

Today is the first Sunday in a new year.

And you're still alive!

You don't have to check the obituaries. You made it.

That's something to celebrate, because about 65 million of us humans didn't.
That's how many people died in 2009.

Their number included Michael Jackson and Ed McMahon,
Walter Cronkite and singer Mary Travers,
Ted Kennedy and Oral Roberts,
three young mountain climbers who perished on Mt. Hood last month,
and 12,121 people who died of the “swine flu.”

But you made it through another year.

Does that provoke a HOORAY or a HO-HUM?

Are you one of those people who will say rather presumptively,
“Yes, and I'll probably make it through this one too. Nothing will change.
2010 will be ONE MORE YEAR, like all the rest.”

Ah, friend, WILL it be? SHOULD it be?

If you think 2010 will be “just another year,”

I'd like you to listen in on a conversation Jesus had long ago with some people
who had lived through a year with some spectacular news stories of its own –
people who did far too little thinking about the passage of time
and the looming judgment of God.

Listen in to what He tells them...

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no!

But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. 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?'"

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

One more year.

But not an ordinary year for this fig tree!

It would be a year of probation – a year of testing and scrutiny, and the threat of its destruction.

WHY?

Very simply, it had borne no FRUIT.

Fig trees in Israel, when healthy, produce two crops a year.

But this one was obviously sick. For three years now it had done nothing.

The owner, a patient man, had finally run out of patience.

“CUT IT DOWN!”

The caretaker, who had a heart for this tree, had begged a compromise.

“Please, ONE MORE YEAR! If it doesn’t produce this year either... then yes, we will CUT IT DOWN.”

The parable, of course, is not about TREES, but PEOPLE.

Fruitless people.

People who take up space in God’s world and in God’s church, but produce very little for Him, year after year... after year.

I can’t help thinking, as I read these words,

of those members of our congregation (and every church has them) whose membership in the church seems FRUITLESS.

They have a space in the membership directory.

Their pictures are displayed in the book on the welcome desk.

They have a mailbox in the hallway.

Every month a newsletter is placed in that box or mailed to their home.

Every year we buy them a box of offering envelopes.
But there is little or no response.

No worship. No offering. No Bible class or service project.
No visible response of any sort.

Year by year God lifts the leaves and looks in vain: “WHERE IS MY FRUIT?”

But this parable is directed at a wider audience, isn't it?
And it's about much more than our involvement (or lack of it) in CHURCH...

How about the rest of us trees in the vineyard?
Have we produced fruit in the way God hoped we would out in “the everyday”?

Take a little personal inventory as this year begins...
Am I a stronger Christian than I was a year ago?
Do I know my Bible better?
Is my speech cleaner... my witness bolder?
Are my prayers more fervent?
Am I a better listener? Am I more ready to serve?

If God looked under my leaves or yours, would His face darken with disappointment
as He asked, “WHERE IS MY FRUIT?”

It is, on the whole, a parable with a gloomy message:
PRODUCE FRUIT...OR BE CHOPPED DOWN!

Writer Harris Lee says:

This story of Jesus is straight talk.
I'd prefer a gentle pat on the back! I'd rather hear about green pastures and still waters.
But NO. Here God meets me and warns me that privilege brings responsibility. He will hold me accountable!

PRODUCE...OR ELSE!

“Unless you repent,” Jesus told them, **“you will all perish the same way.”**

Do you remember that fearful scene in Dickens' story A Christmas Carol
in which Ebenezer Scrooge, that shriveled, fruitless, loveless old miser,
is confronted by the spirit of his former colleague, Jacob Marley?

“Be warned, Ebenezer Scrooge,” threatens Marley. “Unless you change

your ways and become a different and kindlier man, you will be doomed to an eternity of sorrow!”

ONE MORE YEAR, says the parable.

God’s patience has a limit.

His axe is sharpened. JUDGMENT IS COMING!

A frightening parable. But a HOPEFUL one too!

For look again.

The tree is not yet chopped down. Indeed, it has been spared.

Ebenezer Scrooge woke up the next morning and lo, he was still alive!

He had been given another chance!

You woke up this morning. Here it is 2010... and you are still alive too.
You have ONE MORE YEAR...

Won’t you regard it as Scrooge did – as a time of special mercy, as a new opportunity?

Think of it as a GRACE PERIOD.

Some banks and businesses give people what they call a “grace period” during which they can pay off their debts without fees or penalties.

Just so, 2010 is a GRACE PERIOD from God to all of us.

In the parable

that next year is certain to be more than “just another year,”
for the Caretaker makes a promise to perform special kindnesses
for the sickly fig tree:

“I’ll dig around it and fertilize it.”

The tree will get special attention. The kind God is giving you.
And He is, isn’t He?

How many of you can READ (hands)? How many own a Bible?
Many people could not say YES to those things, but you can.

You have a church you like...
one that is close enough for you to get there without hardship.

It offers not one, but two services a week, and a cable broadcast to boot.
It provides a score of Bible study and fellowship opportunities,
and a library with 3000 or more books and videos.

He is digging around you, fertilizing you generously.

Look around.

There are teachers and preachers on television,
Christian radio stations playing uplifting music,
Bible study websites...Christian bookstores.

Never have God's people had such riches at their fingertips as we do.

Surely this time in which we live is a GRACE PERIOD from God!

A time in which God shows us
and shares with us the GRACE that is in Jesus Christ.

Jesus spoke this parable especially about the people of Jerusalem,
those fruitless folks who had let John's preaching go in one ear and out the other.

“BE WARNED!” He told them. **“Unless you repent...”**

But then look.

He Himself went up to Jerusalem.
That wicked, impenitent city experienced the grace of His presence,
His teaching at the Temple,
and His death on the cross.

That's what God will offer you in 2010, friend...
an extra measure of the GRACE of Christ
in those services and classes and books,
in that music,
in the Christian friends who surround you.

ONE MORE YEAR of fruit production POWER:

“He who abides in me and I in Him will bear much fruit.”

As we deal with one another in the church,
let it also be in the spirit of that kindly Caretaker who gives the extra dose of
care to the fig tree...
with patience, persistent love, forgiveness.

As for our DELINQUENT MEMBERS

let us determine that 2010 be a year of extra love and grace.

Let pastor and elders and all of us reach out to them,
convinced that the LOVE OF CHRIST can bring new life
to those who are weak and sick and fruitless.

And then.... AND THEN?

Well, that is where the parable breaks off.

We are not told what happened to that fruitless fig tree.

Did the following summer bring blossoms and fruit... and a
delighted smile to the vineyard owner's face?
Or did it bring the ringing of the axe, the splinter of wood,
and the sad end to a tree that had been planted with such high hopes?

The end of the parable is yours to write.

Ebenezer Scrooge, so the story goes, became a better person. Loving.
Kindly. Indeed, a FRUITFUL man in his old age.

It is not always so.

I remember a man named Bob, lying in a hospital bed in Akron, Ohio,
many years ago. He was dying of cirrhosis of the liver.

"Not much time left," the doctor said. Maybe one more year?
Bob knew it. At the bidding of his wife, I tried to dig around his roots.
I visited Him, shared the Gospel, encouraged him to be baptized.

But Bob was stubborn. "I'll take my chances," he replied. His time ran out
a few weeks later.

How will it be with you in this new year 2010?

Will this year be an open doorway – will you accept the grace of Jesus Christ
into your life and heart?

Or will it be just another year in which you decide to TAKE YOUR CHANCES?

He who has ears, let him hear...