

***One More Year***  
Psalm 90, Luke 13:1-9

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Who knows where the time goes? The end of the year makes us aware of the passage of time. We can't help but think how quickly the year passed; we look back on the significant things that happened, and think of things that might have been; we remember all we promised to do a year ago and how many of our projects remain stuck where they were at that time.

Reflecting on the passage of time reminds us that our own time on this earth is limited. Psalm 90 says that a thousand years are like yesterday to God, or like a few hours in the night. God sweeps the years away like a dream. The hymn setting of this psalm by Isaac Watts which we sang earlier has a fifth verse which is left out of our hymnal:

Time, like an ever-rolling stream,  
Bears all its sons away;  
They fly, forgotten, as a dream  
Dies at the opening day.

That is, of course, an Old Testament sentiment taken from the psalmist, without the Christian hope of resurrection. We do not believe that we are ultimately forgotten or that our lives are as meaningless as the grass that withers and fades. But the psalmist's request remains relevant: "So teach us to number our days, that we may get a heart of wisdom." And the end of a year teaches us to number our days, reminds us that our days are numbered, and presents an opportunity for our hearts to gain wisdom.

My mother used to chase around us kids trying to get us to hurry up, saying "*Tempus fugit, tempus fugit*," which means "time flies." Children don't understand that, not because they don't understand Latin but because they don't understand time. Remember how long summers were when you were little, and how brief they are now? For a child nothing seems sillier than the notion that time flies—it crawls—and for a grown-up nothing seems more obvious.

In Pawtucket this week I saw a row of ancient cherry trees that for some reason had begun to bloom during a warm spell, but now the tiny blossoms were covered with snow. In Japan, where I grew up, going out to see the cherry blossoms in the spring is a national ritual. They only blossom for two weeks or less, and everyone flocks to traditional sites to get the best views. What the American may not understand is that for the Japanese beauty is always tinged with sadness. Cherry blossoms are a symbol for the beauty of the momentary—that beauty which you cherish all the more because you know it cannot last. Maybe you've noticed that samurai sometimes wore the cherry blossom symbol on their helmets or swords. It was a reminder that life is fleeting and precious, that our lives blossom one day and then are gone.

Our losses have taught us to number our days. And the end of the year teaches us to number our days. What have we done with the 366 just passed, and what will we do with the 365 to come? We are stewards of our days. Our Stewardship Committee this past year asked us to think about Time, Talent, and Treasure—but I bet we thought about time least of the three. We are stewards of time, given a chance to invest it in something that will last, something beyond ourselves. Bishop Fulton Sheen—the original TV preacher—said, "Every moment comes to you pregnant with a divine purpose, time being so precious that God deals it out only second by second. Once it leaves your hands and your power to do with it as you please, it plunges into eternity to remain

forever what you made of it.” Carl Sandburg wrote that “Time is the coin of your life. It is the only coin you have, and only you can determine how it will be spent. Be very careful lest you let other people spend it for you.” How we spend our time is how we spend our lives.

The question of stewardship is always “What will we do with what we have?” That includes time. Jesus told several stories about servants who are left in charge by their masters. But he had another way of picturing what is expected of us: he said that we are like plants that are expected to bear fruit. Jesus used an image prophets before him had used for Israel: the nation was like a vineyard planted by God, and God kept coming back looking for fruit—the fruit of justice and righteousness—but all he found was injustice and violence. Jesus says in John’s gospel, “I am the vine (the trunk of the grapevine) and you are the branches...every branch that does not bear fruit I will cut off.” Matthew and Mark report the story of Jesus stopping along the road in his last week to curse a fig tree because it had no figs, and the tree died. That seems ridiculous unless you understand that it is a prophetic act, a parable acted out to show that God expect fruit from his people.

In Luke’s gospel, we find a more hopeful version of that theme of fruitlessness. Jesus has been talking about the need to repent, and he uses this story to talk about repentance. A man had a fig tree that he planted with the expectation that it would bear figs. He came to the tree to get a fig to eat, but there were no figs. So the owner says to his gardener, “For three years I’ve been waiting for this tree to bear fruit. Cut it down! It’s just wasting the soil it’s planted in.” But the gardener says, “Sir, just leave it alone for one more year. I’ll dig around it and put manure on it. I’ll do everything I can to help it bear fruit. If it bears fruit next year, that will be good. If not, you can cut it down.”

The Baptist scholar Alan Culpepper says about this story:

The parable of the fig tree invites us to consider the gift of another year of life as an act of God’s mercy. John the Baptist declared that the ax lay at the root, poised to strike. Any tree that did not bear fruit would be cut down. In Jesus’ parable, however, the gardener pleads for and is granted one more year. The year that Jesus proclaimed, moreover, “the year of the Lord’s favor,” would be a year of forgiveness, restoration, and second chances.

So of course I’m thinking about the fact that God has given us one more year. He did not have to, of course. God could have proven the Mayan scare correct and ended it all on December 21. He could have gotten so mad at Congress that he said, “I’ll throw you *all* over a cliff!” We could have awakened this morning to find that the snow that fell last night was the snow of death, and life on earth was over. But God chose to give us one more year. What will we do with it?

Most of us have had friends who were told that they had less than a year to live. Do you ever wonder what you would do if you were given one more year, and only one more year? It would focus your priorities, wouldn’t it? You’ve probably heard the old line from Samuel Johnson: “Depend upon it, sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.” If you knew that 2013 was to be your last year, it would indeed concentrate your mind.

But the parable reminds us that God is always calling us to repentance and God is the one who has given us another year of life, like the fig tree. The repentance God is looking for is not feeling bad about what we have done, at least not in this parable. What was the sin of the fig tree? Not that it had done something wrong, but that it had done nothing. What we need to repent of is fruitlessness. And how do we repent of that? By bearing fruit.

What do we mean by fruit? In Isaiah, the fruit God is looking for is justice and righteousness. In John's gospel, fruit seems to represent obedience and love. In Paul's list in Galatians, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. But Paul also talks about the gospel bearing fruit in the form of the faith of new believers. One simple way to say it is that fruit is doing what God expects of us—that is, doing God's will on earth, making his kingdom a reality in our behavior. Bearing fruit means that we are blossoming and maturing and ripening, becoming fully human as we become the persons God always intended us to be, reflecting his image and the image of his Son.

What *would* you do if a doctor told you that you have one more year to live? I'm going to see a doctor tomorrow and I suppose it's possible that he'll spot something going on inside me that I know nothing about. If he tells me that I have 2013 and only 2013, what will I do? I'd like to think that I wouldn't just quit my job and take a vacation. I'd like to think I wouldn't decide that I was now free to be selfish and focus on my bucket list because I know I have limited time. I'd like to think that my mind would be wonderfully concentrated, and I would get focused on doing those things that I have left undone, doing things that I feel called to do but haven't had the concentration to accomplish. There are some things that I would get written that I've been putting off for years. There are people I would tell that I love them, and there are people I would tell about Jesus before it is too late. I would give more thought to how my family will be provided for when I'm gone. I would try to improve some things at Harbor Church and use my time to focus your attention on eternal life and the kingdom of God.

In all likelihood, tomorrow the doctor will tell me I am fine. But why should that change anything? Why should I not live 2013 as if I had only one more year? Why should I not focus on the real priorities of my life rather than living in the ruts in which I am comfortable? There are things I know I should do but I never get around to them.

A secular self-help writer named Steve Chandler wrote a book called *17 Lies that Are Holding You Back* [ReinventingYourself.com]. Lie 5 is "I'd love to do that, but I don't have the time." Listen to what he says: "Neither is true. It is not true that they really want to do that, and it is not true that they don't have the time. If they really wanted to do that, they would make the time. There is enough time. It is never time that people lack, it is always purpose. So it would be more honest to say, 'I think I *should* say I want to, but I don't have the commitment'" [p. 40].

Suppose I check the mail tomorrow and there is a letter from the town addressed to the church. It says: "When the Adrian Hotel and property was transferred to the Trustees of First Baptist Church, the Trustees failed to change the tax classification in our records from *business* to *tax-exempt*. No exemption was ever applied for. We have determined that you owe the town property taxes for the years 1941 to 2012, which amount exceeds the value of your property and savings. However, since we understand the hardship this places on your organization, we are giving you one more year to operate before we shut you down."

Lay aside all the ways you would argue the case against the town. Just imagine that we as a church had only one year to live. With our minds thus wonderfully concentrated, what would we do? What would be the most important thing we could do in 2013 if it were our last year? What would we do with our time and talents and treasure if we weren't focused on making our building and our money last as long as possible? What if we were focused on the fruit God is looking for? What if we really wanted to bring people to faith while we still had the chance? I can't help but think that the annual meeting would be a little different. I can't help thinking that our worship would be different.

But the truth is: here we are. God has spared the axe which he could have laid at our roots. He has given us one more year. What will we do with it?