

January 8, 2022
Baptism of Jesus
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Christ Church Exeter

Addition & Multiplication

Isaiah 42:1-9

42Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. 2He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; 3a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. 4He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

5Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: 6I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, 7to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. 8I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. 9See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

Matthew 3:13-17

13Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. 14John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" 15But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. 16And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Starting a new calendar year for me can be a daunting experience. For all the celebration expected around New Year's Eve, I for one find that I become more reflective than festive. Newness can be a challenge. The old is known and familiar: good or bad. The new is open to both promise and uncertainty. Who knows that the New Year will bring?

So, for you and me, it's probably a good thing that we begin with another look at the baptism of Jesus and what it meant for him and what it means for us.

Multiplication tables were a formative part of my early school education. We got there after mastering addition and subtraction. We were tested on them again and again before we moved onto division. It was all memory. 2x2. Easy. 4x4. No worries. 9x9. 81. 3x8? 24. 7x6: 42. 7x8: 56?

Addition and multiplication, as it turns out, can be a way we can look at the world, our lives and our faith. What actions and values add to a life God has promised to make abundant? What hopes and gifts and learning can grow within us when tended to as a gardener waters her garden? How might we contribute more and take less from the common good.

Subtraction and division are always present in the foreground and the background of our lives – looming – and offer a counter view. What activities or pursuits zap our energy and passions? Who are the people or priorities or false idols that stand to divide us one against another?

I suppose it's all about math after all.

On the feast of the baptism of Jesus, it is a Feast Day at home in addition and multiplication. Baptism is always about looking at how we begin. For Jesus, though he may have been aware all along of who he was and his place within the larger faith community and world, his baptism by John was public for a reason. One, it clarified that John, even though he had a large following and many believe was a mentor and teacher to Jesus, he was not the one. John gave way for Jesus to step into the role he was born and chosen to fulfill. It also allowed a moment for God to speak out in the open. The scene we read about can almost feel like it is a scene in a movie to many of us, but in the ancient world people would have been amazed to see and hear: suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

This moment draws a line back to the reading we heard from Isaiah. No other book in the OT is referenced in the gospels as much as Isaiah.

But before we go there, let me call our attention to a verse from Mark's gospel. "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked him. The blind man said, "Rabbi, I want to see."
— Mark 10:51

What draws me to that verse is that I like to imagine God asking the people of Israel the same question: what do you want me to do? We can see God's answer. God says: I will choose a servant. A chosen one. A messiah. I will delight in this servant. I will put my spirit upon this servant – Christians tie this verse directly to the scene of the baptism of Jesus. He will bring forth justice to all nations – not just a few small clans and tribes. This servant will know how far to go and when and will not grow weak or be discouraged. This servant will multiply justice by bringing light, opening eyes, and releasing the captive. These are things Christians believe Jesus fulfilled some 700 years after they were spoken.

For me these verses feed my imagination of who God is and what God does in our world even today – which is the heart of spirituality.

But for me I like to believe the math of God's actions brings us back: more people are added into God's fold. The more people out in the light, open to see and live freely means that God's dream is unfolding still.

The question becomes: in what ways do we add or take away? How do we multiply and when do we divide? Do we continue the work that was done by those before us, or we do we join the interrupters and disrupters.

If we were to offer a bit of social commentary on the ways of our world today, I may not be only one in this gathering that has noticed that people often get more attention by how loud they can speak over what is added to the conversation. Volume over content. To gain an audience in today's media world, one must be outrageous not necessarily be productive. The goal is to inflame not to console. Subtlety is not often a prized value.

Dr. Bob Moorehead was the pastor of Overlake Christian Church in Kirkland, Washington and he penned a short essay his collection called Words Apply Spoken in. 1990. Some of the things he wrote misses the mark for me, but other points hit a nerve and can cause us to look around and think again.

“The paradox of our time in history is that we have taller buildings but shorter tempers, wider Freeways, but narrower viewpoints. We spend more, but have less, we buy more, but enjoy less.

We talk too much, love too seldom, and hate too often.

We've learned how to make a living, but not a life. We've added years to life not life to years. We've been all the way to the moon and back, but have trouble crossing the street to meet a new neighbor. We conquered outer space but not inner space. We've done larger things, but not better things.

We've conquered the atom, but not our prejudice. We plan more, but accomplish less. We've learned to rush, but not to wait.”

One of my clergy colleagues from year ago, Dr. Loren Mead, began a book he wrote with this simple sentence: God is a calling us to be more than we have been.

There it is again. Addition and multiplication. More not less. Changed not static. Open not closed to new possibilities.

How do we move forward into this new year.

One: we can continue to be aspirational people. We can aspire not for the things we know fade away pretty soon after Christmas morning, but the things and moments that endure.

We can continue to aspire to live lives that resemble what Isaiah hoped for and Christ fulfilled.

Two: We too can learn to believe that what God said about Jesus God says to us: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” We are loved by God and God knows all

about us: there is no place to hide. That simple truth may be the hardest to truly accept. Even the great saints of the church had their doubts and their weaknesses and their dry spells when they thought that God had abandoned them.

We are the beloved of God – we are the noun pronounced with 3 syllables.

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Beginning with Beloved
A Blessing

Begin here:

Beloved.

Is there any other word
needs saying,
any other blessing
could compare
with this name,
this knowing?

Beloved.

Comes like a mercy
to the ear that has never
heard it.
Comes like a river
to the body that has never
seen such grace.

Beloved.

Comes holy
to the heart
aching to be new.
Comes healing
to the soul
wanting to begin
again.

Beloved.

Keep saying it

and though it may
sound strange at first,
watch how it becomes
part of you,
how it becomes you,
as if you never
could have known yourself
anything else,
as if you could ever
have been other
than this:

Beloved.