

Talking Donkeys - Nov. 14, 2010

So Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey, and went with the officials of Moab. 22 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. 23 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. 24 Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side. 25 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. 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, it 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 it said to Balaam, 'What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?' 29 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!' 30 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.'

31 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. 32 The angel of the LORD said to him, 'Why have you struck your donkey these three times? I have come out as an adversary, because your way is perverse before me. 33 The donkey saw me, and turned away from me these three times. If it had not turned away from me, surely I would by now have killed you and let it live.' 34 Then Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, 'I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing in the road to oppose me. Now therefore, if it is displeasing to you, I will return home.' 35 The angel of the LORD said to Balaam, 'Go with the men; but speak only what I tell you to speak.' So Balaam went on with the officials of Balak.

For some reason I find this to be one of the funniest stories in the Bible. I'm not sure why. Perhaps it is that I can so easily picture this story being told. See, the ancient Hebrew people wouldn't have read this story from a book, they would have told it aloud, or maybe even acted it out. I see the little children of the early tribes giggling and laughing at the antics of poor Balaam and his talking donkey as they caper around the campfire.

Perhaps I find it funny simply because of the story itself. I mean, it is slapstick at its finest. Between Balaam smacking his foot against the wall and him

beating the donkey, this is something right out of the Three Stooges. Plus the donkey veers off the path three times to avoid the angel, and as any comedian knows, three is funny!

But no, I think the simple reason that I find this story amusing, why many of us do, is that of all things, it has a talking donkey. I mean there are so many unexpected things in this story. Balaam is obviously some sort of prophet for the Lord, yet instead of letting him see the angel in the road, or letting the angel talk, or even speaking to Balaam directly here, God lets a donkey do his talking for him.

You see, Balaam was a Holy man of the day and he was being paid a large sum of money to go out and bless the army of a kingdom that was about to do battle with the Israelites. God, of course, wasn't keen on this happening and had a different plan, and so set up the whole series of events. A series of events that led to...a talking donkey.

It is absurd. It is ludicrous. It is completely unlike any other story in the rest of the book of Numbers, and yet there it is! A talking Donkey! And it isn't like this is the sort of story that is open for interpretation. Verse 28 is pretty darn clear, "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?'" There are not too many different ways to interpret that verse. It is about as straightforward as you can get. The donkey talked. Period.

But why is this so surprising to us? Has God not done strange and wonderful things before this point? I mean we accept floods and burning bushes, the parting of the Red Sea and pillars of fire, but suddenly a talking donkey seems over the top? Why would this be?

Perhaps it is because historically, people have mainly considered donkeys to be silly or foolish. The Greeks believed that the god of wine, Dionysus rode a donkey, and I can remember the animated depiction in the Disney movie Fantasia of that foolish donkey, and of course, there is the more recent animated donkey, Eddie Murphy's character in the Shrek movies who is not exactly the sharpest of tacks.

Perhaps this story of the talking donkey seems strange because for many of us, it is new. Raise your hand if you had heard this story before this week! When we talk of God's voice coming from a burning bush as it did to Moses, I don't see it as strange, but the talking donkey is. Do I find the burning bush okay simply because I grew up hearing the story? When you think of it, the burning bush has been taught in Sunday school, seen in movies, and preached on from the pulpit. The book of Numbers, on the other hand is almost entirely ignored in the three year cycle of the lectionary that our church usually uses. And of the stories from Numbers that we do include, the talking donkey is not one of them.

This is one of the things that I am finding to be so great about the Grand Sweep program. For those who might be new here today, the Grand Sweep is our program this year where we are, as a congregation, reading the Bible from beginning to end. We have classes that are discussing the readings, a daily blog post by the pastors and myself, and here from the pulpit, each week we hear a snippet of the week's reading. We aren't just reading the big important stories, or the common place ones. We aren't just reading the stories of the A-listers, the people we know, but all the stories, including the little ones, like today's lesson on Balaam and the donkey.

If there is anything that today's story is telling us, it is that, at times, God will use even the lowest of creatures to make a difference. In this story, it is not Balaam, the man of God who sees the angel, but the donkey; the beast of burden. And so, seeing the Angel standing in the road with drawn sword, it is the donkey that becomes the hero of the tale, trying to rescue his master from a fatal error. It is the donkey that tries to turn Balaam away by riding off the road. The reward is that the donkey is beaten for its troubles, but that does not deter it from doing the right thing time and again. And when the donkey finally speaks, it is to say to Balaam, "haven't I been a good friend and companion to you all these years? Why strike me now? Have I ever led you astray?" It isn't until Balaam answers "No"

that he is able to see the angel of the Lord and divine the calling the Lord has for him.

There are two things amazing here, the first, that Balaam doesn't panic or freak out in any way when his donkey starts talking to him. The second, is that it is the lowly donkey that saves the day, not the prophet Balaam. And this is in keeping with the themes we have been seeing in the Old Testament so far. This idea of the Lord taking something small and using it for His purpose is repeated again and again. Noah, Abraham...these were not famous or powerful men before God called them, and yet they went on to do great things. Moses was herding sheep when God called him and sent him forth to defy the leader of the Egyptian people, and the Israelites as a whole were nothing more than a collection of slaves, freed from their bondage and who, through following God's call, would become a great nation!

No, we should not be surprised that God would use such an insignificant creature as a donkey as His messenger. This is nothing new. God's tools are varied, and you never know when what seems like the smallest thing might set something huge in motion. Do you think when Jacob gave his son Joseph a really nice coat, he ever thought that it would set off a chain of events that caused him to save an entire nation from famine? Or that when Paul shipped his letters to the

church in Corinth, he ever thought that those words would continue to inspire people almost two thousand years later?

God's power is amazing, and it can manifest in all sorts of ways; in the world around us, in the actions that we take, and, as in the case of the donkey, in the words that we speak.

You see, words have power! I am a firm believer in this. The right words spoken at the right time can change a life. Now there has been a lot of talk in schools recently about bullying. There has been a spate of teen suicides recently, and millions of Americans struggle everyday with feelings of depression and inadequacy. How many of them could be helped through their day if they received a smile? How many of them could be helped through their week if someone said a kind word? How many of them could maybe feel better about their lives if someone said to them, "God loves you!"?

There are so many ways that we can touch another's life, but it requires us to act. In the story today, the donkey saw a problem and acted on it, and when his actions weren't appreciated, when they weren't enough, God opened the donkey's mouth and he spoke!

We need to open our eyes and see the problems around us. For the most part, we have done this. We know what the problems are in the world around us. People are depressed. People are scared. People are worried about their jobs and

the economy. Kids are worried about homework and grades, sports and friends. There are issues of homelessness, hunger and disease, war and hostility, bigotry and hatred. The world, quite frankly, is a mess!

But we can make a difference! We are called to be the Body of Christ in the world. We ARE his hands, we ARE his voice, and our words can make a difference! You may think that the problems are too big, and that you are too small, too insignificant. You may think that you can't help anyone, but you would be wrong. If we have learned anything from today's story, it is that God can use anything to make a difference in the world, even something as insignificant as a donkey...even us.

There is an old proverb about a horseshoe nail.

*For want of a nail the shoe was lost,
for want of a shoe the horse was lost,
for want of a horse the knight was lost,
for want of a knight the battle was lost,
for want of a battle the kingdom was lost.*

So a kingdom was lost—all for want of a horseshoe nail.

You never know when the smile you give someone will be the horseshoe nail they need to get through the day. Our actions have consequences, as do our inactions! We are called to act, to be a presence for good in the world. And I think

this is something that our church as a whole has been doing pretty well. This past week, we brought in and sponsored a new K'ren family, our youth raised over \$600 to help the homeless, this past month members of the church have worked at Lazarus house, the Northern Illinois Food Bank and the Midwest Mission Distribution Center. As a church we are out there in the world, trying to make a difference. But why is it so hard for us as individuals?

In today's story, the Donkey tries everything he can before God finally opens his mouth and he talks. The donkey reminds Balaam of how long they have been together, of how long they have known each other. How many old friends and neighbors do you have whom you have never invited to church or talked to about God or your faith? What are we waiting for? What will it take for God to open our mouths? Are we afraid? Worried that they will laugh at us or ridicule us? Worried that we will look foolish? Well, another word for foolish is also another word for donkey!

God is with us, and we CAN make a difference in the world! If we didn't believe that...if you didn't believe that, then we wouldn't be here today! I want everyone to take a moment and look at the front of your bulletin. Right there on the front of your bulletins you can see our vision statement, a statement adopted by the whole church: To be a hub of Christ Directed activity, radiating out to the world, from the heart of St. Charles. Well, if this church is the hub, then we are the

spokes! It is up to us to act. It is up to us to speak. It is up to us to take the light of Christ out into the world.

Amen.

Let us now stand as we are able and lift our voices, as we together loudly proclaim our faith in God through the Apostles Creed.

Righteous God, you rule the nations. Bless those also who have given of themselves in service to their countries. Guard the brave men and women in military service. Give them compassion for those who confront them as enemies. Keep our children from hate that hardens, or from scorekeeping with human lives. Though for a season they must be people of war, let them live for peace, as eager for agreement as for victory. Encourage them as they encourage one another, and never let hard duty separate them from loyalty to your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ.