

# The BLACK C o M M e n t a t o r

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analysis and investigations on issues affecting  
African Americans and the African world.

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## **Celebrating the 150th Anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation Inclusion By The Reverend Irene Monroe BC Editorial Board**

This January 1 marked the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation.

The original purpose for the document may have been to free slaves; or it may have been solely a strategic move by President Abraham Lincoln to decimate the Confederate troops stronghold in the South and win the Civil War. Its purpose was probably a little bit of both. Regardless of Lincoln's intent, my ancestors named the day of Lincoln's signing of this historic document Jubilee Day. Many African Americans continue to celebrate Jubilee Day with a New Year's Eve church service called "Watch Night Service."

I grew up in the tradition. Every December 31st there was a mad rush to clean the house, cook a pot of black-eyed peas for good luck, and call folks to tell them that, if God wills, you'll see them in the New Year. Then we'd prepare for the most important event of New Year's Eve, the "Watch Night Service," which always started at ten o'clock that evening, and ended at midnight with us stepping into a new year.

This New Year's Eve many folks joined in on the celebration: Boston's Museum of African American History celebrated the sesquicentennial of President Abraham Lincoln signing the Emancipation Proclamation with a concert by the Handel and Haydn Society Chorus and the story of Boston's role in this historic event. The Huffington Post marked the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation with publishing "[Letters to Our Ancestors](#)", by African Americans.

In celebration this historical moment I was asked what gifts my enslaved ancestors passed on to future generations to assist us in our continued fight for freedom. While clearly there are many, inarguably, one of the greatest gifts my ancestors passed on to African Americans is their use of the Bible as a liberation tool. And ,even today, for many African Americans will contest their Emancipation Proclamation is the Bible.

The Bible, with all its inconsistencies, continues to have moral authority in the African-American religious community. Functioning as a moral text, the Bible is used as a tool to form and to frame a democratic moral order.

For example, they knew that their liberation is not only rooted in their acts of social protests, but it is also rooted in their use of language, which is why they used the Exodus narrative in the Old Testament as their talking-book. Functioning as a talking-book for my ancestors, the Exodus narrative dramatically shifted the discourse on slavery from the authority of white voices to the control of black voices. In so doing, Exodus was used to rebuke themes of silence, exclusion and oppression in the text, which in return allowed my ancestors to represent themselves as speaking subjects outside of the text.

The Rev. Dr. King masterfully contextualized the 1960s Civil Rights Movement in the story of the Exodus narrative, and the church, media and American public saw him as a present-day Moses.

Justice in America for African Americans continues to come slowly, just as it did for my ancestors awaiting the good news that President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation had finally become law. But only slaves in the 10 Confederate States were declared legally free even as the Civil War was still going on.

And to actually pinpoint a single day that all African Americans were free is still difficult given how the states were so strongly divided on the issue of black emancipation.

Massachusetts abolished slavery in 1783, eighty years before Lincoln's edict, and our nation's capitol, Washington, D.C. abolished slavery on April 16, 1862, just eight months before the Emancipation Proclamation. Many other states did not manumit their enslaved until the end of the Civil War on April 18, 1865. And news of the wars end traveled unevenly throughout the country with Texas being the last receiving the news on June 19, 1865, a day celebrated among African Americans as "Juneteenth." The absolute end of the slavery came with

the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, which was passed by Congress on January 31, 1865, and ratified on December 6, 1865.

A century after the Emancipation Proclamation, King stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and said, "one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination."

King is gone from us now and we're in a new century with the election of Barack Obama in 2008 as our country's first African-American president and his reelection in 2012. My ancestors who built the White House could have never imagined that one of their progenies would one day occupy it.

My ancestors were happy about the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, but they also were prescient about our continued long and arduous journey toward freedom, which is why they passed on to us their talking-book and it's still talking for us today.

***BlackCommentator.com*** Editorial Board member and Columnist, the Rev. Irene Monroe, is a religion columnist, theologian, and public speaker. She is the Coordinator of the African-American Roundtable of the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry (CLGS) at the Pacific School of Religion. A native of Brooklyn, Rev. Monroe is a graduate from Wellesley College and Union Theological Seminary at Columbia University, and served as a pastor at an African-American church before coming to Harvard Divinity School for her doctorate as a Ford Fellow. She was recently named to MSNBC's list of [10 Black Women You Should Know](#). Reverend Monroe is the author of [Let Your Light Shine Like a Rainbow Always: Meditations on Bible Prayers for Not'So'Everyday Moments](#). As an African-American feminist theologian, she speaks for a sector of society that is frequently invisible. Her website is [irenemonroe.com](http://irenemonroe.com). Click [here](#) to contact the Rev. Monroe.

