

Series: Stranger Things From the Bible
Sermon: Balaam's Talking Donkey

Numbers 22:21-35

Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey and went with the Moabite officials. 22 But God was very angry when he went, and the angel of the Lord stood in the road to oppose him. Balaam was riding on his donkey, and his two servants were with him. 23 When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with a drawn sword in his hand, it turned off the road into a field. Balaam beat it to get it back on the road.

24 Then the angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path through the vineyards, with walls on both sides. 25 When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it pressed close to the wall, crushing Balaam's foot against it. So he beat the donkey again.

26 Then the angel of the Lord moved on ahead and stood in a narrow place where there was no room 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 he was angry and beat it with his staff. 28 Then the Lord opened the donkey's mouth, and it said to Balaam, "What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?"

29 Balaam answered the donkey, "You have made a fool of me! If only I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now."

30 The donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?"

"No," he said.

31 Then the Lord opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with his sword drawn. So he bowed low and fell facedown.

32 The angel of the Lord asked him, "Why have you beaten your donkey these three times? I have come here to oppose you because your path is a reckless one before me. 33 The donkey saw me and turned away from me these three times. If it had not turned away, I would certainly have killed you by now, but I would have spared it."

34 Balaam said to the angel of the Lord, "I have sinned. I did not realize you were standing in the road to oppose me. Now if you are displeased, I will go back."

35 The angel of the Lord said to Balaam, "Go with the men, but speak only what I tell you." So Balaam went with Balak's officials.

Sermon

You can't be serious. This story is a Bible story? For this month, we are looking at some of the strange stories that one can find in scripture. And as I was preparing for this sermon, I somewhat regretted this idea for a sermon series. What do you do with a talking donkey, or for that matter, what do you do with an angel that wants to kill you who apparently can't do it out in the open but has to somehow spring a trap that can be readily foiled by a mule. This is one of those strange stories in the Old Testament that I have a problem getting a handle

on. I can read the story, I can somewhat understand the story, but there are bits and pieces that don't quite make sense to me as of yet. So who are these people? Who is Balaam, what are the Moabites up to, and most importantly, why should we care? There are two main characters that stand out in this puzzling tale. The first character is Balaam. Balaam is a professional prophet or seer who travels about and curses military enemies for money. You can hire him to bless you, or even to rain down curses on others. You have a problem with your neighbor? Call Balaam, he can take care of him. He is, in a sense, a hired gun, and his only weapons are words that have the power to curse. That would be something to see, in the yellow pages, a section under professional prophet or experienced cursor. Just for fun, I looked in the phone book (yes, we still have one) for such services, and I did find that we have a significant number of astrologers and psychics in the metro area. Silly Portland. It's still a thriving business today. There are a few fortune tellers that have made it big time and you can catch their television advertisements on late night T.V. One big one went out of business last year for faulty accounting practices. And I wonder . . . didn't they see that coming? Anyway, that was Balaam's job. And it paid good money. The second major figure is Balak. You haven't heard about him yet, but he's the reason we have this story. He is the king of Moab, a country that borders the promised land of Canaan just to the east, across the Jordan River. Now, this story would make more sense if you know where we are in the Biblical narrative. Moses had already freed the Israelites from Egypt. From the hand of Pharaoh. They crossed the Red Sea and were heading for Canaan, the promised land. However, it took them forty years to do so. There were hundreds of thousands of former slaves wandering through the desert, through the wilderness in search of, in anticipation of, and promised of, a land and nation that they could call their own. They are on their way. God's chosen people looking to settle in their own territory, given to them by God Himself. We are fine with this story and we can easily envision a wandering group of nomadic Hebrews on their way to Canaan. What is commonly overlooked, however, is the portion of the story that has them wandering through the middle east. We tend to think back and perceive and believe that they were out in the middle of nowhere, minding their own business and leaving everybody else alone. This wasn't the case. When the Israelites traveled, they went through other nation's property. Through other towns, other districts, other provinces. They spent most of their time going through space that was already occupied by other people. In fact, the promised land that they were heading to was already occupied by another nation who was trying to figure out how all that was going to work. Now Balak, the king of Moab had all of these Israelites wandering through his territory - drinking his people's water, using their fields, and doing whatever they pretty much wanted to do. So Balak decides to hire Balaam to send a little curse upon the Israelites to take care of them. That somehow, a curse will bring ruin and devastation upon Israel and save Moab from dealing with them. The scripture that we read this morning only deals with about a quarter of the entire Balaam story. Officials from Balak the Moabite king ask Balaam for his services, and Balaam refuses with the assistance of divine guidance. So Balak tries again, this time sending more important people to show the urgency and the desperation. This time, God relents and tells Balaam to go. Now, this is the part I don't understand. God just told Balaam to go. But the very next sentence says that "Balaam was riding his donkey to Moab, and two of his servants were with him. But God was angry that Balaam had gone, so one of the Lord's angels stood in the road to stop him." Did God change his mind in the middle of the night? It doesn't say. For whatever reason, an angel is sent to stop him, but only the donkey can see him. And three times, the donkey saves Balaam by refusing to go toward the mean looking angel with the big flaming sword. Balaam beats the donkey and, God must have a sense of humor, cause God gives the donkey speech to tell Balaam he's in deep trouble. The donkey complains to Balaam, and Balaam speaks back to the donkey as if it is no big deal. A donkey! This is a unique voice of God. There are many ways in which God speaks to us today, but a donkey is one that I would have never put on the top ten list. What I wish to explore today, in this brief amount of time, is how God speaks to us in this day and age. In the here and now.

How does God speak to you? Because one complaint I hear from kids all the time is, "Why doesn't God talk to us like he did back then?" I don't know. But I do know this: The first way that God speaks to us is in the spirit of Revelation. Revelation. Not the Book of Revelation, but somehow God reveals to us something that we are suppose to know. Something that we are suppose to do. With revelation and divine guidance. Revelation. It means, somehow that we are in the presence of God and that there is a relationship between humanity and the

Almighty. Revelation is a personal communication between us and God. It doesn't have to be a direct voice from the heavens, a crystal clear communication where we hear God's voice or know with certainty that a message is being sent. Have you ever had a feeling that you were supposed to do something, that you felt a strange pull or tug to do something that you normally wouldn't do? Something clicks in your mind and you have an understanding of something, or a curious sense of intuition or premeditation or insight that you are surprised that you got? Have you ever had those strange coincidences where the most improbable things take place, and you can only chalk it up to God being somewhere in the mix? Steph and I don't call them coincidences, we call them Godincidences, because we know that - there are things left and right that happen to us and it could only be the presence of God making such and such happen. Here's a fun Nebraska story, just south of where I grew up: It took place at the West Side Baptist Church in Beatrice, Nebraska. Normally, all of the good choir people came to church on Wednesday night to practice, and they tended to be early, well before the 7:30 starting time. But one night, March 1, 1950, one by one, two by two, they all had excuses for being late. Marilyn, the church pianist overslept on her after-dinner nap, so she and her mother were late. One girl, a high school sophomore, was having trouble with her homework. That delayed her, so she was late. One couple couldn't get their car started. They, and those they were to pick up, were subsequently late. All eighteen choir members, including the pastor and his wife, were late. All had good excuses. At 7:30, the time the choir rehearsal was to begin, not one soul was in the church building. This had never happened before. But that night, the only night in the history of the church that the choir wasn't practicing at 7:30, was the night that there was a gas leak in the basement of the church. At precisely the time at which the choir would have been singing, the gas leak was ignited by the church furnace and the whole church was blown to little pieces. The furnace room was right below the choir loft. You could tell me that God doesn't work in and through us in strange and mysterious ways, but I wouldn't believe you. This is one story among countless of strange ways that God speaks to us, God directs us, God protects us. Revelation, where God's presence is among us - somehow.

Another way that God speaks to us is through Reflection. Reflection. We incorporate all of the information that we have, what we have gathered and received through our senses, through our learning, through each other. And our brain goes through the mental processes of putting it all together. I can tell you a lot about God and who God is and what God does, not by divine guidance or insight, but because I have the tool of reason to make clear and educated judgements. Although we recognize that God's revelation and our experiences of God in our lives continually surpass the scope of human language and reason, we also believe that any disciplined theological work calls for the careful use of reason. By reason we read and interpret Scripture. By reason we determine whether or not our Christian witness makes sense. By reason we ask questions of faith and seek to understand God's action and will. God made our brains that we might use them. Much of what I say from the pulpit I believe comes from what God has revealed to me - ideas, sermon topics, conclusions, and much of what I say from the pulpit comes from reflection - putting those ideas and topics in some sense of tangle form that I can share, in ways that we can relate to, into a packaged form that gives us insight as to who God is and how we are supposed to react to that reality. Revelation and Reflection are two major ways that God speaks to us today.

Another one I want to hit upon today is the simple one of experience. Experience. In order for us to gain insight and understanding of God's nature and our relationship to Him, we have to have an experience or set of experiences that lead us to that awareness, to that belief, to that understandings that we have. For us to know something, we have to experience it. It's true for other things as well as God. You don't understand baseball until you've played or seen a game. You don't understand being a parent unless you've been there. You don't understand suffering or loss until you've been hurt or lost a loved one. All of the information and beliefs that we have comes to us through years of experience. Different experiences that we might share lead us to different attitudes and judgements about things, doesn't it? The past generation has different experiences than the present one, and boy, for good or for worse, attitudes and beliefs are different. Experiences give us our understandings and our outlook on life. So I ask you: Are you experiencing God? Are you experiencing God? Where do you go to find the presence of God in your life? Do you find God through the great outdoors? Is that where you find Him? Do you find Him in your daily prayer life? How about in the scriptures? Do you read the Scriptures

seeking an experience with our heavenly creator? How about church? Do you find that you experience God through Sunday Morning services? If not, why not? Of all places to look, you would hope to find God somewhere in a Sunday morning church service. To be honest, there are Sundays where I don't feel much of God anywhere in this place. There are plenty of Sundays that I do, depending on what hits me and what's going on in my life.

There are other ways, God can speak to us in nature, through a sunset, through our children, through our parents, through our own sufferings and trials, through our successes and triumphs. The ways are limitless, I mean, if a donkey makes the scriptures, then anything can...I guess.

And I'll close with this thought: think about this: maybe God is using you to be God's voice to someone else through their experience with you. Maybe God is directing you to share in some small fashion what he wants someone to understand. Maybe you are the instrument that God is using in some mysterious way so that somebody else can experience Him. Are you open to such an idea? Can it be possible? I tell you yes. Maybe you'll never know the impact that your words or actions are to somebody else, but let God direct you in that you can be an instrument in His workings in our world. God can use anybody, at any given time. I pray that He uses you, that He uses us, to do the work He would have us to do. If you don't think that you are worthy or prepared for such an assignment or task, Remember this saying: If God could speak through Balaam's ass, there's got to be hope for us. Amen.