

New Years Eve 2020

Luke 13: 6 -9

Pastor Arndt

⁶ Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. ⁷ So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?'

⁸ "'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'"

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

There was a sort of joke going around about this time last year. It went something like this; This will be the best year for our vision because we will all see 20/20. This was of course ironic because no one saw the events of 2020 coming.

A year ago, a face mask was a penalty that you received in football. One year ago, we shook hands and gave hugs. One year ago, you would have laughed at the idea of public worship being "closed" for almost one quarter of a year.

If you listen to people on this New Year's Eve you will hear a collective cry for a "New" year in which things will return to normal. The question I ask you is, *"If we are looking for things to be normal, has our vision really improved?"*

To be clear, I am not saying that the recent global pandemic is an apocalyptic prediction of things to come. At the same time, would we not be blind if we failed to see that God is getting our attention. God's plans for you for this next year are not "normal".

What are God's plans for us in the coming year? Jesus provides us with the answer in our parable for this evening. Tonight we examine the plans of: Your Master, Your Caretaker, and You.

I. Your Master's Plans

In the parable Jesus pictures you as a fig tree. The point of comparison is your fruit. Fig trees are measured by the fruit that they produce... just as God measures you. In Galatians St. Paul reminds us that the fruit of the Spirit is *"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."*

I would like to give you a moment to reflect on those fruits and the struggles that you have faced in this past year.

"Love" is looking to the needs of your neighbor (even your enemy) first. Consider for a moment, someone that you think of as your opponent. When their words and actions have not seemed to make sense to you, have you labored to understand them and take their words and actions in the kindest possible manner? Or have you pounced on their every word like a lion waiting to devour its prey?

It is no secret that attendance at church and Bible study have declined tremendously this past year. In many cases this is for good reason as God does not want us to needlessly tempt him and put our health in danger. At the same time, let us not fail to acknowledge the challenge that this has meant to our *faithfulness to God* and our *self-control*. Covid-19 has been just as much a challenge to our addictions and pet sins as it has to our respiratory systems.

These fruits of the Spirit are not nice things that God likes to see as extra credit. These fruits are the instincts and natural inclinations of the Spirit. When these fruits are absent it shows that the Spirit is also absent. This past year God, your Master, has been looking for these fruits as signs that his spirit is present in your life. When the spirit is no longer found he says, "Cut that tree down!"

II. Jesus – The Caretakers Plans

But these are not the only plans of God.

With full knowledge of our sin, God planned to send his only begotten Son into this world. Jesus, the Son, would not only suffer and die for the world, He would also care for and cultivate the world with personal pastoral care.

One of the greatest examples of this can be seen in Jesus and his care for the disciples. The disciples listen to sermon after sermon from Jesus. They witness miracle after miracle. Despite this, like me, the disciples are often impatient with God and slow to believe. What response does Jesus give them? He patiently and ferociously shepherds them.

Up to the moment of his crucifixion he continues to pastorally care for his flock. To the disciples that have abandoned him... he prays for them and entrusts his mother into their care. To the crowd that crucifies him... he intercedes for them and says, "Father forgive them for they do not understand what they are doing." To those that die with him he says, "trust me... today you will be with me in paradise."

Jesus is not planning to act normally with you this coming year. Jesus is planning to shepherd you and cultivate you in the word of his grace.

III. Your plans for the New Year

That brings us to your plans for this coming year.

If the previous year has taught us anything, it is to no longer expect things to be normal. There will be new and unexpected challenges that we will face. Yet, through them all, God will be gathering us to His Son so that faith, Spirit, and fruit will be cultivated in our lives.

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control... These are your plans for the New Year! How will we attain them? Let each of us hear the Word of Christ in greater measure. Let each of us more regularly draw near to receive the Sacrament. May the ministry of St. John's become your ministry. The Savior will cultivate you in his Word. By the Spirit may we produce his fruit! Amen