

“Balaam’s Donkey”

Numbers 22: 21-38

²¹ So Balaam arose in the morning, saddled his donkey, and went with the officials of Moab.

²² Then God became angry because he went. So while he was riding on his donkey accompanied by his two servants, the LORD’s messenger stood in the road as his adversary. ²³ The donkey saw the LORD’s messenger standing in the road with his sword drawn in his hand, so the donkey turned from the road and went into the field. Balaam struck the donkey in order to turn him back onto the road. ²⁴ Then the LORD’s messenger stood in the narrow path between vineyards with a stone wall on each side. ²⁵ When the donkey saw the LORD’s messenger, it leaned against the wall and squeezed Balaam’s foot against the wall, so he continued to beat it. ²⁶ The LORD’s messenger persisted and crossed over and stood in a narrow place, where it wasn’t possible to turn either right or left. ²⁷ The donkey saw the LORD’s messenger and lay down underneath Balaam. Balaam became angry and beat the donkey with the rod. ²⁸ Then the LORD opened the donkey’s mouth and it said to Balaam, “What have I done to you that you’ve beaten me these three times?”

²⁹ Balaam said to the donkey, “Because you’ve tormented me. If I had a sword in my hand, I’d kill you now.” ³⁰ The donkey said to Balaam, “Am I not your donkey, on whom you’ve often ridden to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?” Balaam said, “No.”

³¹ Then the LORD uncovered Balaam’s eyes, and Balaam saw the LORD’s messenger standing in the road with his sword drawn in his hand. Then he bowed low and worshipped. ³² The LORD’s messenger said to him, “Why have you beaten your donkey these three times? I’ve come out here as an adversary, because you took the road recklessly in front of me. ³³ The donkey saw me and turned away from me these three times. If it hadn’t turned away from me, I would just now have killed you and let it live.”

³⁴ Balaam said to the LORD’s messenger, “I’ve sinned, because I didn’t know that you were standing against me in the road. Now, if you think it’s wrong, I’ll go back.”

³⁵ The LORD’s messenger said to Balaam, “Go with the men. But don’t say anything. Say only that which I tell you.” So Balaam went with Balak’s officials.

³⁶ When Balak heard that Balaam was coming, he went out to meet him at Ir-moab, which is on the border of the Arnon at the farthest point of the border. ³⁷ Balak said to Balaam, "Didn't I send urgently and summon you? Why didn't you come to me? Am I really not able to honor you?" ³⁸ Balaam said to Balak, "I've now come to you. But I'm only able to speak whatever word God gives me to say. That is what I will speak."

In this week's story, we find a talking donkey! This should be our first clue that we are dealing with some folklore in our text. Think of this story as one which got told around the campfire at night, one which teaches the community a lesson. Think of this story as a tale handed down from generation to generation as a reminder of what can happen when we don't pay attention to what God is doing in our midst.

Our tale starts out by introducing us to Balaam who was a well known diviner at that time. He is mentioned in other parts of the Old Testament, sometimes in a favorable light, and in others, not so much.

For our story, what we need to know is that even though Balaam was not an Israelite, he had a reputation for speaking for God. People came from miles around to seek his wisdom and his guidance. For our story, we need to know is that Balaam has been contacted by the King of Moab to come and curse the Israelites as they make their way across the promise land. The Israelites have become strong and plentiful. Nothing can defeat them. No one could stop them. Of course, we

know that this is because God has blessed them. God has promised them this land as part the covenant.

This sets the stage for our text today. Balaam refuses to go after talking with God. He knows he cannot curse the Israelites as a spokesperson for God. The King asks Balaam a second time but Balaam refuses. All in all, this happens three times. Finally, God gives Balaam permission to go but to do only as God has him to do.

So Balaam starts out on his journey. And things go from bad to worse. Suddenly, we have a talking donkey, an angel with a sword, death threats and a diviner who cannot see what is happening right in front of his face!

We can almost imagine the people's faces as they sat around the campfire, hearing this story. The looks of surprise and delight upon their faces when the donkey begins to talk. The looks of horror when the one who is supposed to know what to do ignores all the signs and begins to go down the wrong path. We can almost imagine the people's looks upon their faces when they understand the message of this story which is: To not get so comfortable with the familiar that we miss what God is doing in our midst. To not close ourselves off, to not close our eyes to God at work in our midst, even if it takes us off the known path.

Again, it would be so easy for us as people of faith in the year 2020, to simply say this is just a weird story in our Bible but as I have lived with this text this past week, I have reflected on all the times along my faith journey, when like Balaam, I thought I had all the answers, when I thought I knew the plan, when I thought I knew what direction I was supposed to go, only to discover that I was going down the wrong path. I have reflected on all the times along my faith journey when I have missed the signs of God at work in my midst because my eyes were so focused on my plan and only on my plan. This week, as I read through this story over and over again, I kept reflecting on all the times when I have started out on a journey, ignoring all the signs which pointed out the fact that it wasn't the right journey for me at that time. This is a hard and humbling lesson to learn for those of us who pride ourselves on our independence and self-reliance.

Because, oftentimes, as people of faith, when we don't always have the answers, when we don't always know why things are happening, we take matters in our own hand. We rush the process. We settle for less than. And like Balaam in our story, through his harsh words and yes, angry actions towards the donkey, in our frustration over the situation, we often make matters worse. We get lost and go down the wrong path. We ignore the signs of God working in our midst because they take us away from the familiar, from the comfortable, from the well known path.

Now I know that this type of experience is not unique to me. Time and time again, I have heard people say, When I tried to do stuff on my own time, and in my own way, it never really worked out. But when I waited for God's time, for God's way, everything worked out the way it was supposed to.

Again, this is a hard and humbling lesson to learn for those of us who pride ourselves on our independence and self-reliance.

Yet, we know that this is not the end of the story. As people of faith, our story doesn't end because we are lost or because we missed the signs. Something will happen along our journey. Something will open our eyes. Something will remind us of the one thing we know to always be true, that no matter what, as people of faith, we know that God is part of the process, that God is part of our journey, that God is always there, guiding us and leading us. We have a promise given to us by our God who loves us more than we could ever imagine, that although, we may not know when or how, we know that everything will be okay.

Because just like Balaam, as people of faith, we know that when we open our eyes to see God at work in our midst, we can begin our journey again, this time, following God's guidance and wisdom. We can begin our journey again, never forgetting who we are and whose we are. We can begin our journey again, this time always being aware of God at work in this world, bringing healing and

wholeness to all, this time being open to where God may be leading us, this time never getting so comfortable with the familiar that we miss the Kingdom of God in our midst. May it be so. Amen.