

“Balaam’s Donkey”

Numbers 22:15-36

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Liz Miller and I talked about a preaching theme for this month of August and settled on ‘obscure animal stories from the Hebrew Scripture.’ She kicked off the series last Sunday with a look at the great fish who swallowed the prophet Jonah whole and later vomited him back up onto the beach! This morning, we take a look at Balaam’s donkey. This is one of those curious stories that never makes it into the lectionary readings. But it is well worth our attention.

The narrative is confusing at best. There are contradictions that seem to have no easy resolution. The story has the feel of a folk tale. Balaam is a believer in God who is a gifted seer. That is, he has the ability to look into the future and to speak words that either bless or curse. And his words have a history of power among the local residents. If he places a curse on you, watch out! Messengers have come from neighboring Moab asking him to come for a visit. The purpose of the visit is to place a curse on Israel. Balaam seems to know that this is not a smart idea, but he decides to go anyway. From the Hebrew perspective, Balaam lacks common sense.

Now, Balaam saddles his trusted donkey, the one who has never failed him in any way in the past, and heads out for Moab on this less than laudable mission. This is where Balaam’s donkey shines. We see how God uses the donkey as an instrument of peace. As Balaam directs the donkey along the road toward Moab, an angel of the Lord appears holding a mighty sword, blocking their path. Balaam is blind to this angelic appearance, but the donkey sees it with 20/20 vision.

And, wanting to save his master from the consequences of a poor decision, the donkey turns away into the nearby pasture refusing to proceed.

A second time, Balaam urges the donkey on toward Moab, and a second time the angel of the Lord appears with sword in hand blocking the narrow lane. Now the donkey sees the angel and turns and presses up against the stonewall causing Balaam to injure his foot and to halt the journey right there.

In the third episode, everything always happens in threes, Balaam again fails to see the Lord's angel blocking the way. The donkey sees the angel and just plops down and stubbornly refuses to budge.

Balaam whips the donkey several times. And now the donkey, who has been speaking with his actions until now, speaks with words, saying; 'Have I not been a trustworthy friend all these years I have served you? What's up with this unwarranted beating?' And Balaam replies, "You have indeed been trustworthy." The donkey, then, is a savior figure in the story, seeing the presence of God when the seer has failed to see; demonstrating common sense when Balaam seems to be void of all common sense.

So, here is what I believe is important to glean from the story of Balaam's donkey. First, **God reveals the divine will through unlikely voices.** We see this throughout the Bible. We see this in our own life experience. So often, it is not the ordained minister or the deacon or the lay person trained in Biblical studies who perceives what God is doing. Sometimes it is a child. Sometimes it is the local dreamer. Sometimes it is the mentally challenged one. Often, it is the artist, the musician, the poet. According to our story teller, it can even be a donkey!

Thus, when it comes to churches creating committees and ministry teams and ministry groups, we do well to see that there is a healthy cross-section of the community, a plethora of voices on each team. Our new social hall is placed where it is because a high school student serving on the executive board in 2008 suggested how appropriate it would be for such a space to have a face on High Street where people walking by could look in and see what's going on at South Church! Thank God for speaking through that sixteen year old youth!

I well remember the night when our mission board was planning the menu it would serve at South Park Inn that month. Someone had suggested serving mashed potatoes, the kind that come in a box and you just add hot water and stir. The chairperson that year spoke up, revealed that she had once been homeless herself, and that when you're homeless what tastes better than anything is an Idaho baked potato, still in its skin, laced with butter. Guess what they served that fourth Wednesday of the month? Thank God for speaking through a woman who knew what it was like to be homeless.

Balaam's donkey teaches us to be open to an infinite variety of sources for tuning in to what God is revealing.

Second, Balaam's donkey teaches us that **common sense can be the highest source of authority**. Balaam has an unusual gift. He has a way with words. He can use words to bless or to curse; to destroy or to build up; to initiate war or to initiate peace. In the Bible story, he seems to be confused about how to use this gift. There is a voice of seduction calling him to use his powers to curse a whole tribe of people. The Moabites would pay him handsomely to place a curse on their new neighbors. But this plan offends the donkey's common sense. The donkey is no fool. He's known Balaam for a long time. He's been a student of common sense.

He knows, for example, that a master is better off handing his donkey a bucket of oats rather than the bitter end of a whip. The donkey hasn't been to college, isn't particularly religious, but he knows a lot about how to treat another creature of God's own making. It's just common sense. In our own tradition of reformed theology, we say there are four major sources of authority: the Bible, our own life experience, tradition, AND common sense! Balaam's donkey would have us claim this fourth source of authority when it comes to how we treat each other, how we treat our neighbors, even how we treat our enemies. Common sense!

Thirdly, **Balaam's donkey teaches us to have a little more respect for the animals in our lives.** In most every culture, there is a folklore in which animals are given a tongue to speak. In West Africa it is Ananzi. Among the Native Americans on the Great Plains, it is Coyote. In Southern Africa, it is Kalulu. In the southern states of the USA, it is Br'er Rabbit. In Hebrew lore, the snake speaks in the Garden of Eden and Balaam's donkey speaks along the road. I find the donkey's words to be powerful in that they command respect without shouting, without threatening violence. The donkey says to Balaam, after having endured the whiplashing, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times? Am I not your donkey, which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I been in the habit of treating you this way?"

It is God speaking through the donkey's mouth. It is God calling the man to think again on how he has treated this loyal companion unjustly. For even a beast of burden deserves a measure of respect. So we see in this primitive story a call for the two-leggeds and the four-leggeds to regard each other as sacred creatures, all made by the Creator's hand. Balaam is humbled by the donkey's words, as he should be. As we look to the many troubled spots in the world today, what we see missing is the humility. Where in the world today is the humility Balaam discovers in this precious story?

It is the donkey who saves the day. It is the donkey's words that bring him, and us, to our knees. In our prayers this morning, let us pray for humility to reign in the hearts and minds of every family, every tribe, every nation. This is how Balaam's donkey was speaking to me this very week. And I share my reflection with you all in the greatest of hope. Amen.