



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

JANUARY 3, 2016
EPIPHANY SUNDAY

Calculating Jesus Matthew 2:1-12; Ephesians 3:1-12

Anyone with a bent toward mathematics has to be happy at this time of year. There is hardly a news item that doesn't have something to do with adding up, averaging, measuring, or otherwise calculating some human experience. One group of number crunchers is busy interpreting the latest presidential polling data in order to influence how we think about the future of our nation. Another group is frenetically reviewing records from this year and previous years so that we will have every possible statistic available to us as we watch the various bowl games around the country. Still another group is using that data and the opinions of the most vocal prognosticators to set the odds for who is likely to win the national football championship and, soon after, the Super Bowl.

Economists are adding up the numbers from last year to predict what kind of economy we will have this year. Employment figures, end of year sales, and the year of elections will influence the 2016 forecast. And don't forget all of the calculations that enter into Wednesday night's drawing of the Powerball numbers. The jackpot is around \$400 million now with a cash value of nearly \$250 million. Imagine all that we could do in ministry with ten percent of the prize money that one of you might win! \$25 million would go a long way toward making some positive changes in Rocky Mount.

It is obviously an aspect of our human nature to take stock of things as they are and to try and calculate where things will be going. That is, after all, the basis of our economy, is it not? It is sometimes also the basis of our theology.

Herod tried to calculate Jesus. Once he heard of a "child who had been born king of the Jews," he tried to gather as much information as he could about the baby. The magi who came inquiring about the child had been calculating for years. It was their business to watch the skies for any signs or portents of cataclysmic events. It just so happened that, in their book, the appearance of a particularly bright object in the sky added up to the birth of a new king. Their calculations brought them from the exotic East to the capital of the little crossroads kingdom of Israel. Their exuberance, however,

ran counter to the reaction in Jerusalem. The thought of a local king who would overthrow the rule of Caesar panicked Herod and the priests and other religious leaders who fed off of his insecurities. Herod called his religious elite together and asked them to crunch the numbers, so to speak, and let him know where this child was. Based on the Messiah's predicted links to King David and the prophesy found in the book of Micah (5:2), they came up with the little town of Bethlehem. Counting on the magi to be beholden to him, Herod asked them to return and tell him where they found the child so that he could express his own sense of homage. Yet, he did not count on God warning the wise men in a dream to go home by another route. Not to be outfoxed, Herod added up the numbers again and deduced that the child would be a boy of about two years of age. He figured that if he killed all of the two year old boys in Bethlehem, the odds of getting rid of this supposed king of the Jews would be in his favor. Tragically, he overestimated the benefits of terror and wholesale slaughter and seriously underestimated the ability of God to outfox him.

Herod was not the only one to miscalculate Jesus. His own parents found it hard to grasp who their son was. Following his bar mitzvah at the age of twelve, Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem when his parents began their journey home. Several days of frantic searching found him in the temple talking with the learned men of Israel. When asked why he had caused his parents such panic, Jesus answered, "Did you not know I would be about my father's business?" In other words, "You should have added it all up and known where I was."

His cousin John the Baptizer came close to getting it right when he acknowledged that Jesus would have far more power than anyone imagined and that he, John, would not feel worthy even to untie his sandal (Mark 1:7-8). The people from Jesus' hometown of Nazareth were proud of their native son when they heard the rumors of all the good things he was doing. When he suggested that he had come to fulfill God's prophesy, however, the fact that he was the son of a local carpenter did not add up to his being the Messiah. They accused him of blasphemy and attempted to kill him (Luke 4).

The scribes and Pharisees along with the chief priests in Jerusalem tried desperately to figure out Jesus. They repeatedly tried to trick him and trap him with questions about taxes due to Caesar, the fulfillment of Moses' law, and the requirements for eternal life. Time after time, Jesus turned their

self-serving arguments back on them and exposed their miscalculations of God's being in the world. Jesus always had the religious leaders figured out.

His own disciples, the people closest to him, had difficulty sizing up Jesus. They tried to measure discipleship against who was considered greatest in God's kingdom. They tried to calculate how many times one was required to forgive, the percentage of what we are required to give back to God, and the value of human power over against God's love. At every turn they were reminded that all God expected was for them to love him with all of their heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love their neighbor as they loved themselves.

The beneficiaries of his kindness were always astounded by what he did for them. The lepers, the blind, the lame, and the people who lived on the margins of life economically and morally never figured out the power of the mercy Jesus showed to them. Even death, which eventually calls everyone's number, did not calculate that Jesus would rise again and offer eternal life to each and every one of us. Although they all tried, no one had Jesus figured out.

Today we still try to calculate Jesus. We look for minimum investment with maximum return. We figure that the hard sayings of scripture are relegated to another place and time. We still believe that we can build our own kingdoms here on earth and ignore the presence of God's kingdom which is already in place. We continue to estimate that God's promises are for a relatively few number of people instead of for the whole world. And we figure that we are among the ones who are included.

Certainly the Apostle Paul who, more than anyone, had tried to figure out Jesus, finally got it right when he acknowledged that the mystery had been revealed and that Jesus had come for all people, not only for the Jews. All people, having been created by God, belong to God. All people, whether they acknowledge it or not, are the children of God and are the heirs of God's salvation and the promise of abundant life.

The only calculation we need to make is the time it will take us to fully embrace the gift of God. Jesus, God among us, came to say "Yes!" to abundant life for us all and "No!" to prejudice, greed, and hatred. His gift to us is life, full and complete. On that we can count!

Christ is born! The Messiah has come! God is with us! We no longer have to figure out what God is about in the world. We no longer have to calculate what Jesus wants us to do. All that is left is for us to live this good news. It is what Howard Thurman called, “the work of Christmas.” It is the equation of God’s grace.

“The Work of Christmas”

When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flock,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among brothers,
to make music from the heart.

Howard Thurman, *The Mood of Christmas*, 1973

January 3, 2016

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

God of the circling years, whose wisdom and faithfulness span generations, your grace and mercy continually astound us. Through Christ you have entered our world, walked where walk, shared our limitations, been touched by our joys and sorrows. We are grateful that we need hide nothing from you because you know our longings and desires, our fears and temptations. Your goodness to us is beyond our comprehension or our deserving. For every gift which comes from your gracious hand, O Lord, we offer to you hearts overflowing with thanksgiving and praise.

God of this very moment, you are present everywhere: in beautiful mornings which sing of your creativity, in the loving faces of family and friends, in the words and music which stir our souls, in the bread and cup which we share at your table, in our prayerful solitude. Make yourself known to us now as we seek to follow you. Help us to move beyond the convenient boundaries of our lives to touch the lives of others. Teach us your perfect will and guide us in the path of righteousness. Speak peace to our restless minds, so that your ways become our ways and Christ's call our fervent desire.

God of every day that is to come, grant that we may live, move, and have our being in constant awareness of your grace and blessing. Wherever we find suffering, empower us to bring healing. Whenever we encounter need, move us to respond with compassion and generosity. Whoever must live in the threat of violence, to them, enable us to speak a word of peace. Whatever we see or hear that diminishes the dignity of another, grant us the courage to stand against it as we work toward the reality of your justice and hope. As we travel the journey of the days you have given to us, guide our footsteps that they may follow those of Christ, and so fill us with your Spirit that your love and mercy will be evident in us and through us. Through Jesus the Christ, who is our Light and our Hope and who is Lord of all, we pray. Amen.

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