teachers, or preachers. We are intercessory prayer warriors. We respect those boundaries.

So, if you are thinking about starting an intercessory prayer group, I suggest that you keep the bright lines in mind. I also encourage you do some personal prayer work before you start. Through your personal prayer work, you may be led to know whether intercessory prayer work is your calling.

The need is great, especially where our children are concerned.

V. A Personal Watch Night Memory

My most memorable Watch Night service was the last one I spent with my Mother on December 31, 1997. Daddy had died nearly two years earlier. Mother, who to my knowledge had never missed attending Watch Night services at our home church, was not feeling up to going that year. She, unbeknownst to her or any of us, was battling pancreatic cancer that, by mid December of 1998, would prove fatal.

Everyone else in our family attended Watch Night service either at our local church or at some other nearby church. Mother and I had a private Watch Night service at home—just the two of us. Together, we sang our favorite hymns, read scriptures, gave our personal testimonies, and thanked God for His faithfulness. It was a very moving and touching experience.

As midnight approached, Mother summoned an incredible amount of energy—it was as if she was no longer ill. An unspeakable joy came over her. She beckoned me closer. I obeyed. We went on our knees—we joined hands. And Mother began to pray and cry out to God in a very humble but fervent manner.

It was a prayer of thanksgiving. Her sweet, soft voice was filled with strident earnestness, rich gratefulness, and sincere appreciation. She thanked God for her life and for the life and joy of each of her children, calling out each of them by name. At no time did she focus on her illness. At no time did she ask for things for herself. It was as if God had already given her enough. Her entire prayer was one of thankfulness, graciousness, and praise.

That Watch Night, the Holy Spirit visited us and we became lost in a spirit of praise and joy. We sang. We clapped. We danced. We prayed. And we thanked God for our church, family, community, nation, government leaders, and members of our family yet unborn.

Before we knew it, the New Year had come. That was the last Watch Night and New Year I would have with my Mother.

VI. Suggestions for Watch Night Services for 2013

For those congregations wishing to hold a children-and-youth-centered Watch Night service, the following suggestions are offered:

1. Consider holding a **Watch Night Jobs Fair** for the youth of the congregation and community to help reduce the high unemployment rate among youth ages 16–19.
2. As a Watch Night and New Year’s pledge, **consider adopting a two-year moratorium on all non-essential church expenditures. Use the savings for tutors and scholarships** for the children and youth of the church and community.
3. Consider conducting a **Children and Youth Watch Night Crusade**:
 - start your planning and organizing months early;
 - poll the children and youth of your church and community to gauge interest and needs;
 - engage children and youth in the planning of the Crusade;
 - identify and commit a sufficient number of trained and prepared children and youth leaders who are properly screened, to satisfy safety concerns and child welfare laws;
 - select a theme that excites children and youth;
 - if your church facilities are large enough, plan different activities for different core age groups in different venues;
 - utilize the music staff to help plan the music, dance, and drama components of the Crusade;
 - include short films, games, talent shows, poetry slams, etc. in the Crusade programming;
 - include children who have special needs in the Crusade activities;
 - invite children and youth to bring their sleeping bags and pillows, making it a sleepover affair.

- prepare plenty of good, healthy food for the Watch Night Crusade participants;
- offer transportation to those participants who need it and for those who may not be able to spend the night; and
- have the entire congregation and members of the community attend a New Year's Day Crusade hot breakfast at the church or a local restaurant. Tell the children and youth how special they are and what great expectations the church and community have for their lives. Anoint them with holy oil and pray a special prayer for them. Give each child a "Children and Youth Watch Night Crusade" t-shirt.

VI. Songs for This Moment on the Lectionary Calendar

Somebody Prayed for Me

by Dorothy Norwood and Alvin Darling

Somebody prayed for me, had me on their mind,
took the time and prayed for me. I'm so glad
they prayed. I'm so glad they prayed. I'm so
glad they prayed for me.¹³

O Lord, Hear Our Prayer

by Stephen F. Key

O Lord, hear our prayer. O Lord, hear our prayer.
Grant the desires within Your will. Help us to wait
and just be still. O Lord, please hear our prayer.
Amen.¹⁴

He Has Done Great Things for Me

by Jessy Dixon

He has done great things for me. Great things, great things.
He has done great things for me.

He has made a way for me. Made a way, made a way.
He has made a way for me.

He will give you victory. Victory, victory.
He will give you victory.¹⁵

Praise Him, All Ye Little Children

Author Unknown

Praise Him, praise Him, all ye little children,

God is love, God is love;
Praise Him, praise Him, all ye little children,
God is love, God is love.
Love Him, love Him, all ye little children,
God is love, God is love;
Love Him, love Him, all ye little children,
God is love, God is love.
Thank Him, thank Him, all ye little children,
God is love, God is love;
Thank Him, thank Him, all ye little children,
God is love, God is love.¹⁶

Notes

1. Chism, Jonathan Langston. Watch Night Cultural Resources, Friday December 31, 2010, www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org/.
2. Ibid.
3. Franklin, John Hope and Alfred A. Moss, Jr. From Slavery to Freedom. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005. p. 230.
4. Ibid., 229.
5. www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org/.
6. "Portrait of Inequality 2011: Black Children in America," www.childrensdefense.org, accessed 24 July 2012.
7. Asthma Statistics, <http://www.aaaai.org/about-the-aaaai/newsroom/asthma-statistics.aspx>, accessed 24 July 2012.
8. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/24411271/ns/health-children-cant-swim/> accessed 24 July 2012.
9. Ibid.
10. "Survey Finds Big Drop in Sexual Activity among Black Teens," <http://healthyliving.msn.com/health-wellness/birth-control/survey-finds-big-drop-in-sexual>, p. 1, accessed 24 July 2012.
11. Ibid.
12. From Slavery to Freedom, 226.

13. Norwood, Dorothy and Alvin Darling. "Somebody Prayed for Me." African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. #505
14. Key, Stephen F. "O Lord, Hear Our Prayer." African American Heritage Hymnal. #657
15. Dixon, Jessy. "He Has Done Great Things for Me." African American Heritage Hymnal. #507
16. "Praise Him, All Ye Little Children." African American Heritage Hymnal. #617