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Watch Night Service

Introduction

It is my pleasure to give an introduction to this Watch Night Service. This concept, although very prominent in the African-American church, can be traced back nearly a century earlier to the Methodists. They basically "kept watch" on New Year's Eve, praying overnight and renewing their covenant with God. Some Methodist churches as well as other churches still hold Watch Night services, but they've become far more popular among African-American congregations.

Watch Night services became a tradition among blacks on that historic eve in 1862, when we gathered in churches on the night of Dec. 31, waiting anxiously to see if President Abraham Lincoln would make good on his promise to enact the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. The presidential order promised to free slaves in Confederate states, a move that would *mark the beginning* of the end of slavery. The Emancipation Proclamation Service was a time to share in the joy and celebrate their new found freedom. This is the link between the Watch Night Service and the Emancipation Proclamation Service.

It's a growing trend across the country for more black congregations to better recognize the connection between Watch Night and the emancipation of the slaves. The service usually lasts past the stroke of midnight on New Years Eve. The services provide a time to look backwards and forwards - a time to reflect and give thanks for the last year and pray for the future, a spiritual way of celebrating a largely secular holiday.

This service is also known as "Freedom's Eve" and includes time for prayer, shouts, songs of joy and praise, testimonies and kneeling to God in prayer. This service can also be incorporated into the celebration known as Kwanzaa. "Matuna Ya Kwanza", which is Swahili, means "First Fruits of the Harvest." This celebration occurs for seven days from December 26th through January 1st. On the final two days, service concludes with a day of remembrance and assessment, which according to founder Dr. Maulana Karenga allows "African people a time of sober assessment of things done and things to do, and a reflection on the life and future of the people." So while Kwanzaa is not a religious holiday, it is a time to reflect on the past and give hope for the future.

As I mentioned, Watch Night service is a way to celebrate the fact that slaves were set free in the New Year. Currently, Watch Night services are held as way to bring in the New Year with God. We now have the opportunity with this service to educate the congregation on the different aspects of the meaning of Watch Night and cause those who have forgotten to remember.

Watch Night services at Mt. Ephraim Baptist Church and many other churches that I know, are usually filled with songs. There are also dancers who either perform

interpretive dance or mimes to a gospel song on stage. Many testimonies are given throughout the service in order to spread the word of what God has done in a particular person's life. Those who testify usually quote a Scripture which helps lead the way to what they consider a blessing in their lives. Our senior pastor, or sometimes a guest speaker, will deliver a brief 30 minute sermon in order to give us something to reflect upon. The pastor will then pray for the meal, give the benediction and then close the service.

After service, is s time for communing with friends and loved ones with a shared meal that is customary for African-Americans on New Years Eve. The meal is full with black-eyed peas for good luck (or pennies, which is a sign of good luck), collard greens and ham to represent prosperity and God's goodness.

Images and visual aids that are used in the service includes a clock that sits behind the pulpit in the choir stand, tools that was used by the slaves, such as hoes, grinders, spades and cotton sacks. There will also be the visual aids that will represent the fruits of the slave labor, such as cotton, tobacco and stalks of wheat. The altar is covered with red, black and green Kente cloth.

The devotion will start with call and response hymns that will be lead by deacons. There will be additional hymns, spirituals and gospel selections that will speak to the anticipation of the slaves waiting for freedom and the looking forward to when freedom is real.

The Christmas season is a time to celebrate Jesus and his sharing in our humanity, and his winning for us the victory over death, the grave, and hell. The themes that are constant through the Christmastide season can be found in the word hope. Jesus as the hope of the world threads through the season. The sharing of the mystery of God's love manifest in Jesus Christ. Christmas is the season of new hope, new joy, and a newfound sense of community. This all leads to the Epiphany where we are to look for the manifestations of Christ in the world.. New beginnings, fresh starts, and additional opportunities from God are themes during this season.

The Watch Night Service flows from the Christmas 1 service. The Christmas 1 service focuses on God's steadfast love for us and His promises that we are never forgotten. God came in the flesh so that we may have a way to abundant life. The slaves waited in great expectation for the promises of God to be realized, which corresponds to the Old Covenant promises – as the slaves watched and waited, so have all people who have waited on the Messiah.