

In the Wilderness | The Gospel in the Book of Numbers

“Balaam and the Donkey”

Numbers 22.20-35

12.11.16

God came to Balaam at night and said to him, "If the men have come to call you, rise up and go with them; but only the word which I speak to you shall you do."

²¹ So Balaam arose in the morning, and saddled his donkey and went with the leaders of Moab. ²² But God was angry because he was going, and the angel of the LORD took his stand in the way as an adversary against him. Now he 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 way with his drawn sword in his hand, the donkey turned off from the way and went into the field; but Balaam struck the donkey to turn her back into the way. ²⁴ Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path of the vineyards, with a wall on this side and a wall on that side. ²⁵ When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she pressed herself to the wall and pressed Balaam's foot against the wall, so he struck her again. ²⁶ The angel of the LORD went further, and stood in a narrow place where there was no way to turn to the right hand or the left. ²⁷ When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she lay down under Balaam; so Balaam was angry and struck the donkey with his stick. ²⁸ And 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 Then Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you have made a mockery of me! If there had been a sword in my hand, I would have killed you by now." ³⁰ The donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your donkey on which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I ever been accustomed to do so to you?" 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 all the way to the ground. ³² The angel of the LORD said to him, "Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out as an adversary, because your way was contrary to me. ³³ "But the donkey saw me and turned aside from me these three times. If she had not turned aside from me, I would surely have killed you just now, and let her live." ³⁴ Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, "I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing in the way against me. Now then, if it is displeasing to you, I will turn back." ³⁵ But the angel of the LORD said to Balaam, "Go with the men, but you shall speak only the word which I tell you."

We've been reading and teaching through the Book of Numbers... fourth book in the Bible and the story of the Israelites journey toward the Promise Land. It's the history of the Big Detour...a trip of 40 days is stretched to 40 years...

A series of rebellions all stemming from the root of unbelief and the Israelites refusal to live by faith – that's why they wandered in the wild...and a whole generation never entered the Promised Land.

This whole book is an autopsy of unbelief...it dissects and analyzes our own great weakness/fatal flaw, that we would rather control and manipulate and “work it” rather than trust in the good intentions of God...which...let’s face it...we often can’t see because the evidence APPEARS to be contrary... and faith is the evidence of the unseen... to live by faith means that we look to the things not seen (2 Cor 4.18).

Faith requires me to look away from personal failures, pains, hardships, feelings, discouragements and troubling questions (all of which may be glaring and LOUD and in my face) and instead to see the unseen – the promises of God and base life on the unseen God.

Today’s text takes place in that second generation when Miriam and Aaron have died and the young Israelites are starting to face the people of the Land and have to trust God to give it to them. THIS is a story about seeing the UNSEEN... Here we meet a character who doesn't fit into our categories but is important – he gets a big chunk of the book: Balaam.

Let’s look at this Moabite sorcerer: 1) Prophecy 2) Epiphany 3) Teaching and 4) Application (a fitting acronym)

There are three parts to the Balaam story – we hope to look today at the first and second at the third NEXT week.

In the first part (which we didn’t read) you learn that Balak was a king in Moab... and he was very nervous.

He could see the young Israelites had really multiplied as a people. They’re preparing for war... They will soon move westward through Balak’s kingdom (Moab) and continue westward into the Land of Promise...and Balak, king of Moab is afraid.

He sees this immense nomadic nation, whose God is YHWH and he has heard of their previous military victories... and he thinks his only play might be to separate the Israelites from their God... there are no natural moves he can make – so let’s try a supernatural move.

He sends messengers to the outskirts of his realm to enlist the services of a spiritual practitioner...a diviner (Josh 13.22)...a sorcerer/prophet who has influence with the spirits and forces. They bring money.

And the messengers explain the situation to this magician Balaam...and sort of flatter him: “I know whomever YOU bless will BE blessed and whom YOU curse will BE cursed...” (BTW – those are like the words God gave to Abraham [Gen 12] – whoever blesses YOU I will bless...whoever curses you I will curse...”)

So Balaam says to the messengers, “Wait here” and he inquires of Israel’s God...and they apparently know each other (it’s one reason I said, “this character doesn’t fit into our categories” – he’s not an Israelite... but he knows YHWH Israel’s God)... Moab was related to Abraham: Moab were the incestuous children of Lot (Abraham’s cousin... later King David’s great grandmother was a Moabitess) but Balaam the prophet is very familiar with Israel’s God.

And the LORD says, “No! Don’t go with them – you can’t curse whom I HAVE BLESSED.”

So, next day, Balaam tells the messengers, “The LORD (YHWH – Israel’s God) won’t allow me to go.”

So, they report to Balak the king of Moab and he figures it’s a negotiation maneuver ...and he “ups the ante” – sends more leaders...really important leaders and they beg...and they promise BIG rewards... “Name your PRICE!”... and Balaam is torn.

So he says, “I’ll ask again” and God seems to say, “What don’t you understand about ‘NO’?...but if you insist... then have at it.” You know the saying, “Be careful what you wish for.”

And when we pick up in today’s reading, Balaam sets out to meet with Balak the king of Moab and “who knows?” It can’t hurt just to hear what the man wants... maybe YHWH will change His mind and let me curse these Israelites... what harm is there in just making a little journey...on my donkey?”

And that’s where this famous scene takes place. Balaam’s apparently keeping his options open... not planning to disobey... “but we’ll just have to see”.

And the messenger of God’s presence...some sort of manifestation of God, “the angel of the LORD” – there are times in the Hebrew Scriptures when this is undoubtedly God Himself in a visible form... and He stands before the donkey and the donkey sees what Balaam CAN’T see... DO YOU SEE THE IRONY THERE?

Balaam has superior powers of spiritual insight but he can’t see what any old jack-ass can see?

AND he really, REALLY can’t see...so that twice he beats the poor donkey until finally the poor beast of burden can’t side-step the angel and instead the donkey bows herself before this Person...and Balaam is furious and abuses the donkey a THIRD TIME... Then a miracle takes place... YHWH (the Lord of the Israelites and the LORD of all creation) HE OPENS THE MOUTH OF THE DONKEY and the donkey asks Balaam, “What did I do to deserve this?”

And Balaam (I expect him to say “Did YOU just speak in human language?”) but maybe he’s in such a froth that he loses himself and says, “You’re making a fool of me...if I had a sword I would’ve killed you!”

Truth is it's Balaam who is making a mockery of HIS MASTER... and the donkey says again, "Am I normally weird like this? Isn't this a sign that anyone with ANY insight at all could've discerned? YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE A PROPHET TO FIGURE OUT THAT SOMETHING IS HAPPENING HERE."

And then Balaam the mystical master, the spiritual giant who's actually dumber than a jack-ass...HE IS GIVEN SOME LIGHT, an epiphany, an eye-opener: "the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam and he saw the angel of the LORD standing with a sword in His hand" (Balaam just said, "If I had a sword, I'd 'a killed YOU!" – and here's a sword!)

And the LORD, who IS concerned for the ethical treatment of animals (Jonah 4.11) says, "Why did you strike your donkey three times? ("What is UP with you guys and your sticks! Enough already! Moses swings twice...you strike three times... enough!")

"I have come to oppose YOU because you needed to be opposed... (33)...That donkey saved your life...because I DO have a sword...but in mercy... I gave the donkey to see what you couldn't see and opened her mouth – to speak for me (she's more of a prophet than YOU are!)"

And Balaam does what the Israelites had been sooooo slow to learn: he says, "I HAVE SINNED" (took them 21 chapters to learn – 21.7)

And instead of sending Balaam home God sends him on his way to speak to Balak (king of Moab) – he learned to be a prophet from a donkey...and now he's learned to say ONLY what the LORD wants him to say (35).

Now...this is such a strange passage...not like our day-to-day existence (unless we happen to watch Shrek that day!) – but what is the BIG IDEA – the teaching?

Well, for one thing, in the ancient world when they thought about spiritual life and spiritual powers their default mode... their go-to, automatic way of thinking was KARMA. That is to say, the practitioner does something...performs something...says the right words...works the right spell...mixes the right potion and when he performs enough out comes the desired response. It's THIS for that...quid pro quo.

The messengers arrive with (22.7) "the fees for divination" and when Balaam says, "No!" the automatic response is to offer more...do more...pay more! And that's why all pagan worship eventually moves in the direction of child sacrifice (Micah 6.7) – because that's the ultimate and highest price! ("They made their children pass through the fire" Deu 18.10 et al)

But God's relationship to His people is of a different quality altogether. God cannot be coerced or controlled or manipulated or bought. God relates to us on the basis of GRACE – NOT karma.

It's not to say that there are NO consequences for actions – if you gossip and lie you will eventually have very few friends... If you sleep around YOU WILL get diseases and become de-humanized... if you eat too much...worry too much...work too little ... we all know there are built in consequences.

But when it comes to relating to God – we will NEVER be able to earn God's favor or force God's hand... WE NEVER CLIMB TO GOD (by our morality or religious fervor or performance) WE DON'T ASCEND TO HIM (we can't) – HE MUST DESCEND TO US.

That's what HE DID with His favored nation – the people of Abraham. They never earned or deserved His favor. They didn't seek or discover HIM – HE SOUGHT AND SAVED THEM. Grace/not karma. And the ultimate expression of grace is Jesus Christ.

This passage has been often depicted in art and has often been compared to Saul's Damascus Road experience where HE had an epiphany and the scales fell from HIS EYES – he went from karma to grace.

It also made me think of another donkey in the Bible – that moment when the Lord of Creation Himself appeared (not simply as an angel or apparition) but became flesh...became MATERIAL/physical.

I'm thinking of the moment when Jesus Christ, the Better Adam, the True Gardener (John 20.15), the King of Creation rode into Jerusalem humble and full of grace... HE SAT ON A DONKEY THAT HAD NEVER BEEN RIDDEN (Luke 19.30) and if you sit on an unbroken donkey – it's going to go crazy! But when it knew that THIS IS THE ONE MAN WHO CAN BE TRUSTED, this is Creation's LORD... this is the One who knows what it is to bear an awful burden.

And as Balaam's donkey bowed before the Angel of the Lord, so that unbroken colt on Palm Sunday – seemed instinctively safe (even privileged to carry) God as God entered Jerusalem to carry our sins.

Now, a very brief fourth point (Prophecy, Epiphany, Teaching and A- for APPLICATION) – I took a course in Grad School called "Traditional Religions". It was fascinating.

The professor had grown up in Southern Africa among people who practiced witchcraft and magic. He told about these primitive practices for getting the gods to send them rain or keep their cattle from getting sick...and it all seemed so foreign...and then (huge auditorium class) – a few weeks into the semester... there was a gradual but universal epiphany – "WE ALL DO THE SAME THINGS".

I first saw it in the so-called prosperity gospel (the TV religion shows) where you send in your money in exchange for God's blessings ...and then in more subtle ways where we use our

performance to ensure that God will like us and that God will bless us (#blessed) – where we try to manage God and try to manage people so they affirm us and give us what we need to feel good about ourselves and somehow GIVE US THE SHALOM THAT CAN REALLY ONLY COME FROM GOD...the God who gives for free...to believers.

And how we will sacrifice...even our own children ... and think of how children are always at risk in cultures built on karma/shame/competition and comparisons and not on grace...

Do you want to apply this strange passage to your life? Think for a moment of who you are in this story – that’s often a fast-track to good application. Are you Balak – afraid of the forces, of war and danger on the horizon and asking “tell me the price and I’ll pay it in order to be safe and secure...” Are you a stranger to the God who can’t be bought or manipulated? Are you a stranger to grace?

Or are you Balaam ...sort of convinced that God is different but often gravitating back to that default mode... keeping your options open...in need of a fresh eye-opening, a new epiphany, fresh repentance saying “Lord, I have sinned...I see You now as the unique God that YOU are and I want not to displease You...but walk in Your grace...by FAITH.”

Maybe the best we can be is the jack-ass... What I really need and what I really HAVE is the Lord of Creation to protect me, to fall on the sword for me ...to do the impossible for me: to open my eyes, to open my mouth and teach to speak.