

Balaam's Ass
Numbers 22
January 21, 2018
Rev. Kelley Becker

*Live, Love Laugh slide

Kelley stands up to preach.

Kelley: "Oh, no, does anyone know where I put my Bible?"

Scott: "I haven't seen it. I heard about a cowboy who lost his Bible once...The devout cowboy lost his favorite Bible while he was mending fences out on the range.

Three weeks later, a donkey walked up to him carrying the Bible in its mouth.

The cowboy couldn't believe his eyes.

He took the precious book out of the donkey's mouth, raised his eyes heavenward and exclaimed, "It's a miracle!"

"Not really," said the donkey. "Your name is written inside the cover."

Kelley:

Did you hear about the man in a movie theater who noticed what looked like a donkey sitting next to him?

"Are you a donkey?" asked the man, surprised.

"Yes."

"What are you doing at the movies?"

The donkey replied, "Well, I liked the book."

Scott: I had a friend who bought a donkey from a preacher. The preacher told my friend that this donkey had been trained in a very unique way, (being the donkey of a preacher). The only way to make

the donkey go, was to say, "Hallelujah!" The only way to make the donkey stop, was to say, "Amen!"

My friend was very pleased with his purchase and immediately got on the animal to try out the preacher's instructions. "Hallelujah!" shouted my friend. The donkey began to trot. "Amen!" my friend shouted. The donkey stopped immediately. "This is great!" my friend said. With a "Hallelujah," he rode off very proud of his new purchase.

My friend traveled for a long time through some mountains. Soon he was heading toward a cliff. He could not remember the word to make the donkey stop. "Stop," my friend said. "Halt!" he cried. The donkey just kept going. "Oh, no... Bible!....Church!...Please Stop!!" he shouted. The donkey just began to trot faster. He was getting closer and closer to the cliff edge. Finally, in desperation, my friend said a prayer. "Please, dear Lord. Please make this donkey stop before I go off the end of this mountain, in Your name, AMEN.

The donkey came to an abrupt stop just one step from the edge of the cliff. "HALLELUJAH!", shouted my friend.

Sermon

Today, we begin a look at some Bible passages that invite us to lighten up a little. Laughter is good for us and, quite frankly, as I was planning this sermon series, it was cold and miserable outside and I decided a little fun would be welcome for the next few weeks. This series will have us laughing, but will also remind us that the Bible is not a history book...it is filled with truth, but is not always factual. The Bible should be taken seriously, but not literally. While the stories we will look at are a little bizarre, I hope, in the end, we are able to say, "This story is important to us today because_____."

*We begin today with the story of Balaam's Ass in Numbers 22:22-35.

We need to back up to the beginning of Numbers 22 to understand what's happening, though. The chapter begins the third and final section of the book of Numbers. The writers of Numbers devoted the first section to the central theme of holiness---keeping the tabernacle safe from impurity. The second section focused on the wilderness journey of the first generation of Israelites. In the end, the first generation failed to live faithfully and died leaving the divine promise of land to the second generation.

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Chapter 22 begins with a change of setting, from the wilderness to the plains of Moab, across the Jordan River from Jericho. Right away, we learn that Balak, the king of Moab, was feeling threatened by Israel's recent defeat of the Amorites. He sent messengers with money to a mystic named Balaam, who, according to the text, was the son of Beor, at Pethor, near the Euphrates River in the land of Amaw. In other words, he was not an Israelite. The messengers delivered this message to Balaam from King Balak, "A people has come out of Egypt; they cover the face of the land and have settled next to me. Now come and put a curse on these people, because they are too powerful for me. Perhaps then I will be able to defeat them and drive them out of the country. For I know that those you bless are blessed, and those you curse are cursed."

We are surprised to learn that Balaam told the messengers he could not give them an answer until he heard from the Lord, which is odd since Balaam was not an Israelite. At first, God said, "No, you cannot go curse the Israelites they are blessed." So, Balaam sent the messengers and their money away. When the king heard Balaam's answer, he refused to accept "no" and sent more messengers and more money back to Balaam. Again, Balaam consulted God and was told not to curse the Israelites because they were blessed. Those messengers returned to the king and, as kings are prone to do, he still did not accept "no" for an answer. He sent more prestigious messengers and the offer of lots

and lots of money to Balaam. And again, Balaam said he needed to check with God. This time, God, in verse 20, said, "Okay, you can go with them, but do only what I tell you."

In the morning, Balaam told the messengers he could go with them to see the king. And here is where our text for today starts and where things take a turn for the super weird. Verse 22 says, "But God was very angry when he went..." How did that happen? God seemed fine with Balaam going in verse 20 and now God was mad. Here's the deal. Verses 22-35, the story of Balaam's ass, is a separate story. Probably the original text went right from verse 21 where Balaam saddled up his donkey and went with the messengers to verse 36 which says, "When King Balak heard Balaam was coming, he went out to meet him..."

Before we talk any more about the text, I want you to hear it:

²² God's anger was kindled because he was going, and the angel of the Lord took his stand in the road as his adversary. Now he was riding on the donkey, and his two servants were with him. ²³ The donkey saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road, with a drawn sword in his hand; so the donkey turned off the road, and went into the field; and Balaam struck the donkey, to turn it back onto the road. ²⁴ Then the angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side. ²⁵ When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it scraped against the wall, and scraped Balaam's foot against the wall; so he struck it again. ²⁶ Then the angel of the Lord went ahead, and stood in a narrow place, where there was no way to turn either to the right or to the left. ²⁷ When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it lay down under Balaam; and Balaam's anger was kindled, and he struck the donkey with his staff. ²⁸ Then the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey, and it said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?" ²⁹ Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you have made a fool of me! I wish I had a sword in my hand! I would kill you right now!" ³⁰ But the donkey said to Balaam, "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?" And he said, "No."

³¹ Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road, with his drawn sword in his hand; and he bowed down, falling on his face. ³² The angel of the Lord said to him, "Why have you struck your donkey these three times? I have come out as an adversary, because your way is perverse^[a] before me. ³³ The donkey saw me, and turned away from me these three times. If it had not turned away from me, surely just now I would have killed you and let it live." ³⁴ Then Balaam said to the angel of the Lord, "I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing in the road to oppose me. Now therefore, if it is displeasing to you, I will return home." ³⁵ The angel of the Lord said to Balaam, "Go with the men; but speak only what I tell you to speak." So, Balaam went on with the officials of Balak.

I mentioned that this is a separate story. The story itself gives us some clues that this is the case. The first, as I said, is God's change of mood, from agreeing that Balaam should go with the messengers, to then being ticked off that he was going. Second, the portrayal of Balaam changes significantly from a mystic who carefully discerns the direction of God's leading, to a blind, impatient seer whose donkey has more sense and clairvoyance than he. Also, the internal structure of this section, with the three-part repetition of action (the 3 encounters with God's messenger) suggests that this story is, indeed, its own story.

It is folklore---a burlesque, even slapstick story about a psychic, talking animal who speaks common sense to his clueless owner. As I mentioned, there are three encounters with God's messenger, all seen by the donkey, but not by Balaam. The encounters are increasingly intense. First, the messenger forces the donkey from the road, and then against a wall, finally he blocks the donkey's way altogether, causing it to lie down. In each of these instances, the donkey saved Balaam's life, but Balaam is blind to his rescue and responds with increasing violence

toward the poor donkey. Finally, in verse 28, the donkey addresses Balaam, essentially saying, “What the heck?” “Well, because you made me look like a fool,” said Balaam. “I wish I had a sword in my hand! I would kill you right now!” Yet, the only available sword is in the hands of God’s messenger and it isn’t pointed at the donkey!

The messenger piped up, again asking Balaam why he beat the donkey, Balaam’s eyes were opened to the presence of the divine messenger and his own cluelessness. He offered to turn around and go back home, but the messenger told him to continue the journey, but to “speak only when I tell you to speak.” Here we are...right back where we started before taking this bizarre trip with Balaam and his ass. Why? Why was this story added?

There is only one other talking animal in the Hebrew Bible. Who knows what animal that is and where it is in the Bible?

(Give people a chance to answer)

*Genesis 2, the story of the talking serpent in the Garden of Eden.

While unusual in biblical stories, speaking animals are a common feature of folk literature.

Here’s one from Egypt that parallels the story of Balaam: There is a story of two brothers, Anubis and Bata, Anubis was the older, Bata the younger. Anubis was a villager, who was married and owned his own house. Bata was under the care of his brother and lived with him like a son. In return for living in the household of Anubis and wearing the clothes that Anubis gave him, Bata herded the cattle of Anubis, plowed his fields, tended his crops, and brought in his harvests. Bata was young, but he was righteous and blameless, so the divine assembly of Egypt often let him use divine power.

The story goes on to tell of Bata’s time with the cattle, who talk to him, telling him where their favorite places to graze were. Bata would listen

to the cattle and, consequently, Anubis' cattle became prime livestock, calving twice as often as the livestock from any other village.

*One year, when the time came to plow the fields and plant, Anubis and Bata were working together. One day, they ran short of seed and Anubis sent Bata back to the village to get more seed. When he arrived at the house, Anubis' wife was sitting there, combing her hair. Bata said to her, "I need seed for the field; my older brother is waiting for me. Hurry up!"

Then she said to him, "Go and open the bin and take what you want. I am not finished combing my hair." Bata went to the barn, took a large jar and filled it with barley and wheat seed, and hoisted the jar on his shoulders. When Anubis' wife saw Bata, she said seductively, "How much seed are you carrying?" Bata naively answered, "Three measures of wheat, two measures of barley, five measures in all."

But Anubis' wife continued, "You are certainly strong. Everyday I notice your bulging muscles..." You can imagine how things go from there. Anyway, Bata flees from the wife and heads back to the field, quite shaken up. Anubis got home before Bata did that evening and his wife told him quite the tall tale about what had happened. Anubis was furious and waited with a spear behind the barn door for Bata to return. When the first cow went into the barn, she warned Bata, "Your brother is waiting to kill you with a spear. Run!" And Bata ran!

This Egyptian folk story of two brothers, parallels the biblical tradition in a few ways. First, it's the story of two brothers and sibling rivalry, like Cain and Abel and Jacob and Esau. In addition, the master's wife propositioning the one who is subservient also has a parallel in the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife. And, of course, the talking animal who saved the life of its master parallels the story of Balaam. We can see that the story of Balaam and his ass, while bizarre with regard to

biblical literature is pretty mainstream in folk lore. So, again, why was it added to the Balaam stories in Numbers?

My best guess, confirmed by a number of scholars, including Dr. Thomas Dozeman, Old Testament Professor at United Theological Seminary in Ohio, is that there is a theological problem that is posed for religious leaders, the priestly writers, when a non-Israelite seer, is presented in a positive light, as a faithful man of God. So, to clean that up, writers inserted this little bit of folk lore to be sure the reader understands that the boundaries between who is in and who is out, with regard to the Israelites, were still in play. As far as the writers were concerned, Balaam may have worshipped the God of Israel, but that did not make him an Israelite. And, later on in Numbers, Balaam is blamed for the Israelite men getting mixed up with the Moabite women.

As 21st century readers, it is important for us to understand where our sacred texts come from, what kind of people may have written them, when they were written, and why. Our interpretation of scripture has to be formed from an examination of context, history, and what our experiences of God have been. And then, we can finally say, the story of Balaam's Ass is important to us today because...

It reminds us that the Bible didn't fall, completed, out of the sky, but was written over time by many people who, like us, longed to understand the Mystery that is God and desired a connection with God and each other. And sometimes, when they couldn't quite figure it out, also like us, they probably just made some stuff up.

Amen.

