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The end of 2013 can make way to a spiritual 2014

by Mariam Williams

At the Intersection

As 2013 comes barreling to an end, I find myself reflecting on the year that is passing, trying to set S.M.A.R.T. goals for 2014, and pondering an important question: What am I going to do on New Year's Eve?

I'm normally among the three percent of people who tell the *Huffington Post* they ring in the New Year with God, Jesus, or other congregants. In fact, I can count on one hand the number of times in the past 20 years or so I *haven't* been at "watch night" service on New Year's Eve. Watch night at my current church is so crowded that several years ago, the pastor began having two services on Dec. 31. The first ends at around 9:30 p.m. and the next starts at 10 p.m. Even though I favor the early service and technically, I've been watching the clock strike midnight from my couch for the past few years, I still count early service as having spent New Year's Eve with God, Jesus, or other congregants.

And I don't want to do that this year. I feel bad about this. I should feel like David. You know, "Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere." But I'm bored with watch night, and I've started to see it as a service that's not for me. This is silly, I know; God's word is for everyone, and just because the message doesn't hit me at 11:59 p.m. doesn't mean I'll never need it. But I see watch night "at least, the way my current church does this service" as catering to four groups of people: 1) those who really thought the circumstances of the outgoing year would kill them, 2) those who want to thank God for an unusual abundance of blessings he gave them that year, 3) those who said to their mom, girlfriend, husband, or some other significant person, "Fine. Just stop nagging me about it; I'll go to church," or 4) those who said that and who added, "Okay, God. I know I've been a terrible person, but if you let me see the new year, I promise I'm yours."

If my year has been good but stagnant or rough but not to the point of despair, I feel out of place among

those literally running around the church when the pastor reminds them of how the devil tried to kill them that year or of how God gave them something better than what they prayed for. I'm less wowed by the music and preaching than folks who were dragged to church, and far less happy than the people in the last group. When I attended the service that ended after midnight, I could usually tell the Category 4s by a cue from the pastor: "Someone here said they'd give their life to the Lord if he would just get them to the new year. Well, it's 12:01! You made it! Happy New Year!" They push through the people in the pews and bolt down the aisles, tears of joy streaming from their cheeks. They are baptized in large groups every Sunday in January.

The Category 4s are a beautiful sight, and I envy them. I know they've just grasped how much they are loved, and they're feeling the joy of entering into a new relationship with God. It's a feeling I've found hard to rekindle. My relationship with God officially began when I was 12, and 21 years is a long time to try to maintain excitement about someone, even someone as awesome as God. I know that for Christians, feelings aren't as important as acting in ways that show our commitment to God through Christ, and that obedience sometimes produces unexpected gladness despite or in the midst of suffering. But the feeling can also make the commitment easier.

I'm not going to make one of my goals for 2014 to get the feeling back. I can't guarantee that meets the "A" in S.M.A.R.T. but I am going to monitor how I feel about the commitments God asks me to make. The ones that inconvenience me will be the hardest, but I want to arrive at the point where I do them cheerfully nonetheless. I think that could make for a happy New Year, wherever I spend its eve.

[Mariam Williams is a writer born and raised in Louisville, Ky., where she's received numerous arts awards. When not working in the field of social justice research and taking graduate courses in women and gender and Pan-African studies, she blogs at RedboneAfropuff.com. Follow her on Twitter: @missmariamw.]

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