

THE TALKING DONKEY

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, May 21, 2017
based on Numbers 22:10-35***

This morning our Children's Choir is presenting a musical entitled, "Donkey Tales," which lifts up Biblical stories that include donkeys as key characters. One of those donkeys, Balaam's donkey, is the most prominent of them all, and we heard the story of Balaam's donkey a few moments ago. It is, at first hearing, a perplexing story, with a donkey that talks, but it is a story which nevertheless can bring an important message to us. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

When you read the story of Balaam, you have a feeling that you have wandered into a Winnie the Pooh tale, because we have a talking donkey. Some people will say that this story proves that the Bible is just a collection of old fables and is to be rejected as unreliable. Others will argue that we must simply accept what the Bible says at face value—that if the Bible says that God made a donkey talk, then God made a donkey talk. Certainly God could make a donkey talk. But the serious student of the Bible will observe that there is only one other time in the entire Bible when an animal talks. The serpent in the Garden of Eden speaks; but the Garden of Eden story is regarded generally by Biblical scholars as a kind of Old Testament parable—a key symbolic story about our whole human condition, in which the serpent is an appropriate symbol for temptation that slithers into human life. The story of Balaam, on the other hand, is a historical account about a non-Israelite seer named Balaam who lived in the 13th century B.C. in the tiny land of Moab. It seems strange that the one time in human history when God would make an animal talk would be this occasion—when an obscure guy named Balaam was riding his donkey along a narrow path. Moreover, it is particularly strange how Balaam responds when the donkey speaks. Balaam replies to his donkey, as though it was nothing so unusual that the donkey had said something. After the donkey had three times tried to avoid an angel in the path (which Balaam did not see), and after Balaam had struck the donkey three times, our story reports that "the donkey said to Balaam, 'What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?' And 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 this way?' And Balaam said, 'No.' (Numbers 22:28b-30)

Balaam acts as though he has conversations with his donkey all the time. How strange is that? Just think for a moment about the pets that you have in your home. Do you have conversations with your animals?

Well, actually, you do! We all do this. We talk to animals; and all sorts of animals—dogs, cats, horses, and donkeys—are able to communicate desires and feelings to us. In this regard, what happens in the story of Balaam's donkey is really nothing so different from what we all experience in life. What throws us off in the story of Balaam is simply the

way that the story is told; because it literally says that “the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey, and it said, “What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?” (Numbers 22:28) We tend to want to read this in a very literalistic way and imagine that the donkey was speaking English, or Moabitic—since it was talking to Balaam. But Biblical writers had different literary conventions than we do; they felt it made perfect sense to mix in figurative language along with literal language when telling a story—and how exactly do you tell the story of how God once communicated to a guy by means of a donkey? The clearest and most engaging way is to have the donkey in the story speak. But the donkey did not have to pronounce human words in order to communicate its feelings to Balaam. Just this past week, a study came out that said that most people can understand dog language; we understand what a dog is saying through its growls and yips and so forth. Indeed you may have had a dog communicate exactly the same message to you that Balaam’s donkey communicated—“What did I do to you, that you did this to me!” In the story of Balaam, whatever sounds the donkey was making, the donkey was talking to Balaam, and Balaam got the message.

Once we get past the idea that this story is somehow strange or unscientific, then we can truly appreciate the story, for in fact this account of Balaam and the donkey conveys several key Biblical truths.

The story begins with Balak, the King of Moab, wanting to pronounce a curse on the people of Israel. (*King Balak of Moab sent this message: “A people has come out of Egypt and has spread over the face of the earth; now come, curse them for me” Numbers 22:10-11*) The people of Israel were journeying out of the wilderness, after their slavery in Egypt, and were on their way to the Promised Land. They had to pass through Moab. Balak was concerned about this new people and what they might mean for his future; so rather than welcoming them and seeking to be friends with them, he decided to curse them. He summoned Balaam, who had a reputation as a seer, and asked him to pronounce the curses. But Balaam, who had higher principles than Balak, answered that he could only do what God told him to do, and God was not calling for curses on the people of Israel. Balak kept pressing Balaam to come. Finally Balaam got a message from God that he could go to Balak, but he could only speak what God told him to speak. So he set off on his donkey. (*Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey, and went with the officials of Moab. Numbers 22:21*)

It seems, however, that Balaam’s heart was not right. It comes out later that Balaam actually shared Balak’s contempt for the people of Israel and was hoping for their demise; so God sent an angel to stop him short. Balaam, however, did not see the angel—an indication of how he was not fully receptive to God at this point. The donkey, however, did see the angel and made several maneuvers to avoid the angel, infuriating Balaam each time, until finally the donkey just laid down in the path. There begins the “conversation” between Balaam and the donkey, which results finally in Balaam seeing the angel and

recognizing that he must act in fidelity to God. The story will conclude with Balaam, under God's direction, pronouncing blessings on the people of Israel.

It is the talking donkey part of the story that is our focus this morning, and this section of the story contains several key themes that will recur throughout the Bible. The story tells us, first of all, that God speaks to us persistently in every way possible. God had already spoken to Balaam through visions and dreams. Then God sent an angel, and when Balaam did not perceive that, God worked through the donkey. If God can communicate through a donkey, we can expect that God can use any means to communicate to us. Notice also how God is persistent; as Balaam just doesn't get it, God keeps on—the angel moves around in the path, causing multiple reactions in the donkey that finally lead to Balaam opening his eyes and perceiving the presence of the angel. So God will persistently communicate God's truth to humanity throughout the Biblical story; and even as people often just don't get it, God keeps on, using every means of communication—speaking through the wonders of nature, through the words of the prophets, through signs and wonders in the Bible, and finally with ultimate clarity through Jesus Christ, and the working of the Holy Spirit. God never gives up in God's outreach to us.

But in order for all this to finally make a difference in our lives, we need to hear and receive God's Word to us. One of the most striking features of the story of Balaam is that God's angel is standing in the path, and Balaam is focused on his own inconvenience. The donkey won't keep going on the path, and Balaam is incredibly frustrated. It does not occur to him that maybe God is trying to get his attention! So in our own lives, we can get so caught up in our agenda and our frustrations that we just do not perceive how God is present and speaking to us. Here the Scripture calls us to open our eyes and our hearts to how God would be at work in our lives.

When we are receptive to God's Spirit, then, even though we may be quite ordinary and imperfect, God can work through us in marvelous ways. Balaam was notably imperfect, yet God worked through him to finally bring blessing on the people of Israel. And of course the most memorable figure through whom God works in the story is the donkey. You don't get much more lowly and ordinary than a donkey, yet Balaam's donkey becomes a key instrument of God's work. And so, as the Children's Choir musical will put it, "If God can use a donkey, then God can use me."

There will be other donkeys with starring roles in Biblical stories—there was probably a donkey that brought the expectant Mary to Bethlehem, there is a donkey serving as an emergency rescue vehicle in Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, and it was a donkey upon which Jesus rode on Palm Sunday into Jerusalem. So the Bible proclaims that it is through the lowly and the humble that God makes an impact on the world. That means there is hope for us! As we are receptive to God's Word, we can be a part of how God will work through our lives.