

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

²¹And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.(Luke 2:21)

Some names lack meaning, and that is fine. They are melodies let loose in the air or letters written on a page, and they succeed in referring to someone in particular, but the name has no meaning beyond this ability to refer. Not so with the name of our Lord. His name happens to have a meaning attached to it, which I think is nice.

Months before this morning's Gospel story, the meaning of our Lord's name had been revealed by an angel. Back when the angel of the Lord appeared unto Joseph in a dream and bid him have no fear to take Mary as his wife, the angel had interpreted the meaning of our Lord's name. It means Saviour, as the angel said:

²¹And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.(Matt 1:20-21, KJV)

This is the name we cherish. This is the God we follow: the one who saves his people from their sins.

Down the road a ways, God willing, we will baptize Maggie Luthar, who has been preparing herself by Baptism by studying Luther's *Large Catechism*. When she is baptized it will be with her as it was with Peter and Andrew along the Galilean shore. There those fisherman were, casting their nets into the sea. Jesus came along "and saith unto them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.' And straightway, they left their nets and followed him." (Matt. 4:18-19). Likewise with Maggie. She has been casting her nets into the sea, earning her living by the sweat of her brow, doing her studies, but on that day of her baptism, this same Jesus shall come along and say to her, "Maggie, my Dear, come follow me." And we will all say "Amen!" when she does so, for it is good to follow Jesus. In following him, we are drawing near to the one who "shall save his people from their sins."

This is the one who shall save you and me from our sins in this coming year 2007. I am speaking of our Lord Jesus. If we draw closer to him this coming year, we will simultaneously move farther away from our sins, which is a good thing indeed.

We stand at the pivot of the years, with reason to be grateful for the year gone by and with

reason to greet this near year, 2007, with hope and with recommitment to our Lord Jesus.

I have a certain parable in mind to help us reflect on the year just gone by and on the year to come. I am thinking of our Lord's parable of the fig tree. It goes like this:

⁶He spake also this parable; A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none. ⁷Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground? ⁸And he answering said unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it: ⁹And if it bear fruit, well: and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down.(Luke 13:6-9, KJV)

See how the vineyard worker protects the fig tree, appealing to his master, "let it alone this year also." Thus, the barren tree is granted another year of grace.

Three things are hinted at here: (1) grace in the past by which the tree has survived so far, (2) the disappointment of grace, for during those three years the tree had produced nothing, and (3) the continuation of grace for another year, with all the possibilities lying ahead for that year.¹

So, first, let us speak of grace in the past by which we have survived thus far. Morning by morning, we have reason for prayers of gratitude, that we made it through the night all these months, all these years since we were born. And meal by meal, we have reason for table prayers that we have some food in a world where there is so much hunger, and that we have shelter in this world in which we can eat our meals with some peace.

There are things we do not understand about God's providence. There are heartbreaks aplenty in this world, and we have a right to pray that the Lord

¹ I believe this sermon has benefited from Charles Spurgeon's sermon "This Year Also," though as I recall that sermon, I suspect I am analyzing things somewhat differently here.

would spare our world from such heartbreaks and from all forms of suffering. Yet none of the things that puzzle us about God's ways in this world — what he does he and what he permits — none of these puzzles authorizes ingratitude. And how could it help us in any case to have an ungrateful soul? How could it help us to ignore the grace that has been lavished upon us this past year and, indeed, throughout our lives, that we have lived till now, many of us with friends and the respect of other people and many good and perfect gifts that come to us from God's hands?

That tree in the parable survived those three years. It could have been cut down at any point. It could have been destroyed by disease or fire. But no, it has survived. It has some reason for gratitude. So do you and I at the end of the year 2006. It might have been a rough year for us. It might have been an easy year. But either way, it has also been a year of grace for us, and I suspect that you are grateful for what God has done for you in the past.

Let us move on to a second point about this fig tree in the parable. Though that tree had enjoyed a season of grace so far – three years of peace – the harvest has been disappointing. It is possible to receive grace, but do little with it. So it was for the fig tree in the vineyard: It survived by the grace of the vineyard owner for the preceding three years, but, alas, bore no fruit during that time. Perhaps it assumed it could delay. Perhaps it hoped it could be lazy and fruitless and no one would notice. But the landowner did notice, and was frustrated thereby.

I am a preacher, you know, and in some sense, it is natural that I should be a preacher, because I am the son of a preacher. I grew up in a devout household. I had good pastors, good Sunday School teachers, good models of the Christian life throughout my childhood years.

It is more puzzling, and more wonderful, that my father should have been a preacher, for he did not have the advantages that I had. He grew up in what they used to call "a broken home." He had no father at home, and his mother, God bless her, died young. Dad seems to have been pretty much a street urchin in Schenectady, NY — until, by God's grace, he fell under the godly influence of Rev. Donald Hardy of that town.

Many years after my father died, Carol and I sought out Rev. Hardy's widow, and she reminisced with us about those early days when my father was a boy. Even in old age, after all she had seen, Mrs. Hardy was still stunned to report to us the attitude of my father's mother about youth and sin. It seems that my grandmother was not especially troubled about the possibility that my father would get involved with sin. Her attitude, according to old Mrs.

Hardy, was that a young man "should sew his wild oats."

I do not want to condemn my grandmother. I have sympathy for her and realize that I do not walk in her shoes. But I do mention this case because it helps frame a good question for each soul: Are you still sewing your wild oats? You have lived your three years in the vineyard. You have enjoyed your three years of grace. Are you still sewing your wild oats? Is that how you have used your past? Are you still wild at twenty? Still frolicking at forty? Still sinning at sixty? Still delaying at eighty? At this end of the year 2006, must we look back with shame and acknowledge that we have not lived up to the standards we have learned from Jesus? 2006 was a year of grace. Let us honor another year of grace if it is granted to us in the year 2007.

Back to the fig tree in the vineyard. Because of the intercession of the vineyard worker, the tree is likely granted another year. "Lord, let it alone this year also..." The parable itself does not report on the master's answer, yet to the degree that the character of the landowner reflects the character of God, there is good reason to expect that the intercessions on behalf of the tree succeed, for our God is patient and longsuffering.

It is in the very nature of love to be so. We rejoice in this at wedding times, when a classic text for the marriage liturgy includes St. Paul's moving discourse on love:

⁴Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; ⁵it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. ⁷Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸Love never ends...(1 Cor. 13:4-8a)

St. Paul learned this from God's dealings with him, for the Lord had been patient with him, bore with him, uplifted him, and at last sanctified him as a servant of Jesus.

And the whole Bible testifies to the patience of God. And so the Psalmist, for example, appeals to the patience of the Lord:

Remember not the sins of my youth, or my transgressions; according to *thy steadfast love* remember me, for thy goodness' sake, O LORD!(Psalm 25:7, RSV)

Indeed, every direction the Psalmist looks, he sees divine patience:

He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD. (Psalm 33:5, RSV)

It is as if the whole earth is a fig tree in the vineyard, from whom the Lord, in his love, is patiently awaiting a harvest.

The Lord's patient love is the very foundation of hope for King David as he weeps bitter tears over his treachery concerning Bathsheba and her husband Uriah:

<To the chief Musician, A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came unto him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.> Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. (Psalm 51:1, KJV)

It is a verse we cherish in the liturgy for private confession.

And of many lovely testimonies from the prophets, let me lift up but one, from the prophet Joel:

"Yet even now," says the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; ¹³and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repents of evil. (Joel 2:12-13, RSV)

Thus the prophet testifies: the day is not too late, the Lord's love is not exhausted, the fig tree is not yet cut down and need never be.

As we now face the year of grace 2007, let us notice the angelic phrasing of our Lord's name. The angel interprets the name of our Lord not in the paltry terms of saving us from *punishment* for our sins, but from the cause of punishment. That is, the angel does not say, "for he shall save his people from the *punishment* of their sins," but something more simple and more glorious, "for he shall save his people from their sins." The other one is true and important – Jesus takes upon himself the punishment for our sins – but this too is important: if we would walk with Jesus in this new year stretching before us, he will save us from sin.

If in the year 2007 we do as our Baptisms bid us, if now and in this coming year we set aside our fishing nets and come follow Jesus, he shall save us from our sins. Misbehaving children are sometimes spared punishment, either because no one discovers their misdeeds or because the parents are too weary to punish the misdeeds. And that would be nice, to escape punishment. But it would be even nicer to escape the misdeeds themselves. It would be more important to flee the sins and the corrupting of our character caused by the sins. Walking closer with Jesus in 2007 will do this for us, for he will never lead us into sin, but away from it.

As it is with that barren fig tree, so it is with us, to a degree that each of us can judge best in the quiet of our own conscience: Our past has been, if not barren, still disappointing in piety and good works. And yet a new year lies before us, by God's grace. It is a year meant to be spent following Jesus, and if spent that way, it shall be our best year ever, for he shall save us from our sins.

And to this Saviour be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.