

WATCHNIGHT SERVICE [written by Rev. Nancy C. Townley](#)

December 31 or January 1

Premise:

The final night of the year finds many Christians reflecting on the events of the past and looking ahead to the future. This is a night devoted to a new covenant with our Lord, to a new commitment to witness and service. The focus should be light and hopeful, not dwelling on the past, but acknowledging it and looking to the future with renewed hope and enthusiasm. The emotional tempo of the service should be relatively quiet and reflective in the beginning moving toward confident energy at the end. The service may begin at 11 p.m. and conclude slightly past midnight, or it may be held on New Year's Day. Traditionally the color for this service would be white.

Scriptures: Eccl. 3:1-13, Ps. 8 (UMH 743), Rev. 21:1-6a, Mt. 25:31-46

CALLS TO WORSHIP:

Call to Worship #1:

L: What a year this has been!

P: So many things have happened. Some of them have been wonderful; others very sad.

L: In all of this our Lord has been with us, guiding, healing, comforting, and rejoicing.

P: Thanks be to God for God's continual presence with us.

L: Now we are on the threshold to a new tomorrow.

P: We don't know what it will hold for us.

L: In all of what is to come, our Lord will be with us.

P: Guiding, healing, comforting, and rejoicing with us.

ALL: Thank you, Lord, for your steadfast love and presence. AMEN.

Call to Worship #2:

L: Tonight we are keeping watch.

P: Tonight we say goodbye to the old year and look hopefully into the new year.

L: Though the darkness is deep, the Light of the World guides our way.

P: Even though we don't really know what is to come, we know that God is with us.

L: Quietly, reverently, open your hearts to God

P: Praise be to God, who was and is and is to be. AMEN.

Call to Worship #3:

L: In the darkness, God's light shined and the world was born.

Congregation (singing): "Bless the Lord, Oh my soul..."

L: Streaming down through the ages, the prophets witnessed God's love and hope to the world as God continually reached out to God's creation.

Congregation (singing): "Bless the Lord, Oh my soul..."

L: In the fullness of time God's wondrous Light was given to us in the form of a young child that we should come to know God's tender loving care.

Congregation (singing): "Bless the Lord, Oh my soul..."

L: Now again, in the midst of darkness, we stand, eagerly and hopefully, looking into the new world to which God calls us.

Congregation (singing): "Bless the Lord, Oh my soul..."

Call to Worship #4:

L: Welcome to this time of quiet expectation.

P: We have come here from extremely busy times.

L: Come and find rest. Come and find hope.

P: This is the last night of this year; we do not know what is to come.

L: Do not fear. Look with eager joy for the presence of the Lord in your life.

P: Open our eyes, ears, and hearts, O Lord, to receive your message of hope for us.

PRAYERS, LITANY, BENEDICTION

OPENING PRAYER:

Lord of the opening way, we bring to you this night our past, with all that has happened in our lives, our hopes and our dreams, our successes and our failures, our gains and our losses. We bring to you our present, lives filled with exhaustion, wonder, fear, concern. We come to you with hearts open to receive your word for us, for the future. We want to be part of your new heaven and earth, to serve you by serving others. Speak to us, heal us, teach us, lead us, for we ask these things in Jesus' Name. AMEN.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION:

Lord, you have asked us to feed and give drink to those who hunger, to clothe those who are naked, to welcome the stranger, to visit those who are sick and imprisoned. When we look back on this year we might be able to say we did some of those things. We remember the enthusiasm with which we started out this waning year, ready to do your work and witness to your love. But you know how things got in our way. We allowed ourselves to be swallowed up by worries and fear. We placed comfort of self before service to others. We took the "easy way out" whenever we could. And you wept for us. Now we are on the brink of the new year. We cannot change what we did not do, but we can make a covenant with you to be your witnesses in our words, thoughts and deeds to your people so that when you say, "Have you given food and drink to those who hunger and thirst, have you clothed the naked, welcomed the stranger, visited the sick and imprisoned?" We can respond with a joyful "Yes! Lord, we have done these things with joy and love!" Forgive us what we have not done. Inspire us to do what you would have us do. In Jesus' Name, we pray. AMEN.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE:

God is making all things new. The past is over and done. It taught us many lessons. But God is the God of the future, new opportunities, new hopes, new dreams, renewed vision. God dwells with us to be our God. We are not alone. Thanks be to God. AMEN.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Lord, our Lord, how incredible and magnificent is your name in all the earth. Your voice spoke the word of light and the light was given. Your heart shouted hope and love and creation was born. Your tears cried torrents for your errant people, and your prophets boldly stepped forward to proclaim your presence. Your Love streamed down and Jesus the Christ came to us, to heal, teach, guide, and bring us to you. Your Power hovered over us, light a mighty flame, inspiring us to be your witnesses. How magnificent and wonderful you are, O Lord. Now the old is passing away and a new heaven and earth are being born. Lord, we want to be ready to serve you in your new heaven and new earth. We need to let go of the disappointments and fears, and open our hearts to receive your love and blessings for us. This is a time of new beginnings. The past we cannot change. We can reflect on all that has happened and move on into new relationship with you. Let the light of your love shine on us, that we may feel and know your powerful presence with us. Let the light of your love shine in us, that we may be encouraged to use our gifts and talents to serve others. Let the light of your love shine through us, that others may come to know you. In this time of new beginnings, new hopes arise. Give us courage to reach out for the dreams and hopes; give us confidence that we can accomplish much for you. AMEN.

LITANY

P: It is dark. We cannot see very far.

L: Do not fear. God alone can see what lies ahead.

P: We have suffered much, loved much, lost much.

L: Do not fear. God knows your hearts and fears.

P: We have dreamed and watched as dreams have floated away, unfulfilled.

L: Do not fear. God is with you.

[Soloist: (UMH 707 "Hymn of Promise", v. 1)

L Do not let fear and darkness overcome you. God has given the Light for your path.

P: The silence sometimes overwhelms us. The past still shouts loudly at us.

L: Do not fear. God is with you.

[Soloist: (UMH 707 "Hymn of Promise", v. 2)

L: Give your hearts and spirits to the Lord!

P: Lord, we give our hearts and spirits to you this night.

L: Let go of your fears. Place your trust in the Lord.

P: Lord, we give our fears to you. Heal us, Lord.

[Soloist: (UMH 707 "Hymn of Promise", v. 3)

BENEDICTION

Go from this place; not into darkness, although it is night! Go into the Light of God's eternal, inspiring Love. Go to be those who bring peace, love, hope and joy. And God will always be with you. AMEN.

Suggested music

UMH 707 Hymn of Promise

UMH 383 This Is a Day of New Beginnings

UMH 510 Come, Ye Disconsolate

UMH 533 We Shall Overcome

TFWS 2142 Blessed Quietness

TFWS 2210 Joy Comes With the Dawn

TFWS 2211 Faith Is Patience in the Night

ARTISTIC ELEMENTS

SURFACE: Place a riser on the worship center near the back [the Christ Candle will be on this riser]. Place four risers on the main level of the worship center, lower than the center one, on which four other candles will be placed.

FABRIC: Cover the worship center with white cloth, so that it puddles down to the floor. Place four strips of gold cloth, approximately 12-15" wide, streaming down from the center riser, across each of the four risers on the main level. There should be enough fabric so that it also puddles on the floor in front of the worship center.

CANDLES: The large white Christ Candle should be placed on the top center riser. It should be a tall pillar candle, approximately 15", if available. Four additional 8" white pillar candles, can be embellished with gold, may be placed on each of the four risers on the main surface of the worship center.

FLOWERS/FOLIAGE: If you have poinsettias remaining they may be placed at the base of the worship center. If you have white poinsettias, they may be on the worship center, either side of the Christ Candle. If you are using white flowering plants on the worship center, add an iridescent gold ribbon to each pot, to give a sense of glow.

OTHER: If it is your custom to have a brass cross on the worship center, place it behind the Christ Candle.