

Once upon a time, on the first Sunday of the calendar year, I attended worship at the Presbyterian Church in our neighbourhood. The minister that day asked some very good questions.

I remember that he referred to the fact that a New Year had begun, and he asked what we were looking forward to as Christians – yes, AS CHRISTIANS – in this New Year. He stated that life would be nothing but a lament if we were to look back on the past year feeling, “well, I got through another year.” His question had to do with what we Christians – people baptized into the Christian church – were excited about in the New Year? What part of the mission of the church, or our personal mission in life, did we want to accomplish in the next 12 months?

A New Year can represent a new beginning. People, some people, make resolutions on how they wish to change their lives. Baptism also represents a new beginning. In the Gospel of Luke, there is a gap of 18 years between the story of what happened when Jesus went to the temple with his parents and the story of his baptism in the River Jordan. When Jesus was baptized, it was a new beginning for him.

When Jesus was baptized, his life changed. When we are baptized, our lives change.

When we are baptized we become a part of the world-wide Christian community with a mission to be a part of God’s re-making of this world in the manner that we pray for in the Prayer of Jesus – a prayer that is shared world-wide among Christian communities. Our baptism initiates us into a community with a set of values that are different than those of the secular world.

When Jesus was baptized God’s Spirit descended upon him like a dove, and Jesus heard that he was God’s beloved. When we are baptized God’s Spirit surrounds us, and we are affirmed as children of God by the whole Christian community. Baptism is both a wonderful affirmation of God’s love for us, and a challenge to use our God-given gifts in Christian communities to accomplish God’s mission.

If we were to read further on in the story¹, we would hear that, after his baptism, Jesus was lead / driven by the Spirit into the wilderness where he reflected for 40 days on his new mission in life.

New Years presents us with a time to do something similar; to reflect and pray about what we are to do while God leads us in the next circuit around the sun. What are we excited about in the coming year? What do we want to accomplish? These are questions that apply to us as individual Christians, and to us as a Christian community that calls itself Newtonbrook United Church. They are questions that require some perspective.

¹ Luke 4: 1 - 13

Perspective – and taking time to gain perspective. How do we do that?

There is a professor at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government who has made a name for himself on this issue of gaining perspective. His name is Ronald Heifetz.

Heifetz writes that life can be like being on a busy dance floor. We get caught up in the dance. Our day-to-day activities can consume all of our time. The music of life keeps us going from step to step and at the end of the day we wonder just what we have accomplished, and sometimes we feel exhausted.

According to Heifetz, we need to take time to gain perspective. He says that this is like being in a game, and watching it at the same time. Great athletes seem to have this ability – to step outside themselves and watch what they're doing. Athletes like Wayne Gretzky are reported to have a sense of the game, and are able to anticipate what will happen next.

In the Jesuit tradition, this is labeled, "contemplation in action"; Buddhists call it "karma yoga". Self-reflection, a practice of action and reflection, is a part of many spiritual traditions.

Heifetz writes that,

"We call this skill "getting off the dance floor and going to the balcony", an image that captures the mental activity of stepping back in the midst of action and asking, "What's really going on here?"²

Jesus, in a sense, "went to the balcony" after his baptism. He went into the wilderness to discern what God was calling him to do with his life. This was the first of many times when Jesus would withdraw to pray, and to reflect. Our New Testament Professor at Emmanuel College, Heinz Guenther, said that this pattern is persistent throughout the Gospel According to Luke. The story of the Transfiguration is one example where Jesus is on the mountain, with a few disciples. On the night when he was arrested, Jesus was on the Mount of Olives.

Jesus didn't have a balcony to overlook the hustle / bustle of life – he used mountains – high places where he could gain perspective.

Maybe we could follow that example and use high places to gain some perspective on what God is calling us to do in this New Year, both as individuals and as a congregation.

There happens to be a "high place" handy right here (*a stepladder in the chancel*).

² Ronald A. Heifetz & Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, page 51

From up here I can see that we are baptized into a CHRISTIAN community and our baptism gives us a mission in life; a mission that has values and ethics that are different than those of the world in which we live and contribute our gifts. I see that we are called to be like yeast that lightens up the loaf of the community – a mission that brings the story of God's love to a world that attempts to live as if everything depended upon human efforts.

From this "balcony" I can see that the forces of Empire are currently conducting a "War on Terrorism". This war is being conducted in an atmosphere of fear and violence is being used by both sides. This is different than what Jesus advocated.

On the night when he was arrested, Jesus had to practice the non-violence that he had preached. You may remember that, according to Jesus, you may have heard it said an eye for an eye, BUT I say unto you, do not resist an evildoer.³ Love your enemy;⁴ do good to those who hate you⁵.

These values are radically different than the Empire's reliance on violence.

On that fateful night, one of the disciples had used a sword to cut an ear off of one of their adversaries. Jesus ordered everyone to put down their weapons, and he healed the person whose ear had been severed.

Our baptism calls us to advocate for a non-violent resolution to the "War on Terror." That is not easy, it is a value that we honour because we have been baptized.

From up here I can see that there are powerful forces in the world "out there" that are focused on the false concept of scarcity. They have a propaganda machine that keeps messaging that people can never have enough. "Grab what you can, and keep it to yourself" seems to be the media message.

I can also see that there are Christian communities telling the truth about this lie – and we tell it through a ritual and language called communion. The bread on the communion table is a symbol of plenty in God's world; a symbol that all of God's children will be fed - and that God has provided sufficient food for all.

I can also see that there are people who are wondering about participating in the dance:

- It's hard to dance with arthritis in your hips;
- It's hard to dance when the music has changed;
- It's hard to dance when it feels like the light has gone out of your world;
- It's hard to dance all the time;
- It's hard to dance when the music is fast and my body is slow.

³ Matthew 5:38, 39

⁴ Matthew 5:44

⁵ Luke 6:27

It is not hard to dance when we open our eyes and see that our baptism affirms that we are not alone; God is with us and God loves us all the time. God is not critical of our attempts to dance, no matter how we try. **The Good News is that in Christ, we are all the Beloved.**⁶

It is in trying to dance that we learn what the dance is all about. It is in going to the balcony that we gain a new perspective – we can see the bigger picture.

From up here I can see Christian churches attempting to be “friendly”. Some of them seem to be struggling to keep their building open. Nearly every one of these communities has a “welcome” sign at their door. Are they social clubs for the lonely, or do these congregations have a baptism-driven mission in which others are being invited to participate? Are they excited about what they’re doing?

From this perspective I can also see that God is active outside of churches. It seems that God has put goodness into people’s hearts and maybe God doesn’t need churches to accomplish God’s mission. There are people of other faith traditions, and people of no faith tradition, who are using their God-given gifts to accomplish God’s mission on earth.

From this perspective I can see that there are many who are caught up in the dance of life and who want a new perspective – to see the bigger picture;

- People who want to open their eyes and see a new world of love and acceptance;
- People who want to open their eyes and see a life of purpose; a life of meaning;
- People who want to be encouraged to go to the balconies of life and see what’s really going on.

Taylor, could you lead us in a hymn about being on the balcony?

Hymn: Open My Eyes, # 371 in Voices United

⁶ Ernest Hess in “Feasting on the Word”, page 241