



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church
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December 31, 2008
New Year's Eve
Luke 13:6-9
Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Isaiah 51:1-6
Psalm of the Day: Psalm 90
Second Lesson: 1 Peter 1:22-25

Treasure another Year of Grace
It is a gift from God

Over the past few weeks, every time you watch the weather report (and you probably watched it a lot to see just how much snow we were going to get the next day), you've seen the countdowns how we break the record for snow in the month of December, right? What is it, 1887 when the record was held? Think about it; the last time that this area had this much snow, do you think you'd be dressed a little bit differently than you are tonight? Do you think you'd be seated a little differently? Did you already stop and think you wouldn't be in this building? The building wasn't here yet in 1887, right? We would have sung a little bit different songs, wouldn't we? They all would have been in a different language. Think how much has changed since the last time this area has seen that much snow. I'm betting the heaters that got people to New Year's Eve Worship, if they had it in 1887, didn't work as good as the ones in your cars this evening.

The thing about time and the passage of time is that there are always changes, right? As we mark another year, we see how things change in a year. As we mark another year in our own life at our birthday, may we look back and think about how things were different when we were younger. Maybe as we get up there in years a little bit, we think back to when our body acted a little differently than it is right now; some of the aches and some of the pains maybe we struggle with. Change seems to be the one constant that takes place as time marches on.

As we remind ourselves of that truth this evening, we really need to remind ourselves of a couple of other truths. One thing that never changes is the human capacity for sin. That includes you and me and those who have been in this congregation for as long as it has existed and those who ever will be in this congregation. Our capacity for sin doesn't really change.

But the other thing we are reminded of in this parable that Jesus tells us this evening is that God's unfailing love for us doesn't change. He gives us another year as a gift. And this evening he really encourages us to treasure it, to make use of it, to see it as what it is. It's a gift of his grace, but it's also an opportunity for us to grow spiritually and live spiritually, and it's something that God is just desperate that you and I take advantage of.

The setting of this parable that Jesus told; it's not a hard parable, I don't think, to understand. But the setting of it, I think is key. Jesus had just asked his disciples some questions. He said, "Those guys that died in the tower when it fell down on them; do you think they were more wicked than you or other people? Or those people that were killed when they were offering their sacrifices and their blood was mixed with the offerings they were giving; do you think they were more wicked than you?" He said, "I tell you no. Unless you too repent, you too will perish." To illustrate what he was saying, he tells this parable.

So in the context of what he just talked about, this tree, he is talking about personal accountability. He's talking about the need of every individual to look at themselves, look at their God, and see how desperately they need God in his grace. You and I are a little warped this way at times, aren't we? We are a little warped into thinking, "It's New Year's Eve. I'm here and if you look around, there's obviously over half the church that isn't here. So, God must love me a lot more because look at all I'm doing for him"—personal accountability.

God tells us to worry about what others are doing only in the sense of producing fruit, which he gets to later in this parable; how we use the gifts he gives us and the growth he gives us to encourage, admonish and all these things to other people. But he wants us to recognize our relationship to him is dependent upon his grace and his mercy.

So he tells this parable about a guy that has a fig tree. It's been planted in his vineyard and it says for three years he has been coming to this. It's not that he just showed up one day and said, "Hey. There's no fruit. Cut it down." But literally what it is painting the picture of as Jesus would have told that, he's painting a picture of a guy who came and came and came and kept his eye on it and was watching it closely and was eagerly looking forward to a fig crop. He had a real desire to see it come. He watched over it and was coming again and again and again with a real eagerness and anticipation.

He came and saw nothing. And he came and saw nothing. And he came and saw nothing. So after all of that time, he says, "Cut it down. It's not producing any fruit. Let's just get rid of it." But the vineyard caretaker says to him, "Let's give it one more year. Let's take care of it. Let's nurture it. Let's see if it will produce fruit if we fertilize it and give it everything it needs, every opportunity to grow, and if it doesn't, then we'll cut it down." That tree by any right in this parable didn't earn another year. It was a gift of grace that gave it another year.

That's the picture of you and me. God is patient with us beyond any expectation of patience. His love knows patience that is boundless; patience that I can't begin to imagine. And he's patient with us and he tells us quite simply because he doesn't want us to perish but he wants everyone to come to repentance, to turn back to him and find in him forgiveness for the sins that we have committed. And our sins are many. We don't use the gifts that he gives us in the right ways always. We are told to forgive as we have been forgiven and we're not so good at that. We carry on the grudges. We are told to build each other up in love. We're not always real good at that either.

Think of all the things that God is looking for in us, those who the Spirit has brought to faith. He doesn't bring us to faith just so that we are saved. If that were the case, he'd beam us up or have Scotty beam us up as soon as we came to faith and bring us right into heaven. But he leaves us here because he wants us to produce this fruit, to serve him. He leaves us here so that we use the spiritual gifts he gives his people to teach and admonish, to encourage, to bring others the Gospel, to bring to those the Gospel who already believe but need it, and you and I often find other things to say. You and I will often find ourselves saying to someone, "You're right. That person is a jerk. You should be mad at him."

God puts these opportunities in front of us to use our gifts and we turn away. We don't produce that fruit. Think about it. God doesn't have feet, but if he had shoes on and he's walking around being us, think of how carefully he would have to step so he doesn't step in the stuff that you and I leave behind as we go through our daily lives.

But God keeps following us. In patience and in love he is reaching out to us with the Gospel—the message that Jesus came to earth as the Christ-child. He lived in our place and he died in our place. We were baptized into his name. We received his body and blood so that we are forgiven for all those things that we keep failing to do that God wants us to do, for all those things that we keep doing that God has told us not to do.

In his love and in his grace, he is patient with us. Time may change. Things may change. But God's patience doesn't change. The forgiveness he has for us in Christ does not change. And the reason that you and I want to now take advantage of this next year and have growth and spiritual fertilizer applied to our lives remains the same. It's not because we have to. It's not out of fear. It's not out of worry that God won't love us; we've already covered that. He loves us. End of story. That never changes.

But why we want to produce this fruit, why we want to live to glorify him in the world, why we want to live to serve him with our gifts remains the same also. But we often forget that. We often want to use "have to's" and "you betters" and things like this instead of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In this next year, immerse yourself in that Gospel. Make all the resolutions you want to. Knock yourselves out. But find more time to just contemplate how amazing it is that God loves you and forgives you in spite of who you are. Find more time to know him more and better and more deeply explore all the facets of his love, because it will change you. It will move you to do what is right, not because you have to and not because you'll get in trouble if you don't, but because you want to show love to the One who loved you first.

This parable reminds us our God is obviously watching us. Our God is obviously anticipating and desiring our spiritual growth, not just in knowledge, but in living of that knowledge that he gives to us. And it reminds us that our God is the strength to do it.