

He Will Be Lifted Up Like the Serpent in the Wilderness

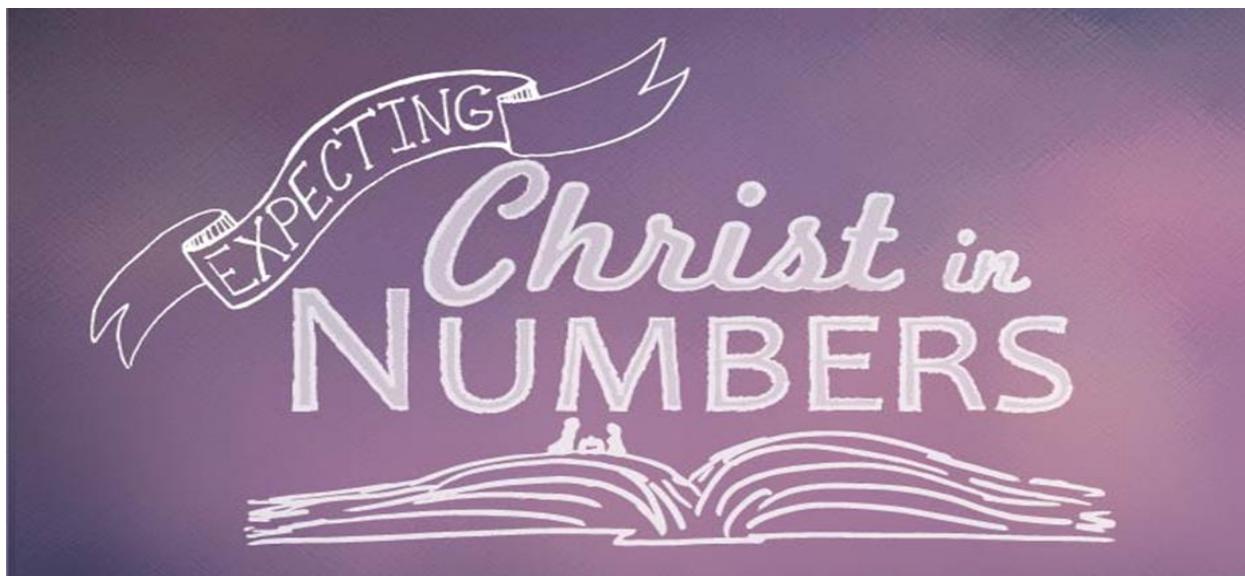
Advent Sermon Series on Expecting Christ in Numbers

Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

December 11, 2016

TEXT: Numbers 21:1-9; John 3:1-16



We continue this morning in our Advent series *Expecting Christ in Numbers*. You might think to yourself: “What does the Book of Numbers have to do with Christmas?” It has a lot to do with Christmas, actually, in the two passages we just heard. Martin Luther, the great reformer whose 500-year anniversary we will be celebrating next year, says this:

“The Lord shows us the proper method of interpreting the Scriptures and that Moses points and refers to Christ in all his stories and illustrations. This purpose is to show that Christ is the point at the center of a circle with all eyes inside the circle fixed on Him. Whoever turns his eyes on Him finds his proper place within the circle in which Christ stands at the center.”

This morning we move forward in Advent. Advent is marked traditionally by the weeks leading up to Christmas in celebrating the hope, love, joy, and peace that comes to this world in Jesus Christ. In week one, we looked at the hope of the world, the hope of Israel heralded by John the Baptist, a Nazirite from birth, signaling that God was about to come into the world. Last week we looked at how Jesus was faithful in the wilderness where Israel had failed before and where our ancestors had failed by disobeying God. We saw that Jesus displays the love of God in perfect obedience. This morning we look at the peculiar joy that is inside of Christmas.

I know many things about Christmas are joyful. For some of you, it's your certain favorite type

of Christmas cookie; it's the gift you are expecting. There are many songs about joy for those who love Christmas music. But there is a very deep profound joy inside of Christmas. This joy is connected not only with God's coming down into this world—the incarnation, taking on human flesh—but there is also a lifting up, an exultation, that is at the heart of Christmas, and we want to explore that today. That lifting up, that exultation, is connected by Jesus with an analogy: *“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so the Son of Man will be lifted up.”* The incarnation that begins in the manger turns with this lifting up and this fuels the joy of Christmas. I want to look together this morning at this conversation that takes place in John 3. Follow as Jesus brings in the imagery from Numbers 21 as we see the descent of the Son of Man and His exultation, which is the basis of our joy. It is an unshakable foundation.

Let's look at John 3. John 3 gives us access to a conversation between a certain Nicodemus, who was said to be a Pharisee. The name Nicodemus means *the ruler of the people*. He is a leading citizen; he is someone who knows the Scripture well. He approaches Jesus in the evening and asks about His origin in John 3:2:

“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”

That is the first Christmas phrase in this passage: *come from God*, having come from God, descended, if you will, into this world. Nicodemus recognizes that Jesus displays that God is with Him. The presence of God is attested by the miracles that Jesus does in His ministry. He is certainly a teacher that has come from God. Jesus does not return this compliment. He does not take Nicodemus' words as flattery. He turns to Nicodemus immediately, and He says to Nicodemus in John 3:3:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot [enter or] see the Kingdom of God.”

This is startling language to Nicodemus. Jesus transposes the topic and says: *“Unless you are born from above . . .”* Many translations suggest a translation of *born again*. The ESV has this, the NIV, and many others. The Greek idiom in John 3:3 is a spatial one. Jesus says: *“Unless you are born from above, you can't see the Kingdom.”* Jesus has a heavenly origin. The gospel message of Christmas originates from the throne of glory, and Jesus says: *“Unless you are born from above, you cannot see it.”* Nicodemus asks in John 3:4:

“How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?”

Jesus replies in John 3:5:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God.”

To enter in, to see it, you need to transpose your perspective. You need to have a new origin, Jesus says. You need to be born from above. He says you have to have a water-spirit birth. What is that? What does it mean to be born of water, born of spirit, without which you cannot even enter the Kingdom? Jesus signals to Nicodemus and to us that the water-spirit birth is another image of a new birth, a new beginning for humanity. Many of us alive today have soaked up a materialistic view of our person. Even though we may be confessing Christians, we live in an increasingly secular context that views humanity as just a thing, as a prize, a combination of chemical reactions, as something not eternal. Yet the biblical view of humanity is that we are both made from the dust of the earth and yet breathed into by the living God. We become alive. To be a human being means to not only have flesh but to have spirit, soul. Jesus says to Nicodemus that you must have this water-spirit new birth, just as Adam in the Garden was made alive by the Spirit of God. The biblical hope is an expectation that God's people will be brought to new life by the presence of the Holy Spirit again, that He would cleanse us from our idolatry, from our sinfulness, and this is expressed beautifully and powerfully in the prophet Ezekiel 36:25-27, when the Lord says:

“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in My statutes and be careful to obey My rules.”

Ezekiel 36 describes this coming of God into the world, this new birth, this birth from above, being born again, having a water-spirit new birth. After Ezekiel 36, the very next image in the Scriptures is in Ezekiel 37 where we see this vision of dry bones made alive by God's breath, by God's Spirit. Jesus signals to Nicodemus that to enter the Kingdom, to see the Kingdom, he must have this. That means that without it, we can't see it, and we can't enter into it. Nicodemus rightly asks on behalf of all of us: “How can this happen? How can you and I receive this water-spirit birth? How can we be born again?” Jesus again says to Nicodemus, somewhat condescendingly, in John 3:10:

“Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?”

Jesus then says to Nicodemus in John 3:12:

“If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?”

Here Jesus draws us into this conversation about heavenly things. Christmas is a season in which we recall heavenly things coming down to earth. Jesus says in John 3:13:

“No one has ascended into heaven except He who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.”

Jesus has unique access. He alone can reveal to us heavenly things, heavenly truths, the

meaning of the season. He is the one who has descended in His incarnation. He has laid aside His heavenly glory and come into this world to seek you and to seek me, and yet the story of Christmas is not only about Christ's descent into the world. It is not only about His lowering of Himself into this world, though it certainly entails that. The descent of Jesus into the manger on that first Christmas morning takes a surprising turn with His exultation, and that is what Jesus begins to speak about next to Nicodemus. He says that no one has ascended except He who descended, that is Christ Himself. Then Jesus says in John 3:14:

"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up."

The Son of Man must be exalted, and the narrative, the conversation, takes a surprising turn. Jesus here draws an analogy using this ancient event in the life of Israel in their wilderness wanderings, the image of the serpent being lifted up on a pole, to describe His own mission and ministry. It is a peculiar analogy, and so we turned back to Numbers 21 from where Jesus draws this image. Jesus says that His exultation can only be compared to this one, so we go back to Numbers 21, Israel's wilderness wanderings. The wanderings that take place are in the Negev, in the southern area nearby the Dead Sea, just north of the Red Sea. They take the city of Arad and consecrate it to God. It is a victory along the wilderness way. It is a moment in the Book of Numbers where there is excitement, euphoria. God has granted a victory and things are looking up. Yet, in Numbers 21:4, we then read:

"From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way."

They grow weary, frustrated, wondering when they will ever reach the land of God's promise. At this point, they are in the area which we call today Timnah. They are nearby this area—a stunning scene. Timnah is a strikingly beautiful place. It looks somewhat like the Grand Canyon. It's a place where copper was mined in antiquity, and yet it is a place where you need God's provision. It is a place without God's provision, without springs bursting forth. In this very area, the people yet again speak against the Lord and against Moses, and they utter this shattering complaint yet again. They say in Numbers 21: 5:



"Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food."

They complain even over the provision of God, the manna, maybe referring to the fact that the

manna spoiled on the next day. You can't hoard manna. God designed us to live in daily dependence upon Him. You can't hoard His provision and store it up. There is no pantry in the Israelite tent for manna. You can't keep it so that you can live for a season without the Lord. We live in daily dependence, and yet God's people in this place of testing and trial once again voice this shattering complaint, and it's a devastating one. I see in this passage that Israel has, in some ways, taken on what we might call the Israelite version of the American dream. What was the Israelite version of the American dream? It is that God acts on your behalf and He redeems you without your having to do anything. That's a great start. It's a version of the American dream that says: "And that comes with the unlimited supply of gift cards. It comes with the reduction of taxes. It comes with gourmet meals provided. It comes with no stress, no trial, no hardship, no pain, no difficulty." It's amazing, isn't it? Isn't it really amazing how we pick up this type of message in our environment?

We pick up a message in our environment that says that God should act on my behalf. I don't have to do anything. I receive the benefits of the Kingdom without having to pay anything for them, and that comes with a life of pleasure, a comfortable life of constant provision. It comes with a life of "I ask for things and God just answers me immediately, and woe be it to me if there's ever any difficulty and testing, any trial, any growth required in faith. This is the ancient Israelite version of the American dream. We pick it up, and we have this image that life should be this way, and the moment that it's not, we think: "God, what are you doing? That's not my dream. That's not what I signed up for when I said I'd followed You." We turn so quickly, and do not think for a moment that this is only an ancient Israel problem. This is a problem that lies within your heart and mine. These aren't the quail that I ordered! My manna is overcooked! Call the manager!" It's within you and it's within me. Watch out for it because what it really displays, what Israel shows, what's in you, what's in me, is a proclivity that we inherit from the Garden. It is to turn our backs to our heavenly Father, and that always yields death. That's why we saw last week that Jesus our Savior was faithful facing these very same temptations to turn the stone into bread, to take the glory without the cross, and to test God in the wilderness. We saw Jesus, our saving Son of God, faithful last week.

Yet this morning we see Israel stumble yet again on this very same count, and the Lord in Numbers 6:6 sends fiery serpents among the people, and this is frightening. This is a frightening image in Scripture. I was thinking this week that maybe the text just says that the serpents happened to come out. Maybe this was expressed in a less direct way, that there just happened to be serpents there, and they came out, the people got distracted and stepped on the serpents. I remember going through the Red River Gorge, getting an orientation and wondering if there was any danger of falling stones, if we needed to watch out for falling stones, and the guide said, "There are a few copperhead snakes here. Watch out for those." I was hiking in a different place with our son Jonathan, and I was giving him the snake-orientation talk: "Watch

out, keep track, there might be snakes,” and he says, “What, like that?” “Yeah, actually, like that right there. Let’s stay on the left side of the path.” We went to the Hershberger farm and were doing some hiking. We were talking with Mike by the house and asked if there was anything dangerous we should watch out for. Mike said, “Yeah, there are a few copperhead snakes here. Watch out for those.” I said, “You mean like that one right there against the house?” He said, “Oh, yes, like that one right there. Just a minute.” He went to the garage, put on his safety glasses and came back with a little pistol. He humanely euthanized the snake, and then we enjoyed our hike. But you know, the text does not say that the snakes just happened to be there. The text says that the Lord sent the snakes. Why does our heavenly Father send fiery serpents, snakes, against the people? We must answer this. We cannot avoid this question. Our heavenly father shows us the frightening reality and the death-dealing consequence when we turn our back to God. I want you to be afraid of sin. I want to be afraid of it because of what it does in my life and my family's life. Two men that I know fell this week. They fell, and there was a great cost to the Kingdom of God. It grieved my heart. A ministry leader that I know closely called me, and he said, “Pray for me.” We just prayed. I said, “I'm getting on my knees right here in my office. I'm going to pray for you, and I want to just bind my heart with yours.”

Sin is real; it is costly; it is death-dealing. We need to really, really be afraid of it. Be afraid of turning your back on your heavenly Father. The Lord knows that we are tempted to underestimate it. He knows that we are tempted to think sin is not a big deal. He knows we are tempted to think we can play with this a little bit. So the Lord sends fiery serpents and they bite the people and many die. Sin is real and powerful. When these serpents bite the people, and when the reality that sin is dangerous is brought out into the open, they do something remarkable. As scary as Numbers 21:6 is, Numbers 21:7 is thrilling to a pastor. It's thrilling to me personally because you can't become a Christian without Numbers 21:7. What happens in Numbers 21:7? God's people experience a moment, a brief portion of the reality of the danger of sin and they say “Whoa, whoa!” They come to Moses and they say these wonderful words. It takes three words to say it in English; it is just one word in Hebrew: “We have sinned!” I love to hear that, actually. When you say “I have sinned, we have sinned,” you are on the cusp of the Kingdom. You know your real situation. The people say in Numbers 21:7:

“We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that He take away the serpents from us.”

Moses prays, and we see the character and saving love of the God of the Bible. He loves you enough to show you the dangerous, powerful affect, death-dealing of our sin, but He does not leave us there. When we say, “We have sinned, pray for us,” God answers. He answers, and this is His answer. His answer is to tell Moses in Numbers 21:8:

“Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.”

The image of being impaled, being nailed on the pole, is an image of judgment. No one is lifted up on a pole in the ancient world for display purposes. It is an image of judgment. The Lord answers the plight of His people with the remedy, and the remedy destroys the effect and power of the serpent by judging the serpent and then lifting up this saving symbol on a pole. Moses does this. This area where he is, in the area of Timnah, is a place where there were copper mines in antiquity. They take enough copper and make a bronze serpent, and he sets it up on the pole, and if anyone looks at it, sees the bronze serpent, they would live. The area of Timnah is spectacular, beautiful, very barren, striking landscape. There is only one kind of tree that grows in that area. At the base of these copper-rich hills, you see this acacia tree. When you come up close, it is this type of tree from



which the crown of thorns was made. This image of the Lord’s providing in this place, in this space, the remedy of our sins, begins the lifting up, the ascent, of the Son of Man. Jesus takes this image,

this prophetic image, and points to the cross. We go back to John 3:14 where Jesus says:

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up”

It is these two words, *lifted up*, that tie together the glory of Christmas. We start out by seeing the descent, the incarnation of Jesus, His laying aside His heavenly glory and being born in humility, taking on human flesh, and living a perfect life of obedience. But the Christmas story does not end with the manger. It points forward to this perfect life, but the descent turns with a lifting up. The Son of Man must be lifted up. You see, we are snake-bitten, every one of us. We are snake-bitten, and without this remedy we will perish. Jesus says: “Just as the serpent was nailed to a pole and lifted up so that the sin of the people would be judged, so I must be nailed to a pole and lifted up so that everyone who looks at Me and believes will be saved.” This is the glory of Christmas.

Every passage in John's Gospel that uses the language of being *lifted up* refers to the cross. In

John 8:28, Jesus says:

“When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He.”

In John 12:23, Jesus says:

“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”

In John 12:28, God our heavenly Father speaks audibly from heaven and says of Jesus:

“I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.”

The crowds who heard the voice thought that it had thundered. Others thought an angel had spoken, and yet Jesus says in John 12:30:

“This voice has come for your sake, not Mine.”

He said that now is the time for the Son to be glorified, to be exalted. What is the glory of Jesus Christ? Jesus says in John 12:31-32:

“Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to Myself.”

What does Jesus mean when He said that He will be lifted up from the earth? John, who laid his head on Jesus' chest in the Last Supper, tells us. John says in John 12:33:

“He said this to show by what kind of death He was going to die.”

The shadow of the cross looms over the manger. Jesus descends from heaven to be lifted up, and when He is lifted up, when He is placed upon this cross, the most remarkable thing happened—everyone who looks to Him is healed. How could Israel have known that the remedy for being bitten by a fiery serpent would be for that serpent to be judged, so to speak, on a cross? How could they know that healing was available? The only way to know that in Numbers 21 is to turn and to fix your gaze upon that which God has provided. So it is with Jesus who is lifted up. *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son.”*

This is Christmas—the giving of the Son as a gift. The word that John uses in his Gospel in John 3:16 for the *giving* is a word that also means that He handed Him over, He delivered Him, so that He might be lifted up. Just as the serpent in the wilderness was lifted up and heals the snake-bitten, sin-filled heart of God's people, so the Son of Man was lifted up, heals the snake-bitten, sin-laden heart of you and me. But, just as Israel had to look and place their trust in God's provision, you and I must turn, and we must fix our gaze on Jesus Christ so that *“whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”* Note the power of this image. You do not perish, but you live and have eternal, everlasting life.

At the heart of Christmas, there is not only the incarnation and descent of Jesus from heavenly

glory, but there is a lifting up, an exultation of the beloved Son of God. The exultation takes place at the cross where He is given over, supremely manifesting the love of God. John Levenson, a Jewish professor at Harvard University stands so close to the message of Christmas. He is a biblical scholar. He sees it; he stands right at the cusp of it. John Levenson is not a Christian. He is a Bible scholar of the Old Testament, a devout Jewish man, and he says this about John 3:16 about the longstanding temptation to make Christmas something sentimental:

“The nature of the ‘giving’ to which John 3:16 refers merits special emphasis, for among many Christians the tendency to sentimentalize the notion of love that pervades the New Testament is longstanding and powerful.

“So let it be said directly: the Father’s gift that the Fourth Gospel has in mind is one that necessarily entails a bloody slaying of Jesus, very much along the lines of the paschal lamb that Jesus becomes and also supersedes. In John’s theology, the killing of Jesus, like that of the Passover offering, enables those marked for death to live nonetheless. . . . Jesus provides those who believe in Him with immortality by dying in their stead.”

Do you believe that? Oh how I wish that John Levenson really believed the words that he wrote. He could see it because he saw the analogy from Numbers 21 to John 3.

The remedy for sinful humanity is the Son of God nailed to a cross and lifted up, and when He is lifted up, Jesus says that He will draw all people to Himself. Christmas is powerful. It is irresistible. Preston told me over the weekend that 365 more gave their lives to Christ last week. Christmas is powerful. Christmas is more than sentiment. Christmas is the beginning of the gospel of Jesus who came to earth to be lifted up, and He draws all to Himself. In this week of joy, Hebrews 12:2 says:

“. . . looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

It was for the joy set before Him that He came willingly to seek and to save. It was for the joy set before Him that He made provision for us to have second birth. Charles Wesley’s great hymn, *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*, a beloved Christmas hymn, has great theology in its lyrics. Wesley writes:

Hark the herald angels sing, “Glory to the newborn King:
Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!”
Joyful, all ye nations rise, join the triumph of the skies;
With angelic host proclaim, “Christ is born in Bethlehem!”

Christ, by highest heaven adored; Christ the everlasting Lord!
Late in time behold Him come, offspring of the virgin’s womb.

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail th'incarnate Deity;
Pleased as man with man to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel.

Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace! Hail the sun of righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings, risen with healing in His wings.
Mild He lays His glory by, born that man no more may die;
Born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth.

This is the message of Christmas. Let it enter your own heart this morning and fuel your joy. You cannot remain indifferent to Christmas. The message flows and fuels our joy and ignites our affection for our heavenly Father when we fix our gaze on Jesus Christ. Theodore Dostoyevsky, the great Russian novelist, is famous for his work *The Brothers Karamazov*, which I read during an 86 hour train ride across China—which is a story in itself. *The Brothers Karamazov* is a very powerful story, and Dostoyevsky says this about being gripped by the narrative of Christmas:

“I believe there is nothing lovelier, deeper, more sympathetic and more perfect than the Savior. I say to myself with jealous love that not only is there no one else like Him, but that there could be no one. There is in the world only one figure of absolute beauty – Christ.”

Do you believe that? Merry Christmas! Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we exalt You. You are beautiful beyond description, too marvelous for words, too wonderful for comprehension, like nothing ever seen or heard. Lord Jesus, we worship You together now. We desire, Lord, to fix our attention upon You. Lord, ancient Israel needed to fix their attention on God's provision for their sin. If they didn't, there would be no remedy, and so this morning, Lord, we fix our attention on You, You who were lifted up, nailed to a pole and raised up so that all who believe would not perish but have eternal life. Lord, if there are any here this morning that do not see Jesus clearly, hold back the veil, I pray. If there are any of us here, like Israel of old, who have gotten distracted in the wilderness, taken our eyes off of You and let the toxicity of doubt, the toxicity of idolatrous dreams, cloud our vision, and plummet into self, rescue us O Lord. Lift us up, place our feet on firm footing, with our eyes riveted on Jesus, Author and perfecter of our faith, “*who for the joy set before Him, endured the cross, despising its shame.*” *Hallelujah! Hallelujah!* We worship you, Lord Jesus.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.