

Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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December 31, 2005

New Year's Eve

Luke 13:6-9

Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: 1 Peter 1:22-25

Psalm of the Day: Psalm 90

Second Lesson: Isaiah 51:1-6

Gospel: Luke 13:6-9

God Looks for a Fruitful Year

When the year comes to a close, there are certain things you can count on like clockwork, isn't there? When you turn to your favorite radio station, if it plays music, you hear a countdown of the top whatever songs from the past year. If your favorite radio station is a news station, you hear the top whatever stories of the year. You pick up the paper and you can read the same kind of things—top grossing movies of the year, top selling books of the year, top news stories of the year, locally and nationally. And, maybe, if you look real hard, the top Packer player of the year. There are a lot of things that are counted down when you come to the end of the year.

It is good that we take the time and look back and reflect. But, have you ever asked yourself, what is God in heaven counting down? What is he looking back on? What is he looking for as time passes? Does it worry you that he might come up with the top 100 sins you have committed play them back in his mind?

This evening, I think we get a glimpse into what God would be looking for. In this parable that Jesus told some people when he was teaching them about repentance, we can see that God looks for fruit. So as you and I mark the passing of another calendar year, I suppose we could say to ourselves that God looks for a fruitful year. As we look back, I suppose he would look for the fruit that has been in our lives from the past year, and he would be looking for the fruit to come in the year that lies ahead of us. But as we consider all of this, we see that he has a right to expect it because of who he is, and then the amazing thing about our gracious God is that he promises us he will do all he can to encourage it and to help us to have a fruitful year.

It is an interesting question when you stop and think, "What is my faith like right now compared to this time last year? Am I walking closer to God? Am I relying on him more? Or maybe I'm shaken by some of the things that are happening in my life right now. Is my faith stronger or is it weaker? Am I walking closer to God or am I walking farther away from God? Am I walking focused on God or am I walking focused on the things that are going on in my life at this point in time?" It is a real interesting question, but it probably goes a long way to answer the question about how fruitful our year has been. Because when we walk close to God and rely on him and know him more and more and grow in our love for him and our trust for him, there is no doubt that we will produce more fruit. Yet, when we walk focused on the things that we can see around us, the challenges we might face, or maybe even the joys that we celebrate, and then we mistakenly attribute them to our efforts instead of to God's, it can be a little harder to

produce fruit that is pleasing to God. That is why our God has to call us to repentance. That is exactly the situation in which Jesus told this parable.

He had started out talking about those that died when the tower in Siloam fell. Do you think that they were more sinful than the people that didn't die that way? It is one of the ways that the people back in Jesus' day, and one of the ways that we today, try to excuse our own sinfulness—we see something bad happen to someone else and maybe we think that it must be because they have done something that God is upset with, so God must love us more because he hasn't let anything like that into our lives. That is nothing that God has ever really promised us. In fact, quite the opposite is true. He has told us that at times there is going to be much testing that comes into our lives until he calls us into heaven. So instead of thinking those kinds of thoughts, Jesus said, "No, I tell you, but you repent. Look at your own life and repent." And in that situation, he tells this parable. He doesn't explain the parable, but I think what he is saying is straight forward to us. The owner of this vineyard is the Lord. The fig tree is each one of us individually. God looks for fruit from the fig tree. Only this time, in this parable, the warning is that for three years he looked for fruit and there isn't any.

I think you and I can both, at different times in our lives, say that that could be what the Lord would say when he comes and looks at our lives. There are times that you and I have been distracted. Times when we have been focused on what we have to do in this world and we forget about the privilege of what we get to do because of who our Lord is and how we get to serve him and thank him and honor him in our lives because we are so wrapped up in what has to be done. We scurry here and we hurry there and we focus on this problem or that problem or that sickness or that challenge—maybe at times we forget about God and we don't produce the fruits that he would have us produce with the gifts that he has given us to serve him. At various times in our lives, there are going to be times when we would have to humbly admit (as much as we wouldn't want to say it out loud to each other) that Jesus is talking to us. "I am the one that hasn't always used the gifts that he has given me faithfully and fully. God would have every right to say I should be cut down." The truth of the matter is that's what every one of us is like when we are born into this world. God should have cut us down.

Do you ever just stop to wonder why God even bothered to create the world? When he created the world, when he said "*Let there be light*", he knew there were going to be nails. When he said "*let the water be separated from the ground*", he knew there was going to be a spear. Why create a world that you know is going to rebel against you, and you know you are going to have to leave heaven and go to earth and die for them? Have you ever even stopped to consider that? There can only be one answer—because God is a God of love. Even though you and I deserve to be cut down, because he knew that Adam and Eve would sin and that everyone since Adam would sin and that you and I would sin and that you and I would not produce the fruit that he has every right to expect because he created us, because he redeemed us, because he has given us gifts, and because he equips and enables us to serve—even though that hasn't always been that, our God still has loved us. And he still knew that from before the beginning of time he would send Jesus to live and die in our place.

That is why he expects things from us—because he has loved us with that depth of love. You and I can love our spouse and our children with a depth of love that can go as deep as we can, but it is never going to be that deep—like the love that he has shown to you and I—because even though we should have been cut down and sent to hell, he lived and died in our place and took away our sins. The amazing love of God is what provides for us.

God has every right to expect this fruit, and he does all that he can to encourage it. That comes through in this parable clearly. The caretaker of the vineyard says, “No, let it go another year. I will dig around it. I will fertilize it and it will produce fruit and if it doesn’t, then you can cut it down.” I would expect that this caretaker is Christ, because he has done everything that he can so that you and I can produce fruit. As I have just said, he lived in our place and he died in our place. He took away our sins. He sends the Spirit into our hearts. The Spirit creates faith in us. The Spirit strengthens faith in us. And now he says, “I am going to take care of it. I am going to do everything that I can, and it will produce fruit.”

Think of how our Savior has done this, not just in his life and his death, but how he continues to do it. How he gives us a congregation with this building, with this school, with faithful servants, with people willing to serve their Lord in all kinds of different capacities, all so that the Word can be proclaimed, so that the Law and the Gospel can be heard. So that the Law can humble us and the Gospel can lift us up and say to us, “Your God loves you and he will do everything he can for you.” Think of how he nurtures us from the time the water splashed into the bowl in the marble font, the times that we have knelt on these cushions and received his very body and blood where he says to us, “Your sins are forgiven. You are renewed. You are enabled to go forward now and serve me and produce that fruit that I look for.” Think of how, when our God has touched us with his love, our hearts have been on fire to want to serve him.

We don’t always do it perfectly. We are still sinners. But we have that spark in us. We want to serve God, not because we have to, not because if we don’t produce fruit he is going to get mad at us and send us to hell. Hell is out of the equation for you and me. Jesus lived and died and forgave us and took away our sins. Now as we focus on him and as he nurtures us through Word and Sacrament, as he nurtures us through one another, as iron sharpens iron so one man sharpens another. Does that often happen—when you sit down in the basement and listen to another Christian apply a truth of God’s Word that I have never thought of—I hear that in our Bible studies. We sharpen one another. God has given us all these blessings so that we can be nurtured. So that he digs around us and fertilizes us through his Word, through Sacraments, through the Word that we share with one another as we build one another up—he is looking for fruit.

Jesus does clearly say that if there isn’t fruit, if that faith isn’t there that produces this fruit that is a natural result of faith, then he tells us that we will be cut down. So as we stand at the end of one year and look forward to another, how are we going to walk closer to Jesus in the coming year? How are we going to learn to know him better and serve him with more joy in our hearts and to use our gifts to build one another up to

reach out to those who don't know him? How are we going to do it? God has a plan for us. He wants us to get him into the picture so that he can use us as he sees fit.