

He Will be Heralded by a Nazirite in the Wilderness

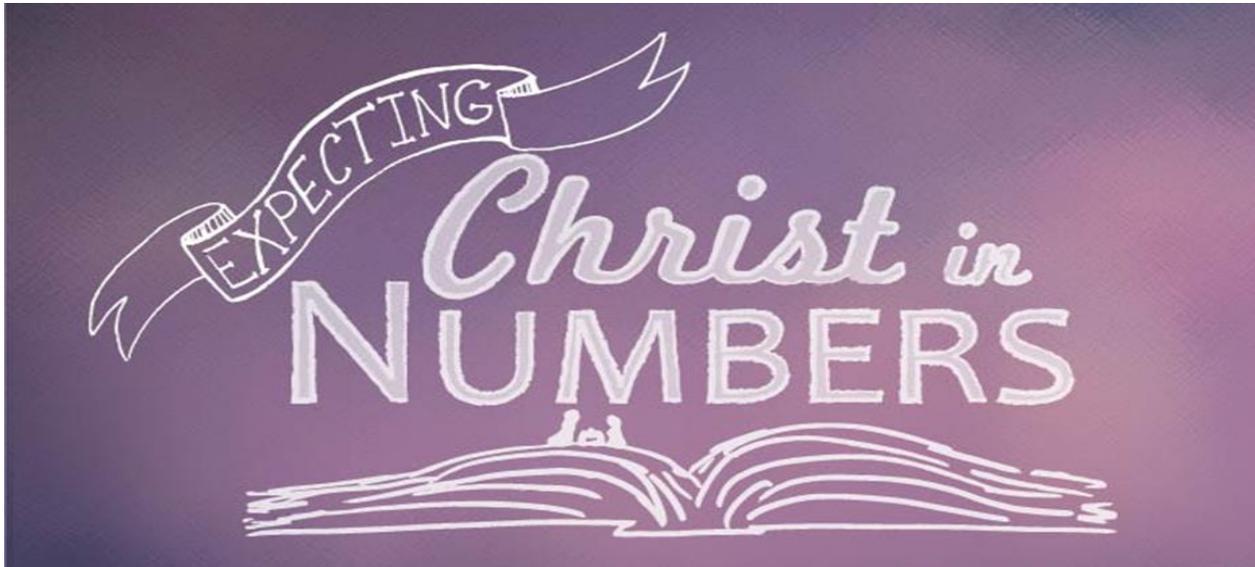
Advent Sermon Series on Expecting Christ in Numbers

Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

November 27, 2016

TEXT: Numbers 6:1-8



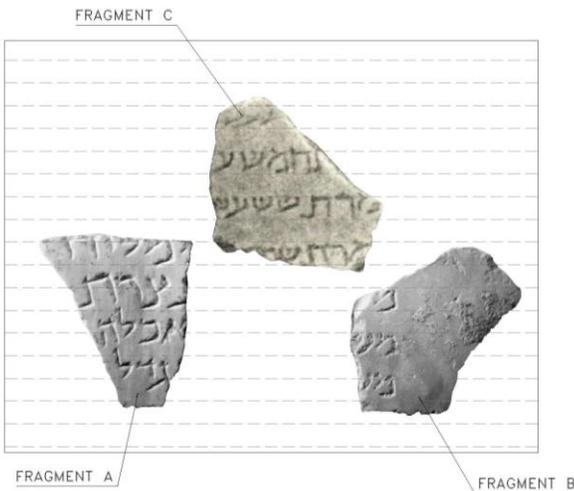
It's good to be back, and we thank you for your prayers for us as we traveled several thousand miles retracing routes of Scripture, standing in places where our Lord Jesus preached. It was a very moving time, drawing close to one another. We had many unforgettable moments walking through Hezekiah's tunnel and seeing that the Gihon spring is still surging forth with water. It was a joy to be together to share this very special time, and I'm sure we'll have much more to share about this as we journey further in faith together. Thank you for praying for us. I felt very safe. The only dangerous place I felt was the airport in Newark, New Jersey, which is more a comment on the state of our society. We turn this morning to new series. Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Advent means *to arrive, to come*. *Advenire*, the Latin term, means this is a season that reminds us of the coming of Christ into the world. Traditionally, we celebrate Advent as the four weeks leading up to Christmas, and each of these weeks is marked by a theme: themes of hope, love, joy, and peace that come into the world through Jesus our Messiah. This year for Advent we are going to explore the life of Christ as we see it prophesied and prefigured in the Scriptures. Jesus told His disciples on the Road to Emmaus that the Scripture was about Himself. At Kenwood this fall, we have been studying the Book of Numbers, so as we prepare for Christmas, we want to hear back echoes of the Book of Numbers as we journey towards Christmas. On our trip to the Holy Land, we reached Jerusalem the first Sunday, and right as we were gathering for worship, we saw the vista of the Holy City,

the Temple Mount area. On the second Sunday, we were actually driving through the wilderness journeys and seeing the wisdom of God in providing springs of water along the way.

This morning, we want to turn our attention to the Gospel of Luke. Luke starts the Christmas story rooted in chronology. The Christmas story begins with a voice heralding out the coming of Christ, and this voice heralding in the wilderness is the voice of the Nazirite, John the Baptist. Christianity is rooted in history and is differentiated from all other faiths in this way. The Gospel of Luke locates the Christmas story in the days of Herod, king of Judea, and for those of us who just returned from Israel, we spent a lot of time, in a sense, with Herod. Herod's monumental architecture has made a lasting imprint on the land, each project striking and bold in its design, whether it's to build a harbor out into the sea or a palace on top of a mountain or a mountain where there was none. Herod's personality still reverberates in the land, and yet for the Gospel of Luke, what is significant is that something happened. The God of the Bible was at work in the days of Herod, king of Judea. This is Herod the Great, and though this man spent a phenomenal amount of money and resources to make a name for himself, none of his projects are described in the Gospel of Luke. Instead of focusing on a man who would seem great in the eyes of the world, Luke focuses our attention on the way that God looks on a certain priest, one of 18,000 priests at the time of Jesus. Luke draws our attention to this certain priest. He tells us next that this priest is named Zechariah, *the Lord remembers*. He tells us in Luke 1:5:

“In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah.”

It was King David who organized the priests into a series of 24 courses of priests after their



ancestral house who would share the service of the sanctuary. In 1962, three fragments of these priestly courses were found in an inscription in Caesarea. These descriptions list the 24 groupings that we find in 1 Chronicles 24. They are in a regular pattern, and each priestly course would rotate throughout the year and serve for one or two weeks and run the sanctuary and officiate at that time. Though there was a high priest and chief priests, the common priest would rotate their week to be in Jerusalem. All of the 24 courses of priests would be in Jerusalem for the major

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 משמרת שנייה ידעיה עמוק צפורים
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 משמרת רביעית שערים עתהלו
 משמרת חמישית בליה בית לחם
 משמרת ששית בימין יזופת
 משמרת שביעית חקוז עלבו
 משמרת שמינית אביה כרפי עוזיה
 משמרת תשיעית ישוע ארבל
 משמרת עשירית שרנדה זבד נבול
 משמרת אחת עשרה אלישבעה וקנה
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 משמרת שלוש עשרה דופה בית געון
 משמרת ארבע עשרה שבאב חזפת שחון
 משמרת חמש עשרה בעייה בלגה ונית
 משמרת שש עשרה אביר פרנכרה
 משמרת שבע עשרה חזירי גמל
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 משמרת עשרים ואחת כין כפר יוחנה
 משמרת עשרים ושתיים גמל בית חניה
 משמרת עשרים ושלוש ליה גנתון צמין
 משמרת עשרים וארבע עמיה חמת אריח

holidays of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. Each course at about this time, we hear from writer of Isaiah, had about 750 priests. So, it was a regular rotation of making the service take place. Zechariah is a priest. He is not of the most prominent order. His is order number eight, so he is down in the list. He is a member of the priestly course of Abijah. We learn in Luke 1:5b-6, furthermore, that his wife is also of priestly descent. She is of the daughters of Aaron, and her name is Elizabeth:

“And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.”

To *walk blamelessly before the Lord* is a biblical idiom *to walk with God*, a precious expression that this couple was devout, of priestly ancestry, serving a regular rotation in the courts of the Lord, and Luke 1:7 tells us that although they had all these wonderful things:

“They had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.”

This is a nice way of saying it, isn't it? “I'm advanced in years; you are advancing in years.”

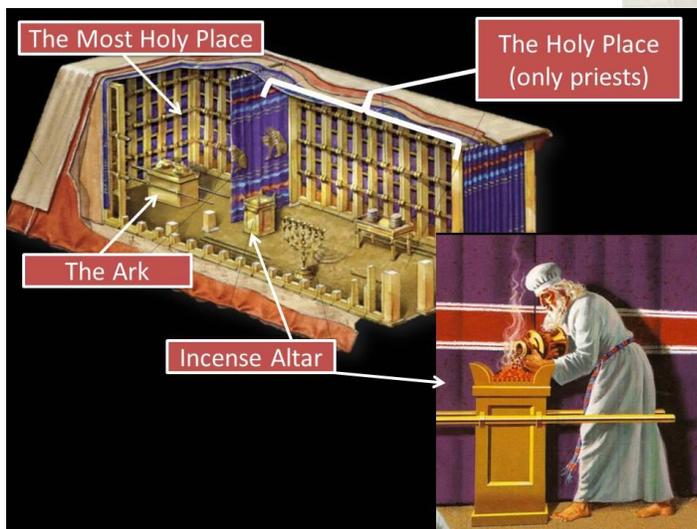
Well, they are elderly, and for those of us who know the Bible well, this category of an old barren couple should fire our imagination, because the God of the Bible tends to enjoy working with the unlikely. He works with the unlikely; He does not choose to work through Herod, king of Judea, who made elaborate plans to secure his succession. He works through a priest in order number eight whose wife is old and barren, and from the human point of view, this couple seems inconsequential to the economy of this world. They were advanced in years, and then in Luke 1:8, we read:

“Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.”

Zechariah had his turn. It was the time for the course of Abijah to come to the sanctuary. He was serving as a priest before God. His division was on duty according the priesthood, and Zechariah is not only serving in the sanctuary, but he has the unique responsibilities chosen by lot, probably one of the single or maybe two or three other times in his entire life that this lot would fall to him to say: “You're on the job to serve in the sanctuary, and it's your turn even as a common priest to enter into the Holy Place and to offer incense at the other side of the veil.” This is as close as Zechariah would ever come to the Holy of Holies. He enters the sanctuary, moving past the outer court.

Just a few days ago we were standing on the Temple Mount, and I was imagining that structure was still standing. The temple that Herod built in Jerusalem was twice as tall as the

Dome of the Rock. Rabbinic sources, who were not flatterers of Herod, said: "If you never saw the Jerusalem Temple, you never saw a beautiful building." They said about Jerusalem during the time of Herod that there were 10 portions of beauty in the world, and nine of them were taken by Jerusalem. It is an astonishing building; an astonishing structure. Zechariah is there serving, and he is chosen by lot to move past the outer courts inside the sanctuary and to come to the veil to offer the incense



at the time of the morning or evening sacrifice, probably the highest moments of his devotional life. It is at that place, with the multitude outside praying, in that moment, that an angel of the Lord appears to him, standing on the right side of the altar, and Zechariah, when he sees this angel, is overwhelmed.

Anytime someone in the Bible sees the Lord, or even an angel of the Lord, they are overwhelmed. Zechariah's heart is filled with reverential awe. He is overwhelmed; a holy fear comes upon him, and the angel speaks and says to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard." We are not told the prayer that he prayed, but it seems that he must have been praying about a son, because the Angel said in Luke 1:13:

"Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John."

John in Hebrew is *Johanan*, and means: *Yahweh is gracious*. *Johanan* signals the hope of the appearance of God's grace coming into the world, and Zechariah's son, *Johanan*, John, is given a name that bears this hope of God's grace coming into the world. The angel says in Luke 1:14:

"And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth."

They will rejoice because he will be great before the Lord. We seek greatness. It is woven into the fabric of our being. We want to be remembered; we want to excel, and the Scriptures give us the key to greatness in Luke 1:15. Greatness in Scripture, greatness before God, is not linked to possessions. Greatness before God is not linked to your marketable skills. Greatness before

God is not tied to your education level. It is not tied to the size of your family. It is not tied to your cultural achievements. Greatness before the eyes of the God of the Bible is linked to a hidden consecration to God. If you want to be great in God's eyes, then you dedicate yourself to God in the innermost chambers of your being. That's where greatness really resides. He will be great before the Lord, and the angel says in Luke 1:15:

“For he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.”

His greatness is linked to the fact that he will not be drinking wine or any strong drink. This seems for many of us as a line out of nowhere, and that is why we need all of the Scriptures. The angel gives this statement about John that he will be great because he will have a hidden consecration, and he echoes the language of the Nazirite vow in Numbers 6:2-3, where the Lord speaks to Moses:

“When either a man or a woman makes a special vow, the vow of a Nazirite, to separate himself to the LORD, he shall separate himself from wine and strong drink.”

Notice that the Nazirite vow can be taken by men, and it can be taken by women. When a man or woman takes a special vow, a unique vow of a hidden consecration to God, this is a Nazirite vow. *Nazir* means to separate yourself, to consecrate yourself to God. The way that you display the Nazirite vow in Numbers 6 is to separate from three things that often fill our minds and take our time. The first separation is to separate from the pleasure of strong drink and all products made from the grape. Wine brings joy to the heart of man, the Scripture says, not being drunk in debauchery—that is not joyful for anyone, let alone the person drinking or those trying to care for them. But the image of the Nazirite is a separation from any kind of product that is at all associated with the vine. The Nazirite is also separated from the excessive concern for bodily appearance. In the Nazirite vow, you let your hair grow long. The Nazirite also separates completely from death and mourning and does not even compromise the vow for family togetherness. The Nazirite vow for some is fulfilled throughout their entire lives, while others take a temporary Nazirite vow. Number 6:8 says:

“All the days of his separation he is holy to the LORD.”

This passage teaches us that greatness in Scripture is linked with the hidden consecration and devotion to God. People throughout the Scripture are presented to us as Nazirites. In Judges 13:2-5, we read:

“There was a certain man of Zorah, of the tribe of the Danites, whose name was Manoah. And his wife was barren and had no children. And the Angel of the LORD appeared to the woman and said to her, ‘Behold, you are barren and have not borne children, but you shall conceive and bear a son. Therefore be careful and drink no wine or strong drink, and eat

nothing unclean, for behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor shall come upon his head. . .”

This couple gives birth to a Nazirite to God from the womb to the day of his death. This is Samson. Samuel, likewise, in 1 Samuel 1, is the answer to the prayer to God of Elkanah and Hannah, and Hannah dedicates Samuel to the Lord with a vow in 1 Samuel 1:11 that says:

“O LORD of hosts, if You will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head.”

Samuel is dedicated to the Lord for his entire life. Others in Scripture take a temporary Nazirite vow, like the apostle Paul who dedicated himself for special seasons of ministry. Acts 18:18 tells us:

“After this, Paul stayed many days longer and then took leave of the brothers and set sail for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila. At Cenchræe he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow.”

This is the Nazirite vow that he takes for a particular season of ministry. This is so difficult for us. We are just not used to thinking this way at all. On the one hand, we think that greatness is linked to the big ones, like money, prestige and power, marketable skills, and education. It is very foreign to us to think that greatness is in the hidden consecration to God. Sometimes those of us in the church are afraid of seeming too super-spiritual. We fear this type of consecration. We say: “Oh, surely God doesn’t want me to separate from anything that I want,” and the call of Jesus to ‘follow Me and deny ourselves’ makes increasingly less sense in a world saturated with consumption.

Greatness is linked to a consecrated life, and when we return back to the Gospel of Luke, we see now secondly the power of a consecrated life. A life dedicated to God is a powerful one, real power. The angel Lord continues and says in Luke 1:16-17 about John:

“And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before [the Lord] in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”

This is powerful. Who has power to turn hearts in repentance? None of us really can do that. If I have the power to do that, we would have to build a bigger build quickly. The power to bring humanity to a place of repentance before God, that's real power, and this son, John, has this power because his life is consecrated to God. He turns the hearts of the children to the fathers, the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, and he makes a people prepared and ready for the appearance of the Lord God Almighty. This is the power of a consecrated life. In Malachi 4:5-6,

the Lord says:

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers.”

John fulfills the mission of Isaiah 40:3, of the voice in the wilderness, saying:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”

John's life is a powerful one that is consecrated to God. When John is born then at the end of Luke 1, his father Zechariah is filled with the Holy Spirit and he prophesies over the birth of his infant son in Luke 1:68-70:

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David, as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old. . .”

He lifts up his son, who is a Nazirite from the womb, to God and says in Luke 1:76-77:

“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare His ways, to give knowledge of salvation to His people in the forgiveness of their sins.”

John has this mission, a consecrated life, the key to greatness, a powerful ministry, and John goes forth in his adulthood in the wilderness, and he prepares the people. He prepares the people in the wilderness of Judea. He calls on the people, and this is why we need Advent. We are tempted to go straight from the feast of Thanksgiving to “what are my gifts?” and if the ones that I receive don't fit, I hope they have a gift receipt or just those great gifts—cash. We are tempted to go from one to the other and miss what is so vitally important about Advent. Advent is necessary for us to prepare our hearts, to re-orient ourselves to God's definition of greatness, to God's perception of real power and influence. When John appears publicly, his greatness is manifested in that all consecrated lives point other people to Jesus Christ.

The season of Advent is a time where we refresh our own commitment, our own hidden consecration to God. That's when He fills us and then reminds us of what a powerful life really is, and the expression of that life, of that Nazirite from the womb in John, the expression of that is to point other people to Jesus Christ. All four gospel writers tell us that John's ministry is a ministry that points other people to the surpassing greatness of Jesus Christ. Matthew 3:11 tells us that John spoke to the crowds and said:

“I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

Mark's gospel tells us similarly in Mark 3:8 that John's preaching says:

"After me comes He who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.

John's ministry prepared the hearts of people and points others to Christ. This is lasting greatness. When Jesus comes to John in the Gospel of John, and He approaches John on the waters of the Jordan, John sees Jesus, and he makes it absolutely clear in John 1:29:

"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

He said in John 1:26-27:

"I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even He who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie."

And yet John baptizes Jesus to fulfill all righteousness: the Lamb of God immersing Himself for the sake of your sins and mine. We will see that the Holy Spirit takes Jesus and leads Him up into the wilderness to be tempted and tried in the same geographical area where God's people centuries earlier had been tempted and tried. We will see next week that Jesus is faithful in the wilderness, the sin-bearing Lamb without blemish.

This is the first week of Advent, the week of hope. The week sometimes called *of the prophets*. The week of hope is a hope of the appearance of God's grace coming into the world in Jesus Christ, and within this beautiful narrative of the announcement of John, who is a Nazirite from birth, we discover greatness in Scripture lives in a hidden consecration to God. I want to challenge you: What are you separating from? What are you moving back from that this world has to offer so you might consecrate yourself more fully to God? Jacob Milgrom says that the imagery of the Nazirite is clear:

"Only by separating oneself, by abstaining from certain acts that are permitted to all others, can one be sanctified to God. One who is separated or consecrated to God is singled out from his group."

Where is the Lord asking you to abstain from the pleasures and patterns of this world so that you can connect to the hidden greatness that He takes joy in? This beautiful passage reminds us that this is where our lives have real power. When you let go of this world, your hands are free to embrace the things of God. When you empty yourself of the affections of this world, the Lord fills you up with the Holy Spirit, and the presence and power of the Holy Spirit manifests itself in our lives in pointing other people, not to ourselves or to: "Say, can I tell you about my Nazirite vow? How are my locks looking?" This is not a faithful expression of consecration. A faithful expression of consecration is that hidden righteousness that belongs the followers of Christ, that powerful life that is driven by the power of the Holy Spirit, in a life that somehow people gladly forget you and me and somehow are left a lasting impression of a remembrance

of Christ. There is a very simple and concrete way to do this for us this season. You can invite people around us, people who have lost their bearings on what this season is really about, to join us in the various opportunities available to them here at Kenwood. We have the privilege and responsibility to tell our story, to tell the true story of the world.

As we prepare, this Sunday marks the hope that is the beginning, and we have four weeks to prepare ourselves. I want to challenge you to separate from something that has a hold of your heart and is keeping you from being consecrated to God. Let Him fill you afresh with the Holy Spirit, a powerful life, and let us live that life out together in a way that points other people to Jesus Christ. Can we do that? Let's pray.

Precious Lord Jesus, we exalt You this morning. We thank You, Lord, that it was Your perfect plan to come into the world. We thank You that Your way is prepared and that You have used a Nazirite in the wilderness to herald the way. Lord, I pray for each of us that we might discover afresh this morning the real key to greatness in a hidden consecration to You. I pray, Lord, that You would fill us now with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit and that we would point others to You. We pray, Father, for all of the events and celebrations of Christmas that, Lord, Your house would be filled and that You would make room in our hearts for You. Lord, we love You. We praise You for Your greatest Gift, for Jesus Christ who is the hope of the world.

In Jesus' Name we pray, Amen.