

Sermon for Sunday, June 10, 1979, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri 63105

"GOD'S OLD MATH GIVES A NEW ANSWER"

St. John 3:1-15

Text: "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."  
St. John 3:14,15

About the time I was beginning to catch on to the old math, somebody invented the so-called new math. If any of the children at our house need any help with numbers, I just refer them to Sydney. But there is some old math in the Bible that is as ancient as time itself and I don't understand that math either. According to that math, God is three persons and yet one God. I've never been able to figure that out. Singularity and plurality just don't mix. How can you say one is three and three is one? Humanly speaking, that kind of math just doesn't add up. But while I may not understand the mathematics of God, there is one thing I understand very well. I understand from my own experience that God's old math gives a new answer to life. I'd like to share that with you this morning.

Some people have the notion that the idea of God as Trinity is something that came into being in the New Testament. Actually, the Old Testament is filled with references to the three persons of the Godhead. For example, in the very first chapter, the very first verse of the Bible, we read, "In the beginning God..." and the Hebrew word for God is plural. Again, in the 17th chapter of Genesis, in the story of Abraham, we discover that Abraham and his wife Sarah have grown old and have no children. You will remember how the Lord appeared to Abraham and told him that in spite of this, they would have a son. God kept his promise and to Abraham and Sarah was born Isaac. But do you remember how the Bible describes God's appearance to Abraham? Listen to what the Bible says, "And the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men stood in front of him." Isn't that fascinating that God's visit to Abraham would be described that way? And, of course, the Old Testament is full of references to the coming Messiah and to the work of the Holy Spirit. For example, in Ezekiel, we read how God promises to put his Spirit within us (37:14). And in Zechariah we read, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit says the Lord of hosts." (4:6)

Well, such illustrations could go on indefinitely. But the point is, God's strange math is very old indeed--as old as time itself. However, the important question about God's math is this: how does it add up? What kind of answer does it give?

The first thing the Bible tells us about God's math is that God the Father is a caring God. Whoever you are this morning, whatever you need, God cares for you. Down in Dallas, Texas, is a place called Buckner Orphanage, one of the largest in America. Dr. Buckner, who began the institution, must have been a wonderful and grand person for all of the little children in his orphanage loved him like a father. Often he was gone for many weeks at a time trying to raise funds for his little children. But when the word swept through the orphanage that Dr. Buckner was coming home, excitement filled the place. All of the children would put on their best clothes and some would pick flowers to present Dr. Buckner with bouquets. Among the group was a little retarded girl. She did not even know the difference between weeds and flowers. When Dr. Buckner arrived, the children would press around him, each vying with the others to be the first to touch him or present him with flowers. But always Dr. Buckner seemed to be looking for someone. Then his eyes would find her, hanging back timidly on the edge of the crowd with her pitiful little handful of weeds. He would push through the boys and

girls and kneel beside the poor little waif. Taking her in his arms first of all, he would tell her he loved her and hugged her tight. She knew that Dr. Buckner cared.

That's how God the father is. He knows us. He cares for us. No matter who we are or what our needs, his loving eyes search us out for he is a caring God. Jesus says that not even a sparrow can fall to the ground without God knowing and caring and he says we are worth more than many sparrows. One of the great psychiatrists of our time tells us that the greatest problem among people today is their sense of insignificance, their sense of worthlessness, and it is inconceivable to many that God could care. Yet he who cares for the sparrow cares for us. Soren Kierkegaard, the great Danish writer, once spoke of standing on a high point looking over the sea. He wrote, "And as I stood there one quiet evening as the sea struck up its song with a deep and calm solemnity, whilst my eye met not a single sail on the vast expanse of water, and the sea set bounds to the heavens, and the heavens to the sea; whilst on the other side the busy noise of life subsided and the birds sang their evening prayer...as I stood there alone and forsaken, and the power of the sea and the battle of the elements reminded me of my own nothingness, and on the other hand, the sure flight of the birds recalled the words spoken by Christ; Not a sparrow shall fall to the ground without your Father: then all at once I felt how great and how small I was; then did those two mighty forces, pride and humility, happily unite in friendship." I can appreciate that, can't you? To feel so small and insignificant and unimportant, and yet to know that God loves me and cares for me. Yes, God's old math adds up to that, for he is a caring God who knows about the sparrows and he knows about you.

But there is a second thing to which God's old math adds up. You see, God not only cares about us, he shares our deepest needs. Do you remember how the prophet Isaiah spoke of Jesus? He wrote, "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows...he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed." (Chapter 52) Yes, God shares our failures. Isn't that what our text for this morning says? "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up.." And why did that happen to Jesus? Because God is sharing your sins and mine. He is giving his Son for the payment of our sins.

Let me ask you a question this morning. What can you do about your sins? You can't hide them, for as the Psalmist writes, "whether shall I flee from thy presence.." You can't deny them for the Bible says God looks on the inner heart. You can't pay for them, for the Bible says the wages of sin is death. And when the day of judgment comes and you stand in the presence of God, what will you do with your sins? Well, there is only one thing we can do with our sins and that is to let God share them. That's what Jesus is doing on the cross, he is sharing the punishment for your sins and mine. And if we will accept it, we are forgiven.

Many years ago a ship named the Empress of Ireland went down at sea. Aboard her were 130 Salvation Army men and 109 of them drowned. Not a one of the men who died that day had on a life preserver. Each had taken his off when it was discovered that there were not enough to go around and had given it to someone else. As they gave away their preservers which meant life to them, they said, "Take our belts. We can die better than you." Yes, they could die because they had found a saviour who shared their sin and they knew they were forgiven men who had eternal life. That's how God's old math added up in their lives--it added up to forgiveness for God the Son had shared their sin and paid the price. There

is a hymn we sing that goes, "Just as I am without one plea, except thy blood was shed for me...O Lamb of God, I come." When you come to him, just as you are, your sins are forgiven because on the cross Jesus has shared them and you are forgiven.

So God's old math adds up to that--to caring and to sharing. But there is one other factor to compute, the factor of God the Holy Spirit. When life is at its worst, how would you like to be carried through those times as though on the wings of an eagle? Well, that's what God's old math adds up to. He is a God who bears us through life. Do you remember how Isaiah put it in the Old Testament? He wrote, "He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary and young men shall fall exhausted (has life ever left you exhausted?); but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." Well, I don't know about you, but that is what I need in life. I need power in my life--spiritual power--to see me through the darkest times. I need the bearing power of God to strengthen me and sustain me and to hold me up when my own strength fails, when temptation overwhelms me, when troubles weigh me down. At times like that, we need a power greater than our own to give us wings like eagles.

Not long ago I read a story about a young man who lost his wife in a tragic automobile accident. After the funeral the father was putting the little three year old daughter to bed, awkwardly trying to button her pajamas. Suddenly the lights went out from some power failure and the little girl, frightened by the sudden darkness, climbed into her daddy's lap and asked him to hold her close. Snuggling in his arms she whispered, "I'm not afraid any more because you are with me." The grief-stricken man buried his face in his little girl's hair and as the tears came, he said, "Yes, dear, it is dark right now. But I'm not afraid either because God's presence is with me, too." Yes, the bearing power of God--the power to see us through the toughest times when our own strength and our own courage fail. The little girl said, "I'm not afraid any more because you are with me." And isn't that what David was saying when he wrote, "Yes, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me..."

Well, that's how God's old math adds up. I don't understand the so-called new math and I certainly can't comprehend God's old math of three in one and one in three. But I do know this: God's old math adds up to a God who cares, a God who shares, and a God who bears me up. I don't know about you, but for me, that's the kind of answer I really need.