

SERMON TITLE: "God's Message through Animals: The Donkey"
SERMON TEXT: Numbers 22:22-40
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: July 31, 2022, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

I want to begin this morning by expressing my gratitude to Austin Barron and the United Methodist Men who planned and led worship last Sunday. When I got back from my vacation, I watched the Facebook worship video, and I could see that Austin and the guys did a fine job. It's a great comfort to know that the church is well-led in my absence.

When I planned this July sermon series on God's message through animals, I knew that our Vacation Bible School is also going to feature some animals. As you can see from the cut outs that are placed up here in the front of the sanctuary, in the week ahead, we're going to learn God's message through Ramsey the ram, Ava the bird, Sierra the mountain lion, Finn the fish, and Lawrence the elk. Get that last one? Lawrence Elk?! Even our mission project has something to do with animals, as we will be raising money to purchase alpacas for people in Ecuador. If we open our eyes and ears to the world around us, God can speak all kinds of important lessons to us through animals.

Today's animal story is found in the Old Testament book of Numbers, chapter 22. God's message comes to us here through the donkey owned by Balaam. Like the talkative donkey in the *Shrek* movies, this loyal beast had a lot to say. So I invite you to listen closely as we figure out what God's message is through the donkey.

1—CONTEXT

Let's start by reviewing the context of what was happening. As you know, God used Moses to rescue the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. And then God's chosen people wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. As you can guess, during those 40 years of wilderness wandering between the Exodus and the Promised Land, there was a lot of questioning about God's direction. Even when they got the big

vision right, the day to day struggles were about discernment. On their way to the Promised Land they went through a lot of trial and error, many attempts and defeats, and a lot of sinning and blaming. Even in their more righteous successes, they had to figure out should they go now or later? Should they go here or there? Should they follow this leader or that one? Whom could they trust? What could they believe? How would they know they were following God's guidance? How could they know God's will?

That was the big picture of what was happening. When we get to the first verses of Numbers 22, the Israelites were camped on the plains of Moab on the east side of the Jordan River, across from Jericho. In their uncertainty and fear about entering the Promised Land, their forward momentum had stalled, and who knows how long they'd been stuck there. But, for sure, the wandering Hebrews had become a burden on that region of Moab. The Moabites weren't happy to have them as what seemed like perpetual guests.

This situation reminds me of what I once heard a clergy colleague say. Emilee told us that whenever she had overnight company coming to her house, she would put only one roll of toilet paper in the guest bathroom. Emilee's rule was that, whenever that one roll of toilet paper ran out, that was a sign that the guests were supposed to leave.

Maybe the Moabites felt like that. The Hebrews had become numerous and strong, and the Moabites were scared that the Israelites would use up all their resources and leave nothing for the Moabites. God's chosen people had worn out their welcome, and the Moabites were more than ready for them to get moving across the Jordan River and into their "Promised Land."

So, in Numbers 22, there was an attempt by Balak, king of Moab, to motivate the Israelites to vacate. King Balak sent a delegation of Moabites to a man named Balaam, who was known for his ability to offer curses. Balaam lived in a distant place, so the Moabite officials took with them a divination fee, so they could properly persuade Balaam to do this dirty deed. When the Moabite delegation arrived, they conveyed the king's request that Balaam come to Moab with them and curse the Israelites. They hoped Balaam's curse would weaken the Hebrews, so the Moabites could drive them out of their land.

But Balaam was divining a different message from God. God was telling Balaam that he shouldn't rush off with the Moabites to curse the Hebrews. So Balaam's reply to the Moabites was that, "although Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command of God." Balaam needed time to discern God's will in this situation. Numbers 22:20 tells us that God came to Balaam that night and told him it was OK to go with the Moabites, so long as he was very careful not to do or say anything more than God authorized. "So," verse 21 tells us, "Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey, and went with the officials of Moab."

2—BALAAM'S DISCERNMENT

With all that as background, now we've finally arrived at our story about the donkey. And, since Balaam was on his way to Moab, we readers are expecting that he will do as he's been asked. We expect that he will ride his donkey up close to the Israelite encampment and call down God's curse upon that giant, intruding horde of unwanted immigrants.

But the Bible, like most good stories, is full of twists and turns. And this story of the talking donkey is packed with surprises. First Balaam refuses to go to Moab. Then he thinks God is telling him to go. Then he experiences God's anger that he is going. Is God giving him mixed signals, or is it just that Balaam is confused? Discerning the will of God is really difficult sometimes!

Then an angel of the Lord intervenes to stop Balaam from advancing. Balaam can't see the angel, but his donkey can. Because the angel is standing on the road with a sword, the donkey has to turn off the road and into a field. Because Balaam can't see the angel, he strikes his donkey to get it back on the road. Then the angel forces the donkey up against a stone wall, so that Balaam's foot gets pinched and scraped. Again Balaam strikes his donkey to get it going properly. But then the angel totally blocks the narrow path, so the donkey can do nothing but lie down. When Balaam angrily strikes his donkey this third time, that's when the donkey finally speaks words of protest.

The dialog between Balaam and his donkey is contained in verses 28-30. There we hear the donkey asking why Balaam didn't trust him. "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?"

The donkey's point, of course, is that something unique is going on. Balaam should recognize that God is trying to get his attention. To help Balaam *and us* get that message through the donkey, the angel of the Lord steps into the conversation in verses 31-35. The angel explains that the donkey was perceiving correctly that Balaam is entering into dangerous territory. If his donkey had not turned away those three times, Balaam would have already died.

We might expect here that the angel of the Lord would tell Balaam to turn back. But, no, instead, it seems that the point of all these interruptions is simply and clearly to get Balaam's attention tuned in to God's will. Cursing people is very serious business with deadly consequences, so it's critical that Balaam get this right. He must not simply do what the Moabites are paying him to do. He must wrestle carefully with this matter of great importance. He must seek God's voice--in the night, through his donkey, and through the angel of the Lord. Balaam must proceed with careful discernment.

David stopped reading at verse 40, but this story of discerning God's will goes on into chapters 23 and 24. Despite the desire of the Moabites for a curse, the words of God that finally came through Balaam turned out, instead, to be words of blessing. In Numbers 23:8, Balaam says, "How can I curse [those] whom God has not cursed?" In 23:20, Balaam says, "See, I received a command to bless; God has blessed, and I cannot revoke it." In 24:9, Balaam tells the Israelites, "Blessed is everyone who blesses you, and cursed is everyone who curses you."

Of course, those blessings on the Israelites were the opposite of what the Moabite king and his officials had wanted. It wasn't easy to discern God's will in this situation. But with the help of an angel and the donkey, Balaam figured out what he should do, and he proclaimed the true message from God.

CONCLUSION

This message of God through the donkey makes me wonder: What is God calling us to discern, and whom is God calling us to bless?

Early in today's worship service we sang the hymn *All Things Bright and Beautiful*. That song talks about bright, beautiful, wise, and wonderful creatures. It talks about colorful flowers and birds and lovely mountains, rivers, and sunsets—all things that make us happy and cause us to smile.

Some time back, I came across a cartoon spoof of this song. The comic strip shows a church choir leader singing this lovely hymn, only to be interrupted by some talking animals who insist that the song leader left out some verses. The rat, skunk, snake, dragonfly, and vulture then proceed to sing:

Things that blight and putrefy
all parasites and lice—
all things weird and horrible,
not just the stuff that's nice.

Every mildew spore that blossoms,
flesh-eating virus, too!
Maggots on the roadkill
were made by you-know-who!

All things gross and poisonous,
all buzzards in the sky;
God made tics with lyme disease,
although we can't say why!

When the cartoon animals quit singing, the chorister said, "It'll never make it into the hymnal." And the animals replied, "Maybe not your hymnal."*

Well, all I can say is that we humans might not be seeing the entire picture. The animals might have some insights from God that could be helpful to us in discerning God's will for our lives and the world around us. Maybe we should try more carefully to hear the different and diverse perspectives. If we can, then God just might use us to be a blessing instead of a curse. This, I think, is God's message through the donkey.

* <https://manmartin.blogspot.com/2018/01/all-things-bright-and-beautiful.html?fbclid=IwAR2QqPiwU9ycGvHzGOIKLHVbWi2YXGQfxFdGqDujSVTnhUomQ-MKQod91KQ>