

God Encamps at the Center of Our Lives

2016 Fall Sermon Series on Numbers

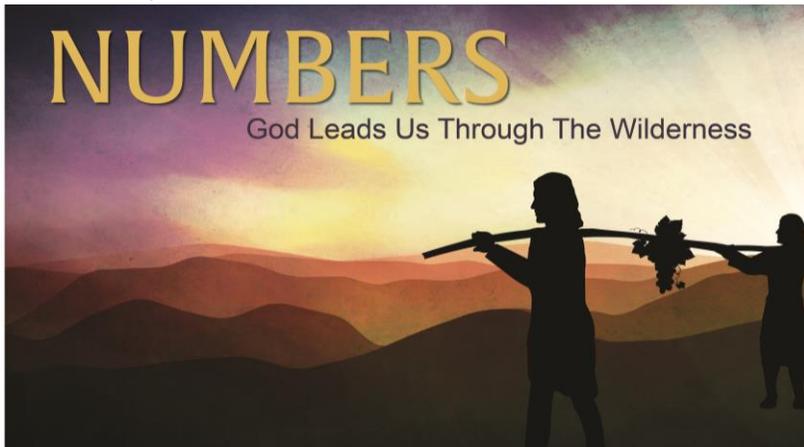
Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

September 11, 2016

TEXT: Numbers 2:1-3

We continue this morning in our new series on the Book of numbers. If you were not with us last week, the book of Numbers is the fourth book of the Bible and narrates the wilderness



journeys of God's people as God takes us from Mount Sinai to the very borders of the Promised Land. We enter into the wilderness as children and emerge as a people ready to claim their inheritance. The Book of Numbers is an epic journey. It's filled with testing and trial in the wilderness, and it's a place

where we meet God and discover His faithfulness and reliability. This morning, we read Numbers 2, and we look at this section as God's people are organized in the wilderness before the journey itself begins. Numbers 2 sets before us a very powerful picture that is communicated in a very Old Testament style in a list of names and a list of numbers. We need help seeing this passage because the people who heard this passage read were living it. They were seeing it, and they knew the people, and the details of Scripture help us enter into the reality of it. What we see before us in Numbers 2 is that God encamps at the very center of our lives. We want to follow this passage and to see it together, and then, in good biblical style, in light of the text which depicts God's people encamped to the four points of the compass, we will have a very unusual ending to the sermon of four applications in light of what we will have just seen. As we often notice throughout the Bible, Numbers 2:1 begins with a short phrase we don't want to pass over:

"The LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, . . ."

When we say that the Bible is inspired, is breathed out by God, it is because God wanted us to have these words. God wanted us to have this story, and this great redemptive narrative includes you and me as we hear it. Yet again we see that the Bible is not the product of human invention. It is the will of God expressed in writing. It is the voice of our heavenly Father.

The Lord speaks yet again, and the location of His speaking is Mount Sinai. The Sinai Peninsula is a large triangle. The Book of Exodus takes us through the journey out of Egypt in the upper left-

hand corner as God's people pass through those bodies of water near the top of this picture. They move towards the mountain of Sinai as they come down this path. Mount Sinai is at the bottom of this triangle. The Book of Exodus takes us out of Egypt to Mount Sinai. We reached the base of Mount Sinai in Exodus 19, and God's people remain here for the rest of Exodus, all of Leviticus, and the first 10 chapters of Numbers. So we are at the bottom of this triangle, the



base of the mountain, God's visible glory. The tabernacle is described and then set up as a portable Mount Sinai where God speaks and dwells in the midst of His people. The Book of Numbers will take us from the bottom of this triangle up the other side, journeying to the land that God had promised, and it is this experience, this journey in the wilderness, that will be described in the narratives of Numbers. These narratives are interspersed with some lists and some detailed accounting of who is there and a description of the camp. The first nine chapters of Numbers describe the camp. We began by seeing last week that the camp is organized according to heads or members of the community that are representing the 12 tribes. In this morning's text, we see this very powerful visual picture, that the camp is arranged with God standing, dwelling, living, if you will, in the midst of His people. As we read the narrative of Numbers, it is something that everyone was seeing, and it is then described for us.

Let's just pass through this briefly together to see how God desires to organize His people. There are powerful lessons for each of us this morning. We read in Numbers 2:2:

"The people of Israel shall camp each by his own standard, with the banners of their fathers' houses. They shall camp facing the tent of meeting on every side."

This means that God's people are encamped in such a way that each one is encamped facing the place of God's presence. That means that no one among the community has their back to the Lord. Whatever position you are in around the tabernacle, around God's dwelling place, you are positioned in such a way that your eyes, your frontal view, is towards God and His dwelling place. The camp is organized. Some of our accountant type, some of our engineers, are loving Numbers 2. They love that God is a God of order not of disorder. We've got 600,000 people; we

have a long journey to go. This has to be organized and set up. We notice a window into how the biblical writers and God's people in biblical times viewed geography. We are trained by our GPS and by our map conventions to see north as our primary direction, but in the Bible, north is not the primary direction. The primary direction of the Bible is east. It is east because you look east and you anticipate both the rising of the sun and the glory of God in front of you. East is the primary direction. The camp of God moves out from the east, as we will see. On the east side of the tabernacle, the dwelling of God, we see that there are three tribal groups, and Judah is mentioned first. Judah is given priority because of the promise of Judah for kingship. Judah is set first and on the east side towards the sunrise. There is a standard for the camp of Judah, and then there is the listing of the company of Judah, 74,600. Next to Judah is Issachar, and next to Judah on the other side is Zebulun. This group of three on the east side is described as their camp, but notice it says in Numbers 2:9:

“All those listed of the camp of Judah, by their companies, were 186,400. They shall set out first on the march.”

This description of God's camp is the camp at rest in Numbers 2, but the camp at rest is prepared for a camp on the move. God's people are not a wax museum exhibit. This camp is organized so that it can be mobilized and move in response to God's leading, with east as the primary direction. Then you turn to your right hand to the south. On the south side there is the camp of Reuben. Next to Reuben there is Simeon, and on the other side is the tribe of Gad. Again, we see that the south side cluster of three tribes under the banner of Reuben is a staggering number of heads of families: 151,000 people. We see that they set out second. Numbers 2:17 tells us that after these six tribes set out:

“Then the tent of meeting shall set out, with the camp of the Levites in the midst of the camps; as they camp, so shall they set out, each in position, standard by standard.”

The Levites are not given any ancestral land as the Levites have the Lord as their portion. They stand for the firstborn redeemed from Egypt, and God's tent, the apparatus of the tabernacle, the coverings and the furniture, then move in the middle of the camp and are carried by the Levites. Then we see the west side. In Hebrew, the west is towards the sea, the great Mediterranean Sea. On the west side is the camp of Ephraim, the tribe of Manasseh, with Benjamin next to them. The camp of Ephraim moves out third, behind the Ark and the apparatus of the tabernacle. Finally on the north side, which is the last biblical direction, is the camp of Dan, with Asher and Naphtali, on this side of the tabernacle. In Numbers 2:31, we see the tribe of Dan with 157,600 people setting out in the rear of this mobile column of redeemed people. We read in Numbers 2:32 the description of this camp:

“These are the people of Israel as listed by their fathers' houses. All those listed in the camps by their companies were 603,550.”

That's a staggering number, especially considering that is just the heads of the families. Most families would include a spouse and children, so a conservative estimate is that this is a church on the move of around two million people. That's a large body of redeemed people.

I love to learn the names of everyone at Kenwood, and I praise God for the growth we're experiencing. Some of the names I forget or don't know yet, but it's staggering to think of keeping track of two million people. When you think of the scale and scope of redemption, it is massive. At the end of the Bible, John sees the scale and scope of the redeemed. He describes his own ancestral people, the 12 tribes of Israel and multiplies them by 1000, which in the biblical use of numbers is sort of like 'to the nth degree.' Then he turns and sees the nations, and he says there were so many it was like an innumerable multitude. When you think of the scale, scope, and power of God's salvation, you've got to keep in mind that there are two million of us walking, living, carrying this story. These numbers are so large that some scholars have said the text is corrupt at this point. There was no way there could be two million people out there in the wilderness, and yet there is no evidence of textual corruption at all. Our earliest readers of the Bible in early translations like the Septuagint and in our earliest commentaries, all take these numbers at face value. It is a massive group. It is a big group. God has a big family. His salvation is huge in scale and scope. This camp is organized with a scale of responsibility and leadership. It is organized by tribes. There are named, designated people who are responsible for those tribes, and within the camp, at the center, the Lord is encamped, and the tribe of Levi is encamped around the tabernacle in service to God. The camp of Israel, moving out from Egypt in route through the wilderness to the Promise Land, bears a great similarity to the camp of Ramses, the Pharaoh of Egypt, in Ramses' battle formation that we



have from the battle of Kadesh. Ramsey's reliefs depict his camp like that: the king is in the middle with the people organized all around. So, we see God leading and bringing His people and dwelling in the midst of them. I want you to have this image in mind because it is a very powerful image. When you think of the image of the tabernacle, God is encamped in the midst of His people. This is an artist's rendition of Mount Sinai. God's dwelling place is in the center of

the camp and this vast company of nearly 2,000,000 people is encamped all around Him. Numbers 2 describes the organization of redemption. It is not haphazard; it is not chaotic.

Let's apply this now patiently in four different directions.

Number one: I want to challenge you and all of us, myself included, that **God belongs at the**

center of our lives. God does not belong on the margins. God does not take just a portion. God is not foundational to who we are or what we do. God is not a given assumption. God is a living Person, the Lord of glory, and He desires and purposes to dwell in the center of our lives. If you want to know what direction you're going, wherever you are in this world, you orient yourself facing the Lord. Notice the arrangement of the tribal encampments lets everyone have God at the center of their field of vision. This is God's purpose and intention from the Garden of Eden, all the way through the Book of Revelation, that God would dwell in the midst of His people. He is not distant, but near. Though He is transcendent, He is imminent. As we then have God at the center of our lives, you will notice that our lives, yours and mine, will begin to make more sense, not less. I heard Dr. John Patrick, gifted physician and Christian apologist say at UC College of Medicine in front of all the faculty and students: "I can prove that Christianity is true very simply, because when someone becomes a Christian, their lives start to make more sense and not less." That was it for him, brilliant man, 37-page résumé. I have seen it. It's real. He has lots of publications, and he just said: "If Christianity were a lie, then if you trusted Christ and began to live your life out of a lie, your life would start to unravel and become disordered, chaotic, and make less sense. But," he said, "just the opposite is true. When you confess Christ, your life starts to become ordered, less chaotic, and it begins to make more sense over time." For him as a scientist, he said: "That just shows me that Christianity is true." We see a very powerful, concrete picture that God desires to encamp at the very center of our lives. So, I challenge you from Numbers 2 to move God from the margin to the very center, and that means explicitly identifying the Lord as the center. That means referring to God with decisions that we make. That means treasuring His Word as our guiding compass in this life. So, number one is that God desires to encamp in the center of our lives. This is application to the east.

Number two is from a different direction around the sanctuary, application to the south: The astonishing thing in Numbers 2, and as the Book of Numbers plays out, is that **you and I become united with one another only in relationship to God.** We come out of Egypt as a mixed multitude. Exodus 12:38 says that not only did the ancestral tribes come out of Egypt, but also a mixed multitude of people including the Egyptians who said: "The Lord is the real God. We are attaching ourselves to Him." This group of people, even when I look around Kenwood this morning, this is a diverse group of people. We wear our hair differently—and that might be the most obvious thing to notice. We have different colored eyes, different colored skin. We have different native languages. We have different educations. We have different life experiences. We have different birth orders. With all this diversity, how does a group of people get united? You can't tell people: "Hey, be united!" You could come up with a great marketing slogan: "Live united!" but there's no motivational power in that. Yet, when God is encamped in the center, notice what happens to all the people who were encamped around Him. They are united. They are united with a shared encampment. They are united with the same distance around the tabernacle. They are united in that each of them is represented. They are united in that they

are named. Each one matters. Each one is assigned a role in this mobile column of God's advance. They are united with a shared history and a common future, and they express this unity. As the narrative unfolds, we will see more next week that they unite together in their offering. Number 7 lists this offering that comes from each portion of the community, and the offering is the same. This offering makes the ministry happen and supports and sustains this column on the way. So we become united together only in relationship to God, and this is actually a real unity, like a mosaic that is formed into a single image of redemption. This is God's purpose and intention. We see the ending in Revelation 7. This is what God is after. He is after a mixed multitude of the redeemed from every nation encamped together around His throne, and this encampment in the wilderness will eventually lead us to the City of God where we surround His throne together in unity that we possess through faith in Christ.

Let's turn to the west side of the encampment for application number three: **When God moves, we move together**. When the tabernacle is first set up and described in the ending of the book of Exodus, in chapter 40, God's visible glory descends, and in Numbers 9:15-16, we read again:

“On the day that the tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the testimony. And at evening it was over the tabernacle like the appearance of fire until morning. So it was always: the cloud covered it by day and the appearance of fire by night.”

God's visible glory! Can you imagine? This is like the ultimate campout. It brings you together around the campfire: shared memories, people talk, you celebrate and get close. This is something of a totally different order: God's own visible glory in the midst of the camp, and we see the camp at rest. But, God's visible glory does not remain; God's visible glory moves out, and we will see this for the first time in Numbers 10. We will see by the time we get to Numbers 33, that God's glory moves the people in a journey of multiple stops, and God will lead us step-by-step with visible glory: the pillar of cloud and fire.

The God of the Bible desires to actively lead us as His people. If you're here this morning and you're living the postmodern life of fragmentation, of isolation, and of loneliness, then I commend to you Numbers 2 because it describes human life as it's supposed to be, where God our heavenly Father is with us. His presence is nearby, and God is our



Shepherd, the Shepherd of Israel. He desires to actively lead us. He has not made you in His image and likeness and then abandoned you. He has made you for relationship with Him, and He desires to lead you step-by-step. I know some of you are thinking right now: “The Old Testament in this moment seems even better than the New because everyone can see God.” Well, let me just assure you that the Bible also contains Acts 2 where that same visible cloud of

glory comes fills every believing heart. God desires to lead us by the Holy Spirit. This is the Holy Spirit, God's visible presence. As we go forward in the Book of Numbers, we will discover that in God's leading and His going out from the camp, we must go with Him, and this is very powerful, and we are still on the western application. You have got to go with God. If you go ahead of God and you say: "I'm tired of this place, and I'm just going on ahead, and I hope God catches up with me," what happens in the Book of Numbers is that the people perish when they go up without God's leading. Sometimes people come to me for premarital counseling, and they present their plans, their desires, and their self-selection of the spouse, and they say: "I'm just coming to you to ask God to bless it." I say: "Let's read about when Israel went up to Iraq without God's leading and they perished. You see, that's upside-down." I love to ask people the question: "Is marrying this person an expression of obedience to your heavenly Father?" That's the better question. Has God entrusted this person to you? Then you approach this with fear and trembling and awe and gratitude, and God is leading and I am following along. That's a totally different life. Whether that's who you are going to marry or whether that's what job you are going to take, or whether I'm going to have the courage to be direct with a coworker who is really upsetting me. Whatever the application of that is, go in response to God's leading and not the other way around. At the same time, you will also be tempted, and I will as well, that God will move, and you'll say: "Boy, I like this part. I want to stay here." You'll be tempted to just encamp and say: "You know, I've got a premium site. I had an unobstructed view. I really like the neighbors I had. They were quiet at night and woke up early with me. We did devotions together. I'm staying here. I like these people, and God is taking off." You'll be tempted to say "No, we are not moving. I'm anti-change. My favorite Scripture is Hebrews 13:8: 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.'" When God moves, we have to move, and we have to trust God that He knows where He is taking us. We have to trust God that He knows how to just keep tension on the line between what you know how to do and then what you need to learn how to do. God will place you in a new job that will be overwhelming, and you'll say: "Lord, I don't know how to do this. I liked my old job." Yet, when God moves, you have to move with Him. As a church family, as God moves us, we have to move. We can't just do things the way we've always done them. We have to move in response to His leading, not our own.

Number four: Let's apply this lastly to the north side of the tabernacle. I want to challenge you from Numbers 2:34. This passage ends by simply saying:

"Thus did the people of Israel. According to all that the LORD commanded Moses, so they camped by their standards, and so they set out, each one in his clan, according to his fathers' house."

Numbers 2:34 ends as many of the narratives of Numbers end. God describes what we are supposed to do, and the people do it. The north-side application for us of the camp in the wilderness is to **show your colors**. You have to **identify yourself as part of the community**. God

said: "Encamp here and be arranged by these tribal units." Then the Lord said that each tribal unit is assembled underneath a banner. That banner has a name; that banner has a color; that banner has an emblem. We see that God's people are organized in the wilderness in such a way that creates and sustains our identity as a people. You have to show your colors. September 11 is a day in the history of the United States where we often grapple with how to make September 11 part of our national history. I'm sure most of us can remember where we were. I remember having just dropped our daughter Salome off at daycare, and I started to go to class at Hebrew Union. As I got into the classroom, I heard people saying: "Planes are falling from the sky and they are striking buildings in the country." I turned around and I went back to the daycare, and I picked up Salome. This is pre-cell phone, and we all lived at the mercy of WLW. I picked her up, and she looked at me with these very young eyes, and she said: "Dad, what are you doing? Why are you picking me up?" I remember looking at her eyes and thinking: "The world that you live in and will grow up in is changing today, forever. How can I describe to my two-year-old daughter that planes are falling from the sky and that we are going home and praying for God to keep us safe?" You see, 9/11 is a stop of our national history, and even the meaning and interpretation of that is really still developing. What's the greater narrative that that event forms a part of? For God's people, despite our individual ethnic, national identities, we have a shared identity as the people of God that is identified by names, colors, emblems that communicate this national story of which we are a part. You have to show your colors, because this story of Scripture, of God who saves us out of Egypt and claims us for Himself and dwells among us and reveals His will and His word and promises us the land, develops in Scripture to become heirs of the new heavens and new earth. This is the story that we become part of, and so the north-side of the application of Numbers 2 is that you have to show your colors. That means that your identity as part of the people of God is in front of your national identity, and it means that you have to identify yourself within this narrative. You have to show in your workplace, in your family, through your parenting, through the way you play, that God is the center of your life, that He is your hope and your future, that we bear this story, and that we are part of this people, and that people around us are invited into the story.

A great part about this camp is that you can add people to it. I love the evangelistic opportunities that God affords to us on planes. I really get excited. I like to fly, but I love what God will do. I ended up having a phenomenal conversation for an hour and a half on the flight home. It started rather innocently by reading my Hebrew Bible on the plane, and that that provokes questions. We have got to show our colors. I ended up talking for an hour and a half with this woman who had her own marketing company, and yet she was fascinated to see that the Bible was reliably transmitted and that God could be known. She said: "What are you reading?" I said: "I'm preaching on the Book of Numbers." She said: "What's that?" I said: "Let me tell you." You have to show your colors.

There is an ancient illustration I will close with about showing your colors from antiquity, based on this image. Around the time of Jesus, there was a member of the Roman Imperial family who converted to Judaism. He converted to worship the God of Israel, and if you're the Roman Emperor you're also the Pontifex Maximus. You're in charge of the civil religion of the Roman world, and if a member of your family converts to worship the God of Israel, that's not so great. So, what do you do? Well, the Roman Emperor sends a set of troops to arrest this man. His name is Aquila, called Onqelos in the Hebrew version. He sends a troop of people to arrest him, and Aquila cites verses of Scripture to the soldiers, and all of the soldiers convert. So what do you do if you are the Emperor? The Roman Emperor sends another group of soldiers and gives them the specific instructions: "Don't say anything at all to Aquila." They seize him, and they are taking him off, and he looks at this group of soldiers, and he says: "May I say something to you about something that's not Scripture?" They say: "Sure," and so he asked them a question. He says: "When a man carries a torch, a light, he goes in front of someone who is carrying someone who is really important, like in a sedan chair, right? The person who is carrying the sedan chair, he goes in front of the commander of the army, right? The commander, he goes out in front of the general, right? Then the generals, they go out in front of the Emperor who is last, and this is how the Roman army marches." Then he asked this question: "Does the Emperor, does Caesar carry a light in front of anyone?" And they say: "No." He said: "You know, that is so interesting, because the Holy One of Israel, He carries a torch before the people. As it is said: 'The Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light.' There is no one like the Holy One of Israel." They all converted. Caesar finally says: "Okay, last round. I'm sending a final group of soldiers to arrest Aquila." He sends a third group, and he charges them: "Look, don't talk to him at all!" So they go, the third group of soldiers, and they arrest him. They seize him and carry him off. As they are dragging him out of his home, he sees the mezuzah, which is that small box on a devout Israelite's home that has pieces of Scripture on it. It's attached to the door. You'll see this today in any Jewish home or restaurant, and it has the Hebrew letter *shine* for Shaddai on it. As he is being pulled out of his home, he sees the mezuzah affixed to the door and just touches it as they are dragging him out, and he smiles. That's it. The soldiers can't bear it, and they say: "Why are you smiling? We just arrested you. We are taking you, and if you don't renounce this, we are going to kill you, and you are smiling." He says: "Well, you know, the thing is, it's the way of the world, isn't it, that the king is usually seated inside and his servants are outside standing guard? But the Holy One of Israel, His servants, they are inside, and He stands guard outside! The Lord will guard your going in and your coming out." When they heard this, they all converted, and Caesar said: "I'm not sending anyone else." Numbers 2 has a powerful implication for us from the east to the south to the west and to the north. God wants to be at the center of our lives. Let's live for Him and show our colors. Let's pray.

Lord, we give You praise this morning for who You are. We delight in You. We thank You, Lord, that You know us and that You see us and that every portion of Your Word is inspired in the voice of our heavenly Father, teaching us who You are and who we are and how we're supposed to live. Fill us with the Holy Spirit. Help us to walk in obedience to You and follow You wherever You go together.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.