



Sermon Title: “*Advent Math*”

Scripture: John 1:6-8, 19-28

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It’s been a long time since I did algebra, and I was never much good at it. But I recall solving for x , as x related to y and z , and thus making the equation work.

Advent math is different from regular math. We still need an equation, and we still need to solve for x , but because it’s Advent math, our calculations will lead us to a very different solution than we could otherwise expect or achieve. That’s because once we solve for x , the values of y and z , values that once seemed so clear and fixed, are fundamentally changed. Once we find the true value of x , everything changes.

But let’s begin with regular math, and work our way up to Advent math. For the sake of simplicity, let’s assume that there are a hundred of us in the room right now. And let’s pretend that each of us could scrounge up one hundred dollars that we can live without. (This does not count what we currently give to all of our charities, or dedicate to our personal budgets, or give to the church. I’m talking about one hundred dollars we could scrounge up without shortchanging anybody or anything, except perhaps our own convenience: a dinner out, that new jacket we’ve had our eye on, a couple of weeks of lunches out, that kind of thing.) So, anyway, let’s say, just for fun, that one hundred of us could come up with one hundred dollars. That’s ten thousand dollars.

And let’s say that on the third Sunday of each month, for the next year, one hundred of us continued to scrounge up one hundred dollars. This time next year, our church would have an additional one hundred and twenty thousand dollars to worry about.

A few months ago, we had a congregational meeting at which we discussed our church’s current situation. Some think the situation is essentially a money issue and that we should encourage each other to give more money. Some think we need to encourage others to join our church. Others think we need to do something about our buildings. Others think the overall budget needs attention and we should especially focus on creating a sustainable staffing plan.

Everybody is right to some extent. But today I thought it might be fun to look at this situation from the perspective of what I like to call Advent math, because, as I said earlier, Advent math changes everything. Advent math changes all the values in the equation.

The formula for Advent math comes straight from today's Gospel where John the Baptist informs the crowd that "among you stands one whom you do not know." Usually, when I've preached on this text, I've gravitated to the idea that Christ is among us as a largely unknown entity, as one we too often fail to recognize and, therefore, one to whom we too often fail to respond. But today, I want to focus on the math of it. "Among you stands one . . . "

But let's get back to the regular math for a second. We've got one hundred and twenty thousand dollars to spend. Should we fix up a building? Put it in the bank? Keep our staff intact? Advertise?

The answers to these kinds of questions are usually determined by group discussion, general consensus, a motion, a second, more discussion and a vote. But the nature of the questions themselves, the nature of the discussion, the nature of the motion, the second and the vote, are all really determined by our relationship with the One, the true light which enlightens everyone.

We are getting close to Advent math now. But before we do the Advent math, let's spend our one hundred and twenty thousand dollars. And even though we haven't yet gotten to the Advent math per se, let's try to spend it the way the One would probably want us to spend it.

Do we install showers for the homeless folks we feed every Monday morning at Sara's Open Table? Do we clothe them as well? How about medical care for them?

Or maybe we send our one hundred and twenty thousand dollars to our nearby, denominational, mission church, Rising Hope. We could give sixty thousand to Rising Hope and sixty thousand to ALIVE, or the Carpenter's Shelter.

This seems like an awful lot of money doesn't it. This seems like we would be doing a rather extraordinary bit of good for God's special people with our newfound cash.

But let's have even more fun. Let's imagine that while some of us would really have to struggle to come up with our one hundred additional dollars a month that we can live without, let's assume, just for fun, that some of us are the kind of folks, let's say, half of us are the kind of folks, who can come up with two hundred dollars a month that we can live without, two hundred dollars that we could continue to eat, be housed, clothed, and get by, without.

So, the half of us that can only come up with one hundred dollars a month contribute five thousand dollars a month, and the half of us who can come up with two hundred dollars a month contribute ten thousand dollars a month and at the end of the month the church has an additional fifteen thousand dollars to worry with. And this time next year, would have an additional one hundred and eighty thousand dollars to worry about.

It really is fun isn't it? What's more fun than having lots of money to spend during the holidays? It's Advent, so I can only think of one. I can only think of one. "Among us stands one whom we do not know," but should.

Now let's do Advent math. Let's understand that none of this is about money, or buildings, or staffing plans, or numbers of people. Let's acknowledge that this is ever only about the One, and that when it's about anything else, it's about the wrong thing.

Let's try to understand that while solving for x , once we learn that x can only ever equal the One, everything else changes. Y and z take on different values than the ones they started with. We are no longer solving for cash, building renovation, or a staff. We aren't even solving for more people in the pews. We suddenly find ourselves solving for

hope. Suddenly, and despite our previous ignorance and confusion, we are solving for joy, solving for compassion, solving for love, solving for the power of the cross of Christ. And perhaps most amazing of all, our former, seemingly insurmountable problems are not only clearly secondary, they are solved.

When others find a group of Christians singularly devoted to the One, they are moved, changed, and drawn to that faithful community. Whenever the One is the center of a community it grows and prospers. Until the One is the center, until x equals the One (for every member individually and for the community as a whole) no calculator and or expert can make the equation work.

I have just one more thing to say about Advent math. Even though, of course, it's not about money, and even though some might argue that the numbers I've thrown around this morning are ridiculously extravagant. I think they are ridiculously conservative. I think my version of Advent math is embarrassingly meager compared with what God expects of us all.