

Balaam's Donkey

Numbers 22:21-39 English Standard Version (ESV)

²¹ So Balaam rose in the morning and saddled his donkey and went with the princes of Moab.

Balaam's Donkey and the Angel

²² But God's anger was kindled because he went, and the angel of the LORD took his stand in the way as his adversary. Now he was riding on the donkey, and his two servants were with him.

²³ And the donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road, with a drawn sword in his hand. And the donkey turned aside out of the road and went into the field. And Balaam struck the donkey, to turn her into the road. ²⁴ Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side. ²⁵ And when the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she pushed against the wall and pressed Balaam's foot against the wall. So he struck her 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, she 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 she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?" ²⁹ And Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you have made a fool of me. I wish I had a sword in my hand, for then I would kill you." ³⁰ And the donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your donkey, on which you have ridden all your life long to this day? Is it my habit to treat 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 way, with his drawn sword in his hand. And he bowed down and fell on his face. ³² And the angel of the LORD said to him, "Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out to oppose you because your way is perverse^[a] before me. ³³ The donkey saw me and turned aside before me these three times. If she had not turned aside from me, surely just now I would have killed you and let her live." ³⁴ Then Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, "I have sinned, for I did not know that you stood in the road against me. Now therefore, if it is evil in your sight, I will turn back." ³⁵ And the angel of the LORD said to Balaam, "Go with the men, but speak only the word that I tell you." So Balaam went on with the princes of Balak.

³⁶ When Balak heard that Balaam had come, he went out to meet him at the city of Moab, on the border formed by the Arnon, at the extremity of the border. ³⁷ And Balak said to Balaam, "Did I not send to you to call you? Why did you not come to me? Am I not able to honor you?"

³⁸ Balaam said to Balak, "Behold, I have come to you! Have I now any power of my own to speak anything? The word that God puts in my mouth, that must I speak." ³⁹ Then Balaam went with Balak, and they came to Kiriath-huzoth.

God is used to working with colorful figures. One of the most colorful in the Bible is Balaam. Hailing from Mesopotamia, Balaam was what we might call a shaman or a soothsayer. He was not a Hebrew. But he knew the God of the Hebrews, in addition to other purported deities he believed he could summon or charm. It would be well and good that Balaam knew the Hebrew God, but God did not approve of Balaam's methods: divination, witchcraft as a way of figuring out God's will. God doesn't like us resorting to witchcraft because when we do so we use spiritual power in order to secure our own status, empower ourselves, even be as a god. We seek a security other than in Jesus Christ. Instead, what God wants for us is to be people of faith. That means that we can't always expect to be in control. We need to trust that God will work everything for good, even when it does not always seem so.

In contemporary terms, Balaam is akin to a TV preacher, someone who is out to use faith matters to make big bucks. Now, like Balaam, many TV preachers are successful. They have a wide following—especially by people down on their luck, and seeking prosperity. Like Balaam, they speak and whole worlds listen. There is power to their words and on occasion powerful politicians have sought advice from them.

Balak, king of Moab, was one such politician seeking help from Balaam. Israel was about to repossess the Promised Land, having traveled in the wilderness for 40 years. Balak, and his people, the Moabites, were terrified of Israel, since Israel has become a mighty people, strong and powerful, *and hungry*. Balak is alarmed that Israel will invade Moab and steal her crops and wealth. What to do? Balak wants to enlist Balaam's help: curse Israel! That would weaken Israel and make her unable to threaten Moab. Sounds like a good plan. After all, Balaam is a mighty magician. Surely his hexes can do the trick. Except, what Balak doesn't realize is that

God Almighty is behind Israel. Any curse brought against Israel will simply boomerang back on the curser.

Perhaps you've heard of a teen begging to go to a weekend party. "Will adults be present?" "Of course!," promises the teen. "Will there be drinking? Drugs?" "Of course not!" But you the parent are being fed lies: no adults will be at this party, and drinks galore will be present. No wonder God's wrath is turned against Balaam. Balaam knows that big money is wrapped up in his curses. He stands to profit big time if he curses Israel on behalf of Moab. So, just like the teen eager to run to an inappropriate party, so Balaam runs hog-wild to Balak in order to make mincemeat of Israel with his curses. Just like a TV preacher salivating over just how much money he can make, Balaam pushes his donkey to get to Moab.

Now, Balaam's donkey isn't like Shrek's. Balaam's donkey really can't talk, at least not naturally. But she is a wise donkey and when she sees the angel with the flaming sword—just like the angel who guarded Eden after the fall or St. Michael the Archangel in the Book of Revelation—she knows that the angel is no one to mess with. She knows that his life is at stake. So, three times she halts, even to the point of injuring Balaam, her master. Better that her master suffer some bruises than lose his life, and the donkey's own life as well!

That God frees the tongue of a donkey to speak is not nearly as awesome as opening Balaam's eye to see the Angel of the Lord. Much like ourselves at different times in life, Balaam is thick-headed. C S Lewis once pointed out just how different angels were presented in the Bible compared to their representations in art. In art, angels all too often come across harmless and non-threatening, delicate creatures. But, in scripture, angels often have to say "fear not" because their appearance is so terrifying that those who see them are thoroughly startled. In the case of Balaam, the fright is increased because the angel is wielding a sword. Silly Balaam: he

now sees that the donkey was only protecting her own life as well as her master's. More to the point, he sees that his own life is at stake! God will have nothing to do with the non-sense of seeking profit at his own peoples' expense. And, finally, Balaam sees that his own dumb ass is a far better preacher than what he would ever be. His donkey speaks the truth, indeed, speaks the truth in love, just as St. Paul, much later in the New Testament, asks of each one of us.

Preachers, even asses, are far more important than what we make them out to be. True, God is everywhere. And, if that is the case, why would you even need a preacher? Many people feel that they encounter God on the golf course. And, no doubt they do. But nature, even at the country club, is seldom a clear indicator of what God's will is for each one of us. Nature is just as apt to take life as give it. It's not often that a golfer gets hit by lightning, but it has been known to happen. God might be everywhere present in nature, but it is not clear that he is there for our well-being. The hard truth is that God is not indebted to us. (But we are indebted to him.)

This is why preachers are so important. Sure, they do preach judgement, which most of the time we don't like to hear. And, that judgment is a true word of God to sinners. God sets boundaries or limits to human behavior. God told Adam and Eve: in the day you eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you will die. Paul hit this truth home: the wages of sin is death. But Paul also hit it out of the park when he then says: but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. No matter how beautiful a sunset or a rainbow is, no matter how beautiful the landscape is, no matter how gorgeous the lakes and streams near here are, nature provides no absolutely secure word that God is for us. But the job of preachers, those who preach both God's law and God's grace, is to impart words that both uproot sinners but also

plant saints, and that in one and the same individual. God is all about making you to be a new person, and that through trust in his love, revealed in Jesus Christ.

Preaching should never be about caving in to the powers that be, whether they are found in the politics on either side of the aisle. Instead, preaching is accountable to God's own word which has the power to raise the dead, impart new life, forgive sins, and heal the broken-hearted. Preaching is accountable to God's love. Balaam and Balak are both right to understand that words do things. After all, when the justice of the peace says, "I now pronounce you man and wife," then you are married. When a preacher says, "you are forgiven," then you are forgiven. Words not only describe the world or provide directives for how we should live. But words also change the world. The gospel is such a word because it is a word of promise.

We are surrounded by well-intentioned Christians who tell us to accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior and that then we will be saved. But is this true? Is it our decision that puts us into heaven? Or is it not, instead, God's decision for us that does that? And, if in fact we have ever made a decision about Jesus, is it not the one that says, "Crucify him? Crucify him?" God's decision is the only one that counts when it comes to matters of salvation. And, God specifically makes a decision about you. God takes you, me, and every other sinner who has put Jesus on the cross, and says, "For my Son's sake, I forgive you." And we can count on the words of Jesus: if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

As bad as Balaam was, he functions as a mouthpiece for God. Later in the narrative, three times he was asked by Balak to curse Israel. But the only thing that can come out of his mouth is a blessing. Finally, during the fourth attempt to curse Israel, Balaam actually prophesied that a "star shall come out of Jacob and a scepter shall raise out of Israel." Christians

have ever seen this to be a genuine prophecy of the coming of Jesus Christ, who is both our star and the scepter.

Surely we hear in this passage the truth that God's people will ever be opposed. Sometimes that opposition is in your face and literally takes out millions of lives. Other times it is more subtle, implying that those of us who believe in Christ and confess him as Lord just aren't very bright or are too old-fashioned or are less the adequate.

Jesus tells us to "be of good cheer" because he has overcome the world. Our identity does not come for these nay-sayers. It comes from Christ himself. In Jesus Christ God validates you and me as sons and daughters. Unlike the paranoid ancient Chinese king who built an army of terracotta warriors to defend him in the afterlife, we don't need such militia. We have instead the power of the word which can bless and curse. But as Christians, loved by God, we need no longer curse our enemies. We are not, even for a minute, like Balak and Moab, even though they were descendants of righteous Lot. No. Instead we are increasingly like our Master who prays, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

May God continue to empower us in word—so that we speak God's message honestly and not with guile as Balaam sought to do—and in deed—so that we welcome our neighbors generously and not seek to oppress them as Balak sought to do with Israel.