

Among the hazards of priesthood is how public one's life becomes. For example, if you want a nice quiet celebration for your 40th birthday, chances are someone will find out and put it on the marquee in front of church. When I walked in here Friday morning one of our school teachers said, "Happy Birthday! You're at your peak at 40; everything's downhill from here." I must have misunderstood--I thought she said Happy Birthday. All the schoolkids came to Mass but they thought it was to celebrate Elvis Presley's commemorative stamp. Dozens of kids made cards for me, like these from the 4th grade: "Happy Birthday, Dude." And next to a cake burdened by candles on every tier Lindsey Cross writes, "Blow hard." Michelle Batliner very kindly diagrammed what "over the hill" looks like. And Melissa Storms cheerfully wrote, "40 isn't old if you're a tree." Then the staff gave me this charming hat. "I'm 40, and I've still got it... it's around here somewhere."

Since my birthday comes at the beginning of the year it lets me think a lot about the year ahead, usually with some positive thoughts. And yet I know that by year's end life will reveal its fullness to me--its joys as well as its pains.

The baptism of Jesus marks the beginning of his public life. I'm sure for Jesus that glorious moment excited him about the work he would do, the teachings he would share, and the friends he would make. Yet the first reading for this feast draws from one of the most sorrowful passages in the Old Testament. Near the end of the Book of Isaiah, we find the words for four songs about a character known as "the servant of the Lord." What distinguishes this character is suffering. We hear all four songs of the suffering servant during Holy Week, because Jesus in his passion fulfills the servant's image. But surprisingly we hear one of the four songs today at the glorious beginning of Jesus' career. The reason is that when Jesus is baptized, we hear the voice of God calling out, "This is my beloved Son. My favor rests on him," which directly echoes today's first reading, "Here is my servant with whom I am pleased." So God's few words conceal a much bigger message: This servant will suffer. God could well have said, "This is my beloved Son; everything's downhill from here."

Buddha said all life is sorrowful, but God calls the servant beyond to save others by suffering. The suffering servant understands the suffering of others. Isaiah gives this beautiful description: "A bruised reed he shall not break, and a smoldering wick he shall not quench, until he establishes justice on the earth." People who suffer are bruised reeds ready to snap or smoldering wicks ready to be snuffed out. The suffering servant will protect the reed and guard the wick, because the servant knows what this is like.

The new year promises joy and suffering, and from our suffering we can help others with theirs.