

# “The Historical Legacy of Watch Night”

Devotional: 31 December 2023 – 1 - 6 January 2024

**Read: Luke 2:22-40**

On the night of December 31, 1862, enslaved and free African Americans gathered, many in secret, to ring in the new year and await news that the Emancipation Proclamation had taken effect. Just a few months earlier, on September 22, 1862, President Abraham Lincoln issued the executive order that declared enslaved people in the rebelling Confederate States legally free. However, the decree would not take effect until the clock struck midnight at the start of the new year. The occasion, known as Watch Night or “Freedom's Eve,” marks when African Americans across the country watched and waited for the news of freedom. Today, Watch Night is an annual New Year's Eve tradition that includes the memory of slavery and freedom, reflections on faith, and celebration of community and strength.

Watch Night service is rooted in African American religious traditions. During the first Watch Night, many enslaved African Americans gathered to pray, worship, sing, and dance. At the time, enslaved black people could find little respite from ever-present surveillance, even in practicing their faith. White enslavers feared that religion, which was often used to quell slave resistance, could incite the exact opposite if practiced without observance. They wrote laws that restricted worship and large gatherings, such as that in the 1848 Georgia Slave Code:

“No person of color . . . shall be allowed to preach, to exhort, or join in any religious exercise with any persons of color, either free or slave, there being more than seven persons of color present.”

Despite these laws, enslaved people sought to exercise their own religious customs, including Christianity, Islam, and indigenous faith practices reflective of the homes from which they were stolen. Enslaved people persisted in their faith practices as forms of resistance and freedom.

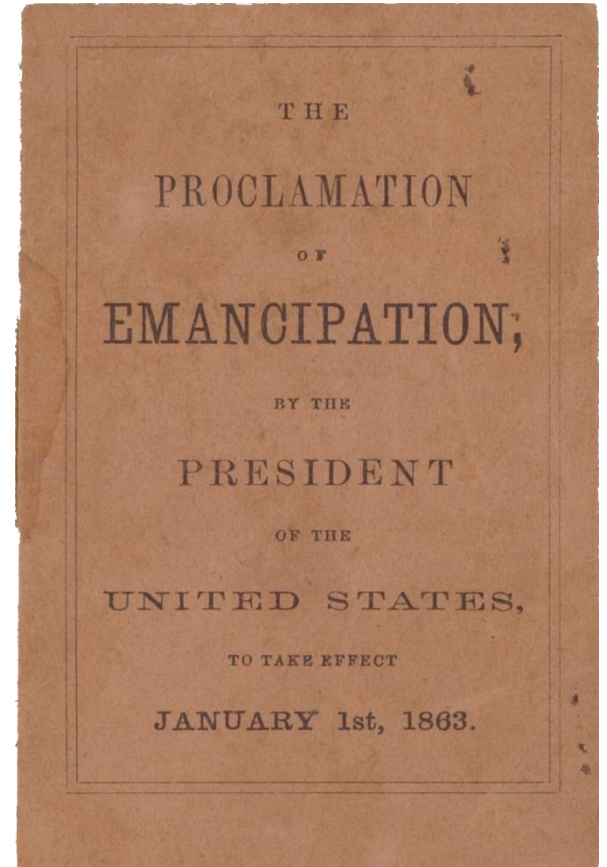
This spirit is still visible in Watch Night services today. The Watch Night service typically begins around 7pm on December 31 and lasts through midnight, as faith leaders guide congregants in praise and worship.

Initially meant to welcome emancipation, today the Watch Night service encourages reflection on the history of slavery and freedom, as well as reflection on the past year—both its trials and triumphs—while also anticipating what the new year will have in store. It is a continuation of generations of faith that freedom and renewal lie ahead.

Do you hear what I hear? Did you sing that this Christmas season? You should have; you still have time. And here on the threshold of a new year, it might be the best time to be a listener. To tune into the music that is playing around us all the time, the music of the spheres, the music of heaven or of creation itself. Do you hear it?

I was given the gift of appreciation of musical ability. That means I can't play any instrument. But I can listen and I appreciate those who can.

Listening doesn't get you many admirers, not like playing does. Yet it is essential for the life or the Spirit. This Sunday after Christmas, or Watchnight service, we get to hear the story of a professional listener. A man who dedicated his life to listening.



And then when the time came, he played. He sang the song he'd been listening for. He sat down to play the tune he learned by ear.

Long story but read it all the way though. Don't skimp on Simeon's story. And don't leave out Anna. We need them. We needed to listen for a while. We need to catch the tune, to follow the rhythms. Simeon learned how to listen. His name means "heard," believe it or not. It was what he was born to do. So, he did. He listened; day and night he listened. He was listening for the future. He was listening for hope, the consolation of Israel, Luke tells us. He was listening for that which would bring peace, that which would bring light. He listened. Day after day, he went to the temple to listen.

But he heard more because he listened deeper. He heard the responses. He heard the sighs of the Spirit as it flowed like wisps of comfort into the hearts of the hopeless and broken. He heard the soothing song of blessing as it played on hearts less in tune than his, but aware, nonetheless, somehow. He heard the invitation of the God he loved: to follow, to obey, to keep close and stay awake, to watch and listen. He heard the commandment not as a hammer on a cymbal, but as a finger plucking a string. He heard; somehow, he heard. Then, that day, he heard the music shift into a higher key, a note of anticipation fulfilled, a baton pointed, a new singer taking the stage. And he followed the Director's gaze. And welcomed the One who comes.

Then Simeon, who lived a life of listening, became a teacher of the song he knew. He sang into the hearts of those who came carrying more than they knew. His song was a gift to the church. "Now let" your servant depart in peace. We've always thought that he was saying it was time to die. Because Luke told us that Simeon was promised that he wouldn't die until he heard what he was listening for. But maybe he is simply saying, "I'm done listening. I've heard all I need to hear. I've heard the voice of the one who sings a song of salvation, who chants the chorus of redemption. My ears are full."

He may be done listening, but he isn't done singing. He must teach the song to those who will sing it. And his colleague, Anna, teaches it to all who are around them, running from one to another to make sure they sing. You can't stand silent in this worship service; you can't have closed lips. Doesn't matter whether you think you can sing or not. We need to learn the tune. The falling and the rising, the major and the minor key, that which makes us smile and that which evokes a tear. We need to sing.

It takes time to learn to listen, but it is worth the effort. The Spirit rested on Simeon, Luke says, rested. Not stirred up, not agitated or poked or prodded, but rested. Maybe if we listen more to the Spirit, the voice of God, we might know rest like Jesus promised. But we can also learn to sing, to play by ear.

Paul learned that song, and he sang it every chance he got. He sang it in the fourth chapter of Galatians. He sang about God sending the Son, about redemption and adoption. He sang to us as children, with the Spirit in our hearts crying "Abba." He sang to us as those set free, as heirs of the promise. It was one of his favorites, a greatest hit he sang again and again.

Isaiah sang the song, too. His song is a fashion song, garments of salvation and robes of righteousness. We look as if we're going to a wedding. We look like a garden in full bloom. We look like a chorus of praise singing in the heavenly choir, serenading the whole world. When Isaiah says "sing," we can't keep silent. Sing until everyone notices, sing until everyone hears. And what they need to hear is not us, not our song, but the composer, the conductor, the source of our music. The beauty of the proclamation of our lives is a pointer to the ongoing presence of the God for whom we sing.

Will we sing into a new year? Will we commit to being the sign of God's presence at work in our world? "I am no longer my own, but yours," we pray with Wesley's Covenant prayer. We ask God to assign our parts, to rehearse us, to direct us so that we can be the choir that is needed in the cacophonous time. And, maybe, some of us will be assigned as listeners, like Simeon. Our proclamation will be the tear of joy that rolls down our face when we hear the music of the One who comes. Praise be to God, now and forever. Amen.

Let us pray: *Today's a new day, a chance for a new start. Yesterday is gone and with it, any regrets, mistakes, or failures I may have experienced. It's a good day to be glad and give thanks, and I do, Lord. Thank you for today, a new opportunity to love, give, and be all that you want me to be. In Jesus Name I pray. Amen.*

**PRAYING TO OUR HEAVENLY FATHER –**  
**YOU'RE NOT ALONE, LET US PRAY WITH YOU & FOR YOU**  
***PRAYERS WILL BE ANSWERED***

- **Mr. Dennis Liepert** has been on an extensive journey of recovery. These last few months have included several hospitalizations. He is feeling weary and worn. We pray to our Living God - Great Physician, thank You for being with Bro. Dennis through all the ups and downs of his life and for the many blessings that You have given him for which we praise and thank You. Merciful God, you know the illness that Bro. Dennis has been struggling with for a long time now. Your precious love has held Bro. Dennis and kept him through this suffering. Now may our prayers of healing and recovery lead Bro. Dennis quickly to a place of restoration. We believe that he is fearfully and wonderfully made and You know every part of his body. You know exactly why he's have been ill for so long. Your children humbly come as intercessory for Bro. Dennis and Ms. Tammy to ask that You would work a full recovery in Bro. Dennis' body - whatever is causing this persistent problem. We believe and look forward to better times for them. Give Bro. Dennis strength and encouragement; he can endure anything with You by his side. We pray that You would, in Your mercy, give him back the health and strength he needs. In Jesus name we pray. Amen. Cards and notes of love and support can be mailed to: **Mr. Dennis and Mrs. Tammy Liepert, 7361 Tower Drive, West Bend, WI 53090.**
- We extend our deepest condolences to Mr. Brett Barnett on the passing of his sister, **Ms. Linda**. Mr. Brett, we all are thinking of you as you remember Ms. Linda's beautiful life. She will live on in your heart. No matter what, you have our sympathy, love, and support. Card and notes of strength and encouragement can be mailed to: **Mr. Brett and Mrs. Mary Barnett, 932 Hillcrest Street, West Bend, WI 53095.**
- Healing and supporting prayers for **Mr. Robert (Bob) and Mrs. Joy Kuhaupt**. Both Mr. Bob and Ms. Joy are experiencing significant health challenges and ask for your caring and supportive prayers. Card and notes can be mailed to: **Mr. Robert and Mrs. Joy Kuhaupt, Sussex Mills Apts., W240 N6345 Maple Ave., #116, Sussex, WI 53089.**
- **Mrs. MaryLou Himes** is recovering from eye surgery. Lord, our Divine Healer and Protector, we approach Your throne of grace with faith, seeking Your restorative power following Ms. MaryLou's eye surgery. As we step into the recovery process, we remember Your promise to us in Isaiah 41:10, where You said: "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." We beseech You, Lord, to touch the body and eyes of the Ms. MaryLou recovering from surgery with Your healing hand. Guide the process of recovery, restoring vision and optimal health. Lord, during this period, we ask that you grant us the gift of peace that calms our worries, and the patience to wait for Your perfect timing. Holding on to this faith, we offer up this prayer in the powerful name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Cards and notes of encouragement can be mailed to: **Mrs. MaryLou Himes, 1800 Annie Street, #4, est Bend, WI 53090.**
- **Ms. Mary Rogge** had Rotator cuff surgery on 10 November 2020. She is completing physical therapy. Ms. Mary is appreciative for your cards and notes of encouragement and love. We give God thanks for Mr. Roger and the Family, who are supporting and caring for Ms. Mary. Cards and notes of love and encouragement can be mailed to: **Mr. Roger and Mrs. Mary Rogge, 4436 Magna Vista Drive, Jackson, WI 53037.**
- **Ms. Sandy Wamser** is home; thanks be to God. She is going through radiation and chemotherapy treatments. She is grateful for your continued prayers for healing, restoration, and strength. She is very appreciative for your love, prayers, and support. Ms. Sandy is also grateful for prayers for Mr. Pat and the Family as they care and support her through this season of treatments and healing. Cards and notes can be sent to: **Mr. Pat and Mrs. Sandy Wamser, 3742 Pleasant Valley Road, West Bend, WI 53095.**
- **Bro. Bob Krell** is rooted in our hearts and prayers as we shower him and the Family with our love, care, and support. It was a marvelous blessing to have Bro. Bob with us in worship last Sunday; "I'm doing well and slowly getting my strength back". We continue to pray for Bro. Bob's healing, restoration, and strength. Thank you, God, for hearing and answering our prayer. Cards and notes of love and encouragement can be mailed to: **Bro. Bob and Mrs. Jean Krell, 804 Lenora Drive, West Bend, WI 53090.**
- **Mr. Michael Cahoon**, son of Mr. Jim and Mrs. Sandy Cahoon, has been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Mr. Mike has started a second round of chemotherapy. Good and gracious God, the odds were overwhelming; you gave

me hope. The opponent was powerful; you gave me strength. I felt alone in the struggle; you gave me a team. I felt like a stranger; you sent cheering supporters. I felt confused; you showed me the game plan. I felt defeated; your words inspired me. I was felt hopeless; you picked me up and put me back into the fight. I feared time was running out; you gave me a new beginning. The cancer cannot win against Your love; against the team of scientists, physicians, and nurses; against the support of my family and friends. Great Physician, you are the guide, you are the motivator, you are the healer; you are Lord. Thank you for helping me to achieve the goal, for leading me to the win. May I now be a champion for others who feel what I felt, who need to know the Power behind every victory. Amen. Cards and notes filled with prayers encouragement can be sent to: **Mr. Michael Cahoon, C/O: Mr. Jim and Mrs. Sandy Cahoon, 1615 Beverly Lane, WI 53090.**

- **Mr. Tom Damp** has been comfortable and safe in his home for years. This has been possible primarily due to home healthcare services. However, with significant changes in coverage from health insurance, availability of in-home health care personnel, and other life circumstances, Mr. Tom is having to make unexpected decisions; stay in his home or transition to assisted living. He asks for your prayers and care as God reveals, God's plan for his new season. Caring Father, we thank you for the opportunity we have as a church family to pray and care for Mr. Tom Damp. We ask that you bless him with the resources to keep safe from harm. Please surround this whole process with your wisdom and mercy, Lord. We pray for Mr. Tom's health and care in this whole process. In the name of Jesus I pray, amen. Card and noted can be mailed to: **Mr. Tom Damp, 1707 Sunset Ridge Drive, West Bend WI 53095.**
- We give thanks and praise that **Mr. Ben Barth**, now husband of Ms. Heather Wolf, granddaughter of Mr. Roger and Mrs. Mary Rogge. Mr. Ben has been released from the hospital after the recipient of a new heart and new lungs to the glory of God. Almighty God, whose Son, Jesus Christ, restored the sick to wholeness of mind and body, bless Mr. Ben on receiving his donated organs. Restore him with the gift of health, that he may continue to serve you with hope and thanksgiving. We pray, too, for the donor and family, whose courage and compassion has enabled the possibility of this transplant. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen. Please overwhelm Mr. Ben with cards and notes for continued healing, strength, and restoration. *Also, extend congratulations on their marriage.* Correspondence can be mailed to: **Mr. Ben and Mrs. Heather Barth, 223 South 11<sup>th</sup> Ave., West Bend, WI 53095.**
- We remain in prayer and support for **Mrs. Ann Cording**. Great Physician, you can heal us in a heartbeat. We pray for God's miraculous healing today. Take our pain away, according to Your will, in Your time. We're not promised a painless life on this earth, but You do want us to live a happy one. Send Your Spirit to help us see past our circumstances and onto Your calling on our lives. Sickness and injury can't stop God-placed dreams. Fill our hearts with hope as we wait on You to move in our lives and flow out from our hearts. In Jesus' Name, Amen. Cards and notes of love and care can be mailed to: **Mrs. Ann Cording, 1416 S. Silverbrook Drive, West Bend WI 53095.**
- **Mr. Chuck Rogge** is still on a journey of healing. He is grateful for the cards and notes of support. Please continue to flood the mailbox with love and support to: **Mr. Chuck and Mrs. Sue Rogge, 5011 Hwy. P, West Bend, WI 53095.**
- **Mrs. Janice Liepert-Kempf**, appreciates your continued prayers for healing and strength as she continues to struggle with illness. You can send emails of prayers and support to: [alankempf33@gmail.com](mailto:alankempf33@gmail.com); or cards and notes to **Mr. Allan and Mrs. Janice Liepert-Kempf, 414B. South Pleasantview Road, Plymouth, WI 53073; phone number: 920.838.1830.**

*We continue to celebrate our 175<sup>th</sup> year of service, commitment and Methodism in West Bend, Wisconsin.*

***"Honoring Our Past, Celebrating Our Present, Anticipating Our Future"***

Prayer: Dear God, thank You for new beginnings. What an incredible day this is with a fresh year's potential stretched out before me. I want to be found faithful this year in each and every opportunity You bring to me. Thank You, Lord, for new beginnings. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

A blessed and amazing New Year to each of you!  
**Pastor Clarissa & Bro. Martin**