

## Saved by An Ass

### Numbers 22:21-38

<sup>21</sup> Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey and went with the Moabite officials. <sup>22</sup> But God was very angry when he went, and the angel of the LORD stood in the road to oppose him. Balaam was riding on his donkey, and his two servants were with him. <sup>23</sup> When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road with a drawn sword in his hand, it turned off the road into a field. Balaam beat it to get it back on the road.

<sup>24</sup> Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path through the vineyards, with walls on both sides. <sup>25</sup> When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, it pressed close to the wall, crushing Balaam's foot against it. So he beat the donkey again.

<sup>26</sup> Then the angel of the LORD moved on ahead and stood in a narrow place where there was no room to turn, either to the right or to the left. <sup>27</sup> When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, it lay down under Balaam, and he was angry and beat it with his staff. <sup>28</sup> Then the LORD opened the donkey's mouth, and it said to Balaam, "What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?"

<sup>29</sup> Balaam answered the donkey, "You have made a fool of me! If only I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now."

<sup>30</sup> The donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?"

"No," he said.

<sup>31</sup> Then the LORD opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road with his sword drawn. So he bowed low and fell facedown.

<sup>32</sup> The angel of the LORD asked him, "Why have you beaten your donkey these three times? I have come here to oppose you because your path is a reckless one before me. <sup>33</sup> The donkey saw me and turned away from me these three times. If it had not turned away, I would certainly have killed you by now, but I would have spared it."

<sup>34</sup> Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, "I have sinned. I did not realize you were standing in the road to oppose me. Now if you are displeased, I will go back."

<sup>35</sup> The angel of the LORD said to Balaam, "Go with the men, but speak only what I tell you." So Balaam went with Balak's officials.

<sup>36</sup> When Balak heard that Balaam was coming, he went out to meet him at the Moabite town on the Arnon border, at the edge of his territory. <sup>37</sup> Balak said to Balaam, "Did I not send you an urgent summons? Why didn't you come to me? Am I really not able to reward you?"

<sup>38</sup> "Well, I have come to you now," Balaam replied. "But I can't say whatever I please. I must speak only what God puts in my mouth."

## The Story So Far...

Numbers is the Septuagint name for the book because it takes a census of the People.

The Hebrew name is more apt: *Midbar*, meaning "In the Desert."

The Israelites, having been saved from slavery in Egypt journey to Sinai.

There they are given the commandments which they break from day one.

As they continue on their way, they whine and complain and rebel against Moses and God.

Again and again they are disciplined and saved.

It took them 2 months to reach Sinai from the Egyptian city of Goshen.

They spend about 11 months at Sinai.

They then travel for 11 months, stopping at least 20 times, whining and complaining before reaching Kadesh Barnea.

In other words, they reached the promised land in 2 years.

They reach Kadesh Barnea where they scout out the land God has promised.

They refuse to go into the land because it means conflict with the people there.

So God gives them the worst judgement possible - he gives them what they want.

He tells them that this generation will all die in the desert except for the two who are faithful.

Caleb & Joshua.

So they remain in the desert for 38 years!

Finally, they are ready to enter the land with a new generation of people born in the desert.

They approach Canaan through Edom, who doesn't allow them passage although they are related.

Edom are the children of Esau, Jacob (Israel's) brother.

They skirt around and wage a number of battles  
against the kings of the region that come out to challenge them.  
They win these battles and the other Canaanites are concerned.  
This is where the story of Balaam comes into play.

## **Balaam**

Balaam is a prophet - not a prophet of Yahweh.  
He is supposed to know the will of the gods.  
So he is a lot like a shaman, seer or oracle, an ancient day televangelist.  
And he did it for money.  
At best, he is a charlatan.  
At worst, in league with the devil.  
Balak, a king of the Moabites asks him to come and curse the Israelites.  
No problem, write the contract, show me the money and it's a done deal.  
The God of the Israelites is like anyone else's god, or so he thought.  
People are fools and will believe anything - "A sucker is born every minute."

## **The Mercy of a Talking Donkey**

Okay, donkeys don't talk.  
Well, not normally.  
So why does this animal talk in this story?  
In fact, this is the only truly talking animal in Scripture.  
We aren't talking Pixar or Disney here.

Nor are we talking about the serpent in Eden who is actually Satan.  
Only one animal talks in the Bible and this is it.

We are told that it is God who enables the donkey to talk.  
Well, despite the fact that there is an Angel sent to strike Balaam down,  
the donkey, able to see the angel, saves his master, unprompted.  
God does not tell the donkey to save Balaam.  
The donkey does it himself.  
Even when he is beaten, the donkey will not put Balaam in harms way.  
This beast has more mercy and conscience than Balaam himself.  
And so God opens the mouth of the donkey to speak.  
God allows the good donkey to save Balaam although it is undeserved.  
The donkey intercedes for Balaam.  
It is a mercy that God grants to the Donkey and also to Balaam.  
The donkey teaches the lesson of loving your enemy.

Now, I'm not an animals rights activist and a decided carnivore.  
The animal kingdom is not all warm and fuzzy but rather brutal.  
Yet there are some animals that reflect a humanity that shames humans.  
Certain creatures come to mind like some pets.  
They can be selfless, faithful, forgiving and affectionate beyond human reason.  
They can be therapeutic, providing not only companionship but comfort.  
I wonder if Balaam's donkey was such a creature.

## **Seeing the Unseen**

One remarkable part of this story was that Donkey saw the angel  
while Balaam was blind to it.  
No reason is given for this ability to see in the donkey and the blindness of Balaam.  
There is, however, a distinct possibility.  
The clue lies once again the the contrasted characters.  
Balaam, who is an unscrupulous trickster who plays any tune he paid to play.

The donkey, well, it's a donkey!

Yet loyal, protective, attentive.

The character of the creature, man or beast, dictates the ability to see.

One of my favourite stories is about a man who comes across a massive construction project.

Curious as to what they workers are building, he asks one person what they are doing.

"I'm pouring concrete."

Finding the answer unsatisfactory, he asked yet another worker.

"Buddy, I'm paying the bills and feeding my family!" was the answer.

Although this answer did look beyond the actual task in front of the person, it was unhelpful.

Almost about to give up, he saw a fellow who taking a break

from one of the most mundane tasks on the site.

Asking the same question, he received this reply:

"We are building a basilica for the glory of God!"

Each worker were on the same site.

Yet only one of them looked up to truly recognize what he was called to.

In this story, the donkey has the upper hand.

How well do you see?

How well do you hear the voice of God?

How compassionate are you?

### **Exercise: Guided Prayer & Listening**

#### 1. Seek First His Kingdom

Heart condition - Your real internal motives - fear, greed, love, ambition, performance

#### 2. Know Him from Scripture

The primary way we know the voice of God is by recognizing his real character from Scripture.

#### 3. Take Time to be Attentive

We Call this Prayer.

It engages your imagination.

It requires time.

It is learned.

#### 4. Trust the Holy Spirit

Let the Spirit lead you.

Dreams, visions, feelings, words, verses, images.

These are tested in community and by those with gifts of discernment.

You need to exercise your spiritual gifts and answer the invitations Jesus gives.

It is the difference between seeing and not seeing.

Prayer allows God to transform us from the inside out.

Ultimately, why did a Donkey Speak?

To save the undeserving.

We don't need a Donkey.

We are surrounded by a Cloud of witnesses of God's people, the Word, and the Spirit.

But if you need a donkey to nudge you, God may be merciful.