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Numbers 22:22-35

Bible Characters You’ve Never Heard Of: Baalam

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Numbers 22:22-35 The Message

Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey, and went off with the noblemen from Moab. As he was going, though, God’s anger flared. The angel of God stood in the road to block his way. Balaam was riding his donkey, accompanied by his two servants. When the donkey saw the angel blocking the road and brandishing a sword, she veered off the road into the ditch. Balaam beat the donkey and got her back on the road. But as they were going through a vineyard, with a fence on either side, the donkey again saw God’s angel blocking the way and veered into the fence, crushing Balaam’s foot against the fence. Balaam hit her again. God’s angel blocked the way yet again—a very narrow passage this time; there was no getting through on the right or left. Seeing the angel, Balaam’s donkey sat down under him. Balaam lost his temper; he beat the donkey with his stick. Then God gave speech to the donkey. She said to Balaam: “What have I ever done to you that you have beat me these three times?” Balaam said, “Because you’ve been playing games with me! If I had a sword I would have killed you by now.” The donkey said to Balaam, “Am I not your trusty donkey on whom you’ve ridden for years right up until now? Have I ever done anything like this to you before? Have I?” He said, “No.” Then God helped Balaam see what was going on: He saw God’s angel blocking the way, brandishing a sword. Balaam fell to the ground, his face in the dirt. God’s angel said to him: “Why have you beaten your poor donkey these three times? I have come here to block your way because you’re getting way ahead of yourself. The donkey saw me and turned away from me these three times. If she hadn’t, I would have killed you by this time, but not the donkey. I would have let her off.” Balaam said to God’s angel, “I have sinned. I had no idea you were standing in the road blocking my way. If you don’t like what I’m doing, I’ll head back.” But God’s angel said to Balaam, “Go ahead and go with them. But only say what I tell you to say—absolutely no other word.” And so Balaam continued to go with Balak’s nobles.

Do you remember Mr. Ed? “A horse is a horse of course, of course; and no one can talk to a horse of course that is of course, unless the horse is the famous Mr. Ed.” And then the horse sings, “I am Mr. Ed.” After reading about the Bible character that you never heard of this morning, you will know that Mr. Ed had its beginnings in the Bible.

The hardest part of this story for me is that I keep seeing Balaam with the donkey in Shrek. I haven’t seen that many talking donkeys! In our story Israel has grown into a great nation and we are seeing the second generation after Moses told the Pharaoh to “Let my people go.” The Israelites have not yet entered the Promised Land, they are still wandering and they are living in Moab. The Israelites have defeated two kings nearby, the king of the Amorites and the king of the Bashan. The king of Moab is Balak and he thinks if he doesn’t do something and soon, he will be defeated next. He is afraid of all of these Israelites because there are so many of them.

Do you remember when the Pharaoh in Egypt thought the same thing? He said the Israelite people were more numerous and more powerful than the Egyptians. The Pharaoh tried a couple of things but in the end decreed that “every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live” (Exodus 1). King Balak didn’t go that far, but he did seek out a diviner, sort of like a fortune teller, to curse the Israelites so they would not be able to reproduce. The name of that diviner was Balaam.

King Balak sends emissaries to hire Balaam, but God speaks to Balaam telling him to not curse the Israelites because they are blessed. King Balak sends more people with more money to entice Balaam to go curse the Israelites. That night Balaam dreams that God tells him to go meet with King Balak but to only do what God says. So, the next day Balaam goes and that is the story that we heard this morning.

Even though Balaam was following God’s direction, God gets angry that Balaam went. It is like when I tell my kids that they can’t go outside because it is almost dinnertime. Then they drive me crazy and I tell them to go play with their friends, and then as they are walking out the front door, I block their way. Don’t do this, okay you can do it, wait, I changed my mind! God gets mad at Balaam for doing what God told him to do and sends an angel of God to stop Balaam from going. The donkey is the only one that can see the angel and the donkey tries to avoid the angel. Balaam starts beating the donkey for refusing to move, and the donkey starts talking and complains about the way Balaam is treating him. Astonishingly, Balaam doesn’t say “How weird, my donkey can talk!”

Balaam starts talking to the donkey about how the donkey is playing games with him and then he threatens the donkey if he doesn’t do what he wants him to do. I love how Balaam doesn’t even acknowledge the craziness of what is happening, he just starts with the threats. The donkey reminds Balaam that he is his trusty donkey and he has never behaved like this before. Balaam acknowledges that this is indeed unusual behavior for the donkey not to do what he is told. Then, God opens Balaam’s eyes and he can see God’s angel standing in the road.

The angel tells Balaam he has been getting way ahead of himself. Even though Balaam was only doing what God told him to do, he tells the angel he will turn back if the angel doesn’t like what he is doing. The angel says he can go but to only say what God says. If I were Balaam, I would be so frustrated right now. God told Balaam to do something, he did it, he got in trouble for doing it, and then God told him to do it again. Be consistent, God!

It is difficult to hear and know what God is saying. I had a friend that was going through a rough time, and they were upset that God wasn’t speaking to them in an audible way. I told them that if they heard the audible voice of God, people might want to put them in a mental institution. For me, it usually takes getting a lot of people’s opinions, lots of prayer, lots of thinking, making pro/con lists, and if everything seems to be pointing a particular way I will think that this is the way that God wants me to go. Balaam could have seen the persistence of the Moabite emissaries as a sign that he should go with them? Or maybe he thought that a door was opening, and he was going to go through it and then figure out what to do.

It is funny that Balaam keeps saying he will only listen to what God has to say and he will only do what God tells him to do, yet he is so focused on putting one foot in front of the other that he completely misses it when God is trying to give him a message loud and clear from his donkey. By avoiding the angel of God, the donkey saves Balaam’s life, but Balaam has to have that pointed out to him by the talking donkey. I just want to put this out there, the next time your dog or cat or whatever animal you have is not doing what you want them to do, they might be trying to save you from being killed by an angel of God.

Today we had the privilege of baptizing a beautiful child of God. There are so many times that we go through the motions as a parent. We do what we think is the right thing, and then something happens to make us stop and listen. It might be a talking donkey, but probably not. As my kids have gotten older and they are able to reason and we are able to have intelligent(ish) conversations, they make me re-evaluate things. Maybe what I think is the best thing, isn’t the best thing. My daughter just finished 8th grade and she had finals. There was one class that she said she could skip the final. Skip the final, I asked? Are you sure? Did the teacher tell you that? Put it in writing? I am going to need some proof. I eventually did the old standby, we will have to talk to your father about this. I know that you don’t want to make one parent out as the bad guy, but I needed help! My husband Lee told her that if she went to class it would show her good character. Of course, when Madeleine told me what her dad had said, she did put air quotes around “character.” She went to the final.

As Balaam’s story continues, King Balak shows Balaam all of the Israelites and asks Balaam to curse them. Four times the words that God puts in Balaam’s mouth are words of blessing. In the rest of the Bible, Balaam is remembered in a negative way. In Numbers 31, Balaam is killed. The Bible says he is killed with the Midianite kings because they encouraged the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols, worshipping other gods, and getting involved intimately with the women of Moab. Deuteronomy 23 says that no Moabite shall be admitted to the congregation of God because they hired Balaam to curse the Israelites. Deuteronomy does explain that God turned the curse into a blessing because God loves them. Revelation 2:14 blames Balaam for teaching King Balak how to “put a stumbling block before the people of Israel so they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality.” 2 Peter 2 says that Balaam was into divining or fortune telling only for the money. Well, of course!

Do you remember the great Protestant Reformer with the 99 theses on the wall, Martin Luther? He was declared a heretic and kicked out of the Catholic Church. In his writing, he talked a lot about this story of Balaam and his donkey to stress that God can speak through the most humble and insignificant of people. God even speaks through those that the world says are profane, illegal, common, sinful, or vulgar. Martin Luther said he would listen for the voice of God in whatever form that voice appeared. God speaks to us and often God speaks through someone, or something in Balaam’s case, that is unexpected. Balaam thought he knew where to look for God, but God surprised him by showing up in the mouth of a donkey. The Israelites thought they knew where to look for God, but God surprised them by showing up in Balaam, someone who they thought would be an enemy.

Where may God be trying to speak to us today? A few weeks ago I had lunch with a pastor friend who had just presided at the funeral of one of her youth. The first thing she said to me was, “I need to hold a baby.” Maybe God is speaking to you through this beautiful child that was baptized. Psalm 25:4-5 says, “Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.” May we be ready to listen because God is speaking to us today. Thanks be to God, Amen.