

You have had ample time to recover from New Year's Eve. The fact is that celebrating the beginning of the New Year on January 1 is a relatively recent tradition. In England, from ancient times the tradition was to celebrate the beginning of the New Year on December 25, the day that celebrates Jesus' birth. From the 1300s to the 1700s, the tradition changed so that the new year was celebrated on March 25, nine months before Christmas—in other words, the day that Mary became pregnant with Jesus. The thinking apparently was—since that day marked the beginning of Jesus' existence inside his mother—it was also a good day to mark the start of the New Year. It was not until 1752 that England finally changed and adopted January 1 as New Year's Day.

Today's story about Jesus' baptism isn't about inventing New Year but it definitely is about a new beginning for Jesus. We can note that immediately after his baptism, Jesus begins a new phase of his life as he commences his public ministry. Christian Churches that follow the liturgical year mark that beginning of Jesus' ministry by calling this day "Baptism of the Lord Sunday". One of the main things that Mark's gospel wants us to understand about baptism is that it's a time for us to hear God's voice. During Jesus' baptism, Mark says that the sky opened, the Holy Spirit came down, and Jesus heard God's voice, "This is my Son, with whom I am well pleased." So the challenge for us who are baptized as well is to realize that at the time of our baptism, and throughout the rest of our lives, God is saying the same thing to us: "You are God's son. You are God's daughter. You are someone with whom I am well pleased." And that makes a difference. Many people go through life listening to other voices that tell them that they don't belong; they are unlovely; they are outside God's care. God's voice utters a different message.

The problem is that it's so difficult to hear God's voice amid all the other voices chattering around us. *We need to listen selectively.* Years ago I was serving as a minister in a small Saskatchewan town. The good elders of the church suggested that I might visit an elderly bachelor who had the reputation of being particularly cantankerous. Ed (not his real name) had spent many a day at sea and he retired unwillingly when his health gave out. He wasn't a church-goer and it was somewhat of a surprise that the minister turned up at his door. He waved me in, sat me down at the kitchen table and promptly took out his hearing aid and put it on the table. It was fairly clear, even to a novice minister, that Ed had made a choice about listening. On that particular day he wasn't going to tune in, although another day we had a good time playing cribbage. Even those of us without hearing aides, make decisions about listening. In order to survive we filter out much of what we hear. We hear voices calling out to us on the telephone and on the Internet. But the baptism story forces us to ponder whether, amid all those voices around us, we are tuning in and hearing God's voice. Are we hearing what God is saying?

In listening for God's voice, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish that voice from all the other voices we hear. Two Canadian sea otters were taken to a wildlife sanctuary in Scotland. Eventually the rangers at the wildlife area had to separate the Canadian sea otters from their Scottish counterparts, because the Scottish sea otters repeatedly attacked them and tried to drive them away. Although the two sets of sea otters outwardly appear to be identical to each other, the rangers believe that the Scottish sea otters were able to distinguish a slightly different accent in the Canadian otters' bark. Their hearing could recognize the difference in identity.

Jesus had selective hearing for God's voice calling him. But once he heard there were consequences. Immediately after the baptism Mark notes that Jesus is sent out into the wilderness where he is tested in solitude, for his vocation. Hearing and listening, meant changing. From the moment of his baptism, Jesus' life was filled with changes, filled with new beginnings. There was the change of leaving his parents and brothers and sisters in Nazareth and

striking out on his own. There was the change of constantly being on the move from one town to the next. In the same way through our baptisms, God is also saying to us, "I love you. Now be changed by the experience of that love." Just as Jesus lived a life of change and new beginnings, that is what God hopes for us.

The problem is that change does not come easily to us. We prefer to stay with what we know, with what is comfortable. It's like a bumper sticker that says, "Change is good, unless it happens." In theory, we know change is good. But in practice, when change actually happens and we're affected by it, then we're not so sure that change is as good as we thought it would be. In baptism God invites us to be open to change, so that we can share in the new life, the new day that God is bringing about. Especially when things go badly, we think we are open to change because change will bring something better. Sometimes we believe that the change we need is a new haircut, a new set of clothes, a new car, a new diet.

There was a few years ago, an article in the Times Colonist (page B1, TC, January 3, 2006) entitled, "Buying Happiness". Marian Scott wrote that "Some experts say that the North American penchant for thinking happiness comes in the form of a plasma TV or a new car, creates a population caught on a fruitless and hedonistic treadmill." She attributes this insight to Timothy Wilson, a social psychologist at the University of Virginia. Wilson points out that "consumers scurry after stuff we think will make us happy, only to find once we get it, the thrill quickly wears off. If that were not so, we wouldn't have nearly as many things donated to our Thrift Shops. Things that I once must have thought were desirable, somehow find their way on to the shelf ... where someone else will find them new and pleasing, at least for a short while."

Marian Scott further comments, "Researchers also noted a curious fact. Even though incomes rose dramatically the post-Second World War decades, the level of happiness stayed the same. 'We're much more wealthy than our parents and grandparents, but we're not happier,' Wilson says." The voice that trumpets that you need to have more things in order to be happy, is not necessarily a voice speaking truth. Similarly the voice that says you always need to come first in everything, or the voice that says you will be happier if you give in to addiction, not the same as the voice from God that challenges you to listen and to live sacrificially as one called by God. Those who hear and listen have entered the kingdom of God. Jesus used many parables to help us recognize the kingdom that is around us and in us. We need modern parables to perform the same function as Jesus' parables.

Over the holidays I saw a replay of Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire. One of the central images of the story, other than fire-breathing dragons, is a luminous goblet out of which fire seems to flow. The imagery of Rowling reminds us of earlier literary works based on the quest for the Holy Grail. Harry Potter is drawn into the quest for the Goblet of Fire against his will. There are many voices along the way that would distract him from giving his life to what he must. In the middle of it all, it becomes apparent that what appears to be good is actually evil, and Harry must discern who or what speaks the truth. Rowling creates a kingdom of magic in which to frame questions of meaning and purpose. When the movie or the book ends, we are left with a question: Whose voice shall we heed and whose kingdom shall we give ourselves to?

God's kingdom isn't locked in the past. God's kingdom is also something greater than we create ourselves. Genesis tells us that God brings light into darkness and that being human is to live in relationship with God, along with all the other elements of Creation. Jesus' baptism is an event in which God speaks purpose and covenant. Jesus is God's messenger of the kingdom. The kingdom is both now and not yet. We get there by letting go of our past and our present, and stepping forward in faith; we trust God to lead us to a new beginning, where we can live out what God has called us to do. God has enabled us to hear this Good News. Amen.