Bringing in the New Year

New Year’s Eve is one of the great party days of the year. I know people who start planning on January 1, where they will be on December 31, to bring in the new year. Who doesn’t want to be at the best party, with the best music and the best people!

For as long as I can remember I have spent New Year’s Eve evening... in church. In fact, I think I can say without exaggeration that at the stroke of midnight for all 45 New Year’s Eves of my life, I have been on my knees, praying in church. This practice was so engrained in my understanding of spirituality that even when I was in college and could have decided to attend a number of parties, I still made my way to Bethel AME, Tallahassee, to hear Bishop Adam Jefferson Richardson, pray in the new year.

In the Black Church we call it Watchnight Service. The history of Watchnight traces its roots to December 31, 1862, when African American’s all over the United States gathered in churches, waiting for word regarding their impending freedom. Click here (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ESm9Mdj3yQB) for a video about this history. There is an element of Watchnight that also comes from the Wesley Brothers, who encouraged followers of the early Methodist tradition to gather in churches, instead of bars, to bring in the new year.

Watchnight is now one of my favorite worship services of the year. It is a celebration of what God has already done and an anticipatory praise for what is waiting in the new year. More than anything else, being on my knees in prayer, as the clock strikes midnight, gathered with my family, just seems like the right thing to do. Even if Watchnight is not a part of your tradition, offering a midnight prayer, along with your toast and kiss, just might seem like the right thing to do!

- Rev. Cean James, PSEC Associate Conference Minister for Congregational Development