



(The Baptism of Jesus by Mike Moyers)

Susan Shain calls this period immediately following New Year's Day as the "shiny part of the year" when we set goals for ourselves. However, she suggests that we think about ourselves and our lives as if today is December 31, 2019. She argues that reflecting on who we have become at the end of this year will actually help us become that person between now and December 31st.¹

She quotes Dr. McGonigal who recommends reflecting on what changes would make you happiest, then picking a "theme" for your year. That way, even if a particular habit doesn't stick, your overarching intention will.

Take the theme of reducing stress, for example. You might try meditating and hate it. But, since your goal wasn't "meditate 10

minutes a day," you don't have to abandon the resolution completely. Maybe you try yoga next.

Electing a unifying theme will also stimulate your brain to look for additional opportunities to advance your goal, ... McGonigal, whereas narrowing yourself to a single behavior will cause your brain to "shut off once you check it off the list."

This was a novel approach to me: if I reflect on what changes would make me happiest and find a theme to those changes – say better health- then that is a vision I can carry forward day-by-day between now and then even if a particular approach to that goal doesn't work out. It's sure worth a try as my previous New Year's resolutions haven't been very successful!

In a separate article, Ravi Venkatesan, Special Representative for Young People & Innovation at UNICEF², asks why we don't seek to consciously "upgrade" ourselves as often as we upgrade our phones, our hairstyles, our clothes, etc. He uses the work of Dr. Carol Dweck to suggest that our internal selves need an upgrade into a growth mindset rather than a fixed mindset. Upgrading our "internal software" is necessary if we are going to grow into our full potential as the Beloved Community where we recognize each person we see as a child of God.

What does this have to do with our Scripture you are rightly asking! Today's Gospel reading starts with "as the people were filled with expectation" which is a link to the beginning of our own "shiny season" with our own hopes and dreams. Wondering. The "what if's" as the year

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/31/smarter-living/better-habits-tips-new-year-resolutions-science.html> (1/7/2019)

² <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/new-year-become-better-version-yourself-ravi-venkatesan/?trk=eml-email-feed-ecosystem-digest-01-recommended-articles-5-Unknown&midToken=AQFqQHQu0ctnkA&fromEmail=fromEmail&ut=0caYVhZUOUoUA1> (1/7/2019)

begins to unfold with all kinds of new possibilities. How can we build on the past, keep what is good and life giving, and yet be open to new ways of being a community of shared faith and values. Starting new things can be scary. The outcome is not certain. We may make mistakes – and sometimes those mistakes are exactly what we need to move forward in authentic loving community. At the same time, some things we have done for years may have lost their purpose and we need to let them go – even as we are not sure what will replace them, if anything.

I wonder if Jesus as he approached the River Jordan and John the Baptizer was anxious. I wonder if Jesus was aware that he was putting behind him his private life and preparation for ministry. I wonder if Jesus had any conception of what his life would be like once he began his public ministry. His baptism is the hinge between his private life of preparation and his public ministry. Things would never be the same. Using one of my favorite words: Jesus experienced an ontological change as he entered the water and as he came out of the water. Nothing would ever again be the same. There was no way to return to life as he knew it.

The baptism was a necessary step into this new life. Jesus can't stay in the water. He has to get out and get on with his life. His baptism was a "software upgrade" if you will. Jesus, now that he was beginning his public ministry, was both a calming compassionate leader as well as a leader who would burn the chaff with unquestionable fire. The mantle of ministry- of calling out our hypocrisy, our weaknesses, and our sin- has descended upon Jesus as surely as the gentle dove and the voice from heaven. That voice from heaven, whether heard by Jesus alone or everyone gathered there on the banks of the Jordan River, will be Jesus's guide for his time in public ministry and through his death. God is with Jesus, just as God is with us whether the times are good or the times are dark. Whether we have lived up to our potential or failed once again, to hear the words from heaven: You are my child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.

We are promised the abiding presence of God by the prophet Isaiah as well:

Now thus says the Lord, he who created you... Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned ... you are precious in my sight.

Fortunately, this software upgrade of our internal mindset doesn't need a specific type of computer or USB slot. This software upgrade into a growth mindset only requires that we believe God and what is reflected in our Scripture as coming from God. It requires that we reach out to accept the loving hands of those gathered here. It requires that we come forward to receive the body and bread of our Lord Jesus Christ – the ever present reminder that we come to the table for solace **and** for strength, for pardon **and** for renewal. This is not a one-time only promise; it is a promise each and every time we step forward and accept that we are the beloved and that God is well pleased with us. The Holy Spirit descended upon you and me as we were baptized. The oil anointing us marks us as Christ's own forever. Nothing is ever the same once you have received the affirmation that God's has called you God's own.

And yet, it's often really, really hard for us to accept that promise. We know ourselves to be flawed, to sin repeatedly – maybe not in big ways but still and all we fall short time and time again of loving our neighbor as ourselves. Of loving God with whole hearts and minds and spirit. We hold back because we're afraid of what it would mean for us to be that vulnerable.

Debi Thomas puts it this way³:

God has not insulted humanity with so little agency; we get to choose. We *have* to choose. No matter how many times God shows up, we're free to ignore him. No matter how often he calls us Beloved, we're at liberty to retreat into self-loathing. No matter how many times we remember our baptisms, we're free to waste our days, dredging out of the water the very sludge we first threw in. No matter how often we reaffirm our baptismal vows to seek and serve Christ in all persons, we're still at liberty to reject each other and walk away. The freedom in which we live, move, and have our being is so vast, so all-encompassing, and so generous, it can feel overwhelming. But this is love. It doesn't impose. It doesn't coerce. It doesn't assume. It descends as quietly as a dove, and speaks in a voice so gentle, we're free to ignore it.

The challenge to us this early in 2019 is to consider what our relationship with God will look like on December 31st. Will we have grown in trust and in love? Will we have upgraded our internal software to look more Christ like? Or will we have moved farther away from God because of the uncertainties or challenges the year will undoubtedly bring? Consider this week if you have the courage to upgrade your internal software and to become more of what God dreams for you. I hope you'll accept the challenge. **Amen.**

³ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay> (1/7/2019)