

Understanding what Christmas means

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As surprising as it seems, Christmas is upon us once again. Surely by now we've seen the signs: Christmas products displayed in the stores, lights and wreaths around town, Christmas music on the radio and Christmas specials on the TV.

Somewhere along the way you will probably have heard (or will, if you haven't already), talk about the meaning of the Christmas season, about the baby Jesus, and about all the amazing prophetic words in the Bible that predicted the coming of the Christ child.

We are used to hearing about Isaiah's prophecy of the virgin birth and Micah's prophecy of the birth in Bethlehem. These are important landmarks in identifying Jesus as the promised Messiah. They point to him as both Son of God and Son of David, a king.

If we are looking to understand what Christmas means and why it matters that the Son of God has come to us as a human, these prophecies are a good place to start. But when Jesus himself points to the Old Testament to highlight his purposes in coming, he looks not just to the prophets, but often to the life of Moses.

In John's Gospel (3: 15), Jesus points to Numbers 21. There the people of Israel "spoke against God and Moses, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?'" This is one of many times Israel complained about God. In this case God chose to punish the people by sending snakes, which would bite them. When the people repented, God told Moses to "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live."

Jesus draws a parallel between himself and the snake "As Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (John 3: 14-15). Later he says "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12: 32).

This strange little story about a metal snake on a pole foreshadows the purpose of the Christmas incarnation—to draw people to eternal life through the sacrifice of the cross.