



“Stories You Missed: Balaam’s Donkey”
Sermon by Rev. Christopher Chatelaine-Samsen
Numbers 22:20-31

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That night God came to Balaam and said to him, ‘If the men have come to summon you, get up and go with them; but do only what I tell you to do.’ So Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey, and went with the officials of Moab.

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. 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 on to the road. Then the angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side. 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. 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. 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. 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?’ 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!’ 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 in this way?’ And he said, ‘No.’

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.

Listening to God’s voice is hard. Just ask Balaam.

Perhaps you’ve just heard this strange Biblical story about a man and his talking

donkey for the first time. If that's true, don't be surprised. Over the summer we spend eight weeks talking about the stories of the Bible that help us understand the Big Story that goes from Genesis to Revelation - but there are other stories. The B sides and bootlegs. The hidden gems off the main road. Stories you may have otherwise missed. Stories like this one.

Amongst the stories in the dusty back shelf of the Bible, this one is one of my favorites. It's got a talking donkey – how great is that?

But that isn't the only reason it's one of my favorites. Before I tell you why, though, a little context might help to make some sense out of this.

This story takes place back in the early days of Israel, not long after they had left Egypt and were in the process entering the land of Canaan. As we noted earlier this summer, the Israelites had a problem, which was that the so-called Promised Land was already inhabited, and in order to get rid of them, the Israelites had to go to war against them. I suppose so goes the ancient near east. And amongst those people that the Israelites had to get rid of were the Moabites, whose King was named Balak.

Balak, so the story goes, was terrified of the Israelites, who had already had a series of military successes against others, and was sure that his army would be soundly defeated by the army of Israel. He was in a bind – sure defeat unless he could figure a way out.

So he hatched a plan. He would seek out a well-known oracle, the kind of person who could pronounce blessings and curses strong

enough to win or lose at battle and ask for a favor. He would bring with him all the most important, well-known, impressive people in Moab and implore this first-rate oracle, with the promise of a substantial payment, to come to the place of battle and curse the Israelites while they were at battle. So they went to Balaam, one of the finest oracles in the land, and make their pitch.

At first, Balaam wasn't biting. After Balak, King of Moab, asked for the curse, Balaam prayed to God and heard that God wanted no such thing. So he said no. But Balak wasn't taking no for an answer, so he tried a second time, and Balaam again prayed to God, and this time got a different message - if they call you, go, but do only as I say. At least that's what he thought, although perhaps the promise of a good payday tinged his ability to hear clearly. Hard to know, but it seems that somewhere, the message got a bit garbled.

This is where the story gets weird. Balaam saddles up his donkey the next day and heads out down the road. It seemed that God said go, and he did. Except that morning, when he did the thing that he thought he was supposed to do, God seemed to immediately have other plans. God didn't want Balaam to go. This was all wrong. So God got in the way. As Balaam was on his way, a messenger of the Lord stood in front of the donkey on the road to stop them. The donkey saw this messenger, but Balaam, in his desire to get down to business, did not. Again, for the oracle that Balaam is supposed to be, he doesn't seem especially tuned in to God.

The first time, upon seeing this terrifying sight, the donkey walked off into a field. The

second time, the donkey ran into a wall. The third time, the donkey just sat down on the ground and refused to move, at which point Balaam, tired of the nonsense and delay, took a stick and began to hit the poor animal. Get up! What's wrong with you?!

But God wasn't done trying to get through to Balaam. Because out of nowhere, the donkey started talking. Hey! Don't you know me better than this? Haven't I been a good donkey? If I'm refusing to go forward, did you think that there might be a good reason??

Let's pause here for a moment to acknowledge that sometimes, when we read the Bible, we have to remove our lens of modern plausibility. Yes, the Bible is full of things that really happened, but it's also full of tales that would be perfectly at home in Tolkien. They may speak a true word about God, but they're awfully strange in their telling.

Which brings me to what I think is the strangest part of this story so far, which is that Balaam talks back to the donkey. Has a conversation. Not, as I would do, stop and scream "O my gosh it's a talking donkey!"

And suddenly, Balaam has a moment of clarity. In a flash, that very same messenger of the Lord becomes visible to Balaam, and he falls down in terror and reverence. Finally, without ambiguity, after many tries, Balaam has at last heard God's voice.

How do we hear God's voice? It is the ever-present question in Scripture from those first days in the Garden through the visions of John of Patmos. How do we know what God is saying to us? What on heaven and earth

does God want? It is, if not the most important question, at least the most indispensable question we can ask, the question without no other question really matters. How do we hear God's voice? How do we understand God's intentions for our lives? For the world? How do we hear that call that takes us from where we are and bring us into God embrace and into loving service? How do we hear and then know who to be and what to do?

I, for one, have never found it easy. I have relatively few stories in which I can tell you, with little question, that I believe I heard God's voice. When I was just out of college, I did youth ministry, and my particular assignment was middle school ministry. Now, there's nothing wrong with middle school ministry, but let's just say it didn't feel like my particular call.

I had a small group of middle school boys, and I had in my head this idea that we'd have Bible study and do, you know, serious things. I clearly had poor recollection of what it was like to be a middle schooler, because, as you can imagine, what they really wanted to do after school was play games or run around on the church lawn. In hindsight, sounds fun.

But I persisted, and every week, on Wednesday afternoon, ran into the same wall of frustration that I had constructed for myself. Guys, let's read the Gospel! But can't we play video games? Finally, one day, I'd had it with the goofing off and silliness (I know, I was quite the Grinch). Their parents came to pick them up, and I walked, finally rid of them and with great anger, down the long hall between the youth room and my office. And suddenly, with clarity I can't

explain, I knew with certainty what I needed to do. A voice stopped me in my tracks – really, I just stopped in the middle of the hallway like my legs stopped working - and said, “pray for those kids.” Not in a passive aggressive way, not to change them, but just to help me learn how to love them for who they were and what they needed. Just pray for them. And so I did.

I’m not sure what finally made me receptive to hearing God speaking. Maybe the frustration – being at my wit’s end. Maybe it was a bit like Balaam, nothing working like it was supposed to, even his donkey unable to walk in a straight line. Maybe, pushed to our limits, our own wisdom failing, we finally find ourselves open to hear something we’d been otherwise unable to.

I love this story because, if you push past the strangeness of the ancient world and the unbelievability of a talking donkey, it’s a very human story about faith. Buried in the ancient stories of tribal wars mixed with fantasy is a story about a person, caught between his own convictions and the pressures of the powerful, just trying to hear God’s voice amidst the shouting and the static.

How do we hear God’s voice? I wish I had a simple answer, if for no other reason than that it would help me. But God seems to have few simple answers. I imagine the Bible would be a whole lot shorter, in that case. And yet God shows up in distinct and irreplicable ways through out Scripture. Moses gets a burning bush. Elijah gets silence. Saul falls to the ground, blind. Joseph has a dream.

Balaam gets talking livestock.

The particular mode may, in fact, not matter much at all. In all of those circumstances, my own as well, God’s voice is heard most clearly when all the things that are supposed to work don’t work anymore, when the squeeze between what is, what should be, and what we want becomes tight enough that it becomes hard to breathe, when people just get to the end of themselves and feel done. Evidently, it’s in those moments that most of us, myself included, are finally confronted with the God who has been trying to get through all along.

In the meantime, God is indeed speaking. Sometimes through one another. Sometimes through a voice from within. Sometimes through a dream or an idea. Heck, sometimes God can speak to us loud and clear through the voice of a complete... donkey.

Whatever it is, though, or whoever it is, keep alert, and listen up. God is speaking. Amen.