



“After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go.”

At first glance this verse appears to be one of the most mundane in all scripture. It’s hard to imagine it is anything more than the most routine of observations. Jesus appointed 70.

But today’s sermon will be something of a lesson on Biblical interpretation in which we discover there are more layers than we can imagine in God’s Word.

For example, we know Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey is not merely a way to describe the mode of transportation used, but an act imbued with meaning meant to speak something to the people. Namely, that Jesus is humble, coming in not as a warrior on a horse, but a humble servant. We know that Jesus dying on a cross was not simply descriptive of the mode of execution, but that Deuteronomy tells us anyone hanged on a tree is cursed by God, and since the cross was made of wood, Jesus, the Son of God, became cursed by God that we might be blessed. Today we learn that the number 70, far from being a simple observation about the count of disciples, discloses something deep about the nature of God in Jesus Christ.

But since I am a math geek, I want to share something about the nature of numbers. God speaks to us in numbers by placing a divine calling card on the universe, letting us know there is something more than chaos behind the curtain of creation.

It was Isaac Newton’s grasp of mathematics that enabled him to comprehend the movements of the heavens and he concluded, *“This most beautiful system of the sun, planets and comets, could only proceed from the counsel and dominion of an intelligent and powerful Being.”*

Representing and naming the inconceivable is the joy of mathematics. In fact, the word “google”, was the invention of a young boy when asked what you would call $10 \times 100^{\text{th}}$ power! Googleplex is a google to the google power, which is a number larger than all atoms in the universe. Mathematics has the clout to speak to us of things beyond the power of prose and exceeding the comprehensibility of the human mind. Thus, it is especially appropriate for helping us know something of the mind of God.

With a wink and a nod God uses numbers to show order and simplicity within the vast complexity and incomprehensibility of nature. $E=mc^2$, perhaps the most famous example of all, in which numbers show us that energy and matter are in fact manifestations of the same

phenomenon! The utter astounding reality of this mind-blowing discovery by Einstein says something deep about the nature of reality. What appears to be disconnected, distinct and random is in fact filled with order, purpose, and meaning. Einstein declared, *"Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind."* Today we will add math to this discourse as we realize 70 in the Bible is not just 70, but something far more!

Before we proceed any further, a caveat. There is nothing magical to Biblical numbers. We are not going to find the meaning of the universe by adding up all the numbers in the Bible. As Galileo remarked, *"I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with senses, reason, and intellect has intended us to forego their use."* Thus, we must not abandon reason to try and draw ludicrous conclusions. Rather, as in any good writing, there are layers to enhance and deepen meaning.

70 tells us that God is present and at work in the world.

70 tells us that God's dominion and redemption includes the whole world.

70 tells us that God's divine plan uses people to teach us and to lead us.

70 tells us that God is present and at work in the world:

As we know, 7 represents completion as in the 7 days of creation and 10 represents the fullness of God's law (the Ten Commandments),

so 70 (10 x 7) is meant to convey an all-encompassing reality.

The number 70 has been a calling card of sorts for God, something like the imprint of a signet ring. Signet rings were worn on the pinky finger, engraved with the family crest, dipped in hot wax, and used to sign documents.

There were 70 years in the Babylonian exile, 70 sons of Abraham, 70 scholars who translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek, 70 weeks of years of punishment for Israel's transgressions.

When Jesus chose 70 disciples, He was signing his work.

We can see Jesus purposely used "70" to signify something divine when Peter asked how many times, we should forgive someone. Rather than saying 490, he said, "70 x 7!"

In Jesus' case, the Bible used 70 as a way to show the continuity of God throughout history and to indicate Jesus' status as God in the flesh.

The number 70 in the Bible serves as training wheels for "Godly sight." As one begins to learn how to spot God's presence in the Bible, suddenly you discover the imprint of God's signet ring is everywhere in the world, not just in the number 70.

Many scientists have found great joy in spotting God's imprint in creation.

Paul Davies, author of *God and the New Physics*, wrote, *"There is for me powerful evidence that there is something going on behind it all... It seems as though somebody has fine-tuned nature's numbers to make the*

universe... The impression of design is overwhelming."

Part of the gift of scripture is to teach us how to see God in our lives. As you walked here today the signs were overwhelming – God’s signature was everywhere. In the bright green of the trees, (not only the beauty but the photosynthetic prowess it represents) in the wagging tails of dogs, in the nod from a stranger, in the welcome sight of the front doors of the church, the breeze that pressed upon your cheek.

70 tells us that God’s divine plan uses people to teach us and to lead us:

In the book of Numbers, when Moses is frustrated and worn out from leading the people all by himself, God commands Moses to gather 70 of the elders of Israel. God takes some of the Spirit on Moses and places it upon them. There were 70 members of the Sanhedrin, the high court of Israel.

This consistent use of 70 leaders shows us that God does not only choose a few people to lead, teach, and inspire but that God imbues many with gifts to show us the path of salvation and Jesus’ choice of 70 continues that thread.

In your own life consider all the people who have led, supported, reprimanded, and guided you into faith. I can still remember my preacher from 3rd grade, Rev. Klein, at Second Presbyterian Church in Roanoke. I don’t remember what he said but I do remember the passion, conviction, and compassion with which he preached. His example showed me that faith is important and central to our lives.

As a new pastor finding my way in Magnolia, Arkansas, Mama Sue took me to visit members on many occasions. The delicious food she brought, the time she took to go from house to house, and the caring manner she presented to each person taught me the power of hospitality and opened my eyes wider to the glory of God.

Perhaps every 70 days you can take stock of all those God has placed in your path to lead into the joy and power of God.

70 tells us that God’s dominion and redemption includes the whole world:

According to Jewish tradition, there were 70 descendants of Noah and at the Tower of Babel they were each given different languages to speak thus dividing the world into 70 nations. Later, as Israel emerges into the Promised Land, Moses gathered large stones and instructed the people to carve the Torah into them in 70 different languages, hinting that the Law of God was meant to be shared with the whole world.

However, up until Jesus, the views in most religions were largely insular. Meaning, the gods people believed in were mostly for people like them, and the protection, the blessings, and the teachings were reserved for that group. And the fate of other peoples was inconsequential at best or that of damnation and eternal servitude at worst.

When Jesus appointed the 70 in Luke to go ahead of Him, this was a symbolic act to demonstrate the Gospel was meant to reach every nation on earth.

And we do know that, faster than any religion in the history of the world, it spread like wildfire because the message was universal, filled with forgiveness, and held the promise for everyone no matter your gender, ethnic group, social status, or economic condition.

And thus, when Jesus sent them and sends us, He does so with particular instructions to help us convey the Good News as intended.

Thus, the charge to all of us is to live as the "70" sent by Jesus:

...as people who have eyes to see the signet ring of God everywhere we go.

...as people of God who have been shaped and led by mentors and teachers of God showing us the way.

...as people of God to go into the world, the whole world, showing no favoritism but the love of God with everyone we meet.

Amen.