

## **Sermon on Balaam's donkey**

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Let's all find Numbers 22 in our pew Bibles. Has anyone read Numbers anytime recently? Can't say I have. Perhaps we should all remind ourselves of the books of the Bible. The top 5 for Jews, called the Torah, the books of Moses, the first 5 books?

Genesis

Exodus

Leviticus

Numbers

Deuteronomy

These 5 books are the pre-history of Israel, the stories from Mesopotamia in the north, Egypt in the south, the wilderness and the desert, of a people chosen by God, formed by God in these other places, and brought by God to this place, the land of Israel.

By Numbers 22 the people are where – can someone read verse 1?

... describe

the land of Jordan. and the King of Jordan wants to get them off his land but he is nervous about them and doesn't want to attack them directly. so he sends for Balaam the holy man and wants to buy a curse off him. And we have heard how that story didn't work out very well for him at all.

But we're ready this story today because of one most curious character in the story – Balaam's donkey.

Hands up if you knew that the Bible contained a talking donkey!?

The story tells us 6 things about this donkey

1. He was a faithful donkey, normally a most reliable beast of burden and means of transport for Balaam
2. He was an old donkey, having carried Balaam for many years
3. He saw the angel. God came down in the form of a spiritual being and the donkey saw it when the Holy man did not!
4. The donkey chose evasive action! The donkey didn't just turn around and run away, the donkey did all it could to warn Balaam, in order to save his life.

5. The donkey did not appreciate being beaten up, and wanted to say so! He had every right to complain!
6. He was amazingly forgiving, and set off again uncomplaining once Balaam had sorted it out with the angel.

I think this is a rather adorable story, particularly notable in that Balaam himself was a Gentile, a foreigner, a Syrian, who the Bible describes as knowing and talking with God, Yahweh the Lord, and acting as a mouthpiece of God. There are other non-Jews whom God uses in various ways, but this I think is the only non-Jewish prophet of God in the Old Testament, and so a fascinating model for how God's Spirit works through all peoples in the New Testament.

But anyway, that is not my topic this morning. We are today talking about the animals, and their importance in God's creation and in our lives. And this is actually an enormous topic and one that we must come back to again. But for now, let's stay with Balaam's donkey and listen to what he has to say, because it's not often that what animals are saying to us gets translated so bluntly into human language. I mean, those of us with pets know mostly what they are saying to us

but even though Balaam had known this donkey for years and years he really didn't get what the donkey was trying to say. So God gave the donkey a helping hand, the power of human speech, for just a couple of minutes. Apparently. Or perhaps God gave Balaam the power to understand the braying of the donkey. Either way, they understood each other and that is one of the things that the Spirit of God does, helping us to hear and understand each other. Praise God for that.

But I wonder if we can stretch this story out a bit, or maybe quite a lot, so that the donkey might stand-in for all of the created world. Do you think perhaps that this donkey might speak for all donkeys, all animals in fact? Because this is the way the Bible works, you know. All of it is both from one time and place AND alive for all times and all places. Not in a literal this equals that kind of way, but in the ways of metaphors and models, so that this small story is a microcosm for the macro story.

Anyway. So, there they are, walking along the path, and 3 times the donkey sees an angel barring the path and 3 times he takes evasive action and 3 times he gets beaten for it. Then the donkey complains:

**Why are you beating me?! Haven't I carried you all these years?**

Can't you just hear the cry of all the earth in those words!

Isn't the whole planet saying to us humans right now

## **Why are you beating me?! Haven't I carried you all these years?**

I would like you to talk to your neighbour about this.

***What are the ways that humans have been beating and abusing the earth? What most troubles you?***

... feedback

What happens next in the story? Can someone read verses 31 to 33

Wow. God speaks, through this angel, and God is not happy with Balaam. Balaam gets soundly told off for being abusive to his donkey, but also for not taking notice of the warnings that he was going the wrong way.

When I read those words from the angel they struck me as being the same thing that the scientists are saying to us today.

Why are we abusing the planet, it is just trying to warn us that we are going the wrong way? If we keep going we could die – to put it bluntly.

Can I ask you to talk to your neighbour again, perhaps turn the other way to talk to someone else. And here's your question. I'm afraid it is not an easy question:

***What is God saying to us about our relationship with creation? Is God talking to us through the animals? through the storms? through the scientists? What might God be saying to us?***

... feedback

In our story from Numbers 22 Balaam repented "I am sorry". Balaam realized that the donkey could see more of God than he could, and he respected his donkey for that. He bowed down, falling on his face. He surrendered his plans, his desire for the financial pay-out of his trip. He let it all go before God, and found in himself a place of simple obedience to God. And out of that God was able to speak through him. The prophecies which Balaam went on to say are some of scriptures astonishing words about the importance of the people of Israel, but also Balaam prophesied the Messiah,

In Numbers 24 Balaam described himself as one who falls down, with eyes uncovered. And he prophesies (Number 24:6-7) of Israel

Like palm groves that stretch far away,  
like gardens beside a river,

like aloes that the LORD has planted,  
like cedar trees beside the waters.  
7 Water shall flow from his buckets,  
and his seed shall have abundant water,  
his king shall be higher than Agag,  
and his kingdom shall be exalted.

This prophecy applies also to us, who in Christ are part of his kingdom, under this King, the Messiah, Jesus. We are part of the outflowing of spiritual water, like seeds planted beside the river.

And yet even as we read this beautiful words and know their spiritual truth, we are confronted by the harsh reality that water is becoming so rare in our world. The land of Moab, where this prophecy was spoken, is getting drier and drier. And a result of global warming is that when rain falls it falls too much, so land floods and winds destroy.

Balaam the holy man warns us even as he was warned, to listen to the donkey, to listen to our earth, to stop in our tracks, to turn around in our headlong careering towards destruction.

I am going to pause again, this time to give you time to pray. In this quiet moment we offer our own prayers of confession, for our part in damaging creation, and praying for our part in listening to God, listening to creation.