

A Talking Donkey
Numbers 22:22-35
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First Central Congregational UCC
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Today's scripture lesson comes from the Book of Numbers, one of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures that tradition, but not modern scholarship, said were written by Moses.

We don't get to Numbers very often. In fact, in seven years of being your pastor, I've never once before today preached a sermon from Numbers.

One goal of our summer worship series "Heroes & Songs" is to explore some of the Old Testament stories that we don't get to very often and to revisit as adults some of the stories that we may have learned in Sunday school as kids.

The Book of Numbers tells some of the story of the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt to the Promised Land in Canaan. In particular, Numbers recounts their wilderness wanderings. The Hebrew name for this book translates "In the Wilderness," which is a better title. Numbers refers to the censuses that occur in the book. This is not, otherwise, a book about mathematics.

Because of their lack of faith in the promised deliverance of God, the Israelites wander in the wilderness for a generation. We shouldn't take that literally. Not long ago an atheist friend pointed out that you can walk from Egypt to Israel in all of nine days, so it's absurd that the Israelites took forty years. Exactly. This story is full of absurdities, ironies, and comic moments, especially what we will read today.

The Israelites have now left the wilderness and are on the eastern side of the Jordan River in territory that today is occupied by the nation of Jordan. In the time the story is set the nation of Moab occupied that land. The Moabites were distant cousins of the Israelites, as were most of the people groups and nations of the Ancient Near East.

The King of Moab, Balak, feels threatened by this massive group of people and instead of offering them safe passage through his territory, he seeks to curse them. So he sends for the Mesopotamian prophet Balaam to come curse the Israelites.

Today's reading, then, is what transpires as Balaam leaves home to travel to Moab. Hear, now, this ancient story of Balaam's ass. I will be reading David Rosenberg's translation which uses the ancient Hebrew name for the Lord—Yahweh:

After these things passed, now look: Yahweh had become inflamed that Balaam would go with contemptuous men. Yahweh's angel put himself in Balaam's path, like an adversary. Balaam was riding on his ass, two servant-boys in attendance.

As the ass saw Yahweh's angel standing in her path, sword unsheathed in his hand, she stepped off the road into a field. Yet Balaam whipped the ass, to get her back on the road.

Then Yahweh's angel put himself in a narrow path ahead, through vineyards fenced in on either side. As the ass saw Yahweh's angel she swerved into the wall, pinching Balaam's foot against it; he whipped her again.

Once more Yahweh's angel put himself ahead, in a narrow spot with no room for turning either right or left.

The ass saw Yahweh's angel again and sat down under Balaam; [who] was furious, whipping the ass with his stick.

Now Yahweh opened the ass's mouth. "What did I do to you," she said, "to make you lash out at me on three occasions?" "Because *you* have been riding *me*," Balaam said to the ass. "If I had a sword in my hand, it would whip you dead this time."

"No! Aren't I your own ass? I'm the ass you've been riding on as long as you've owned me," said the ass to Balaam. "Have I been trying—to this day—to make an ass of you?" And he: "No."

Now Yahweh opens Balaam's eyes; he sees Yahweh's angel standing in the road, the sword unsheathed in his hand—and falls prostrate, flat on his face.

"Why did you strike your ass these three times?" says Yahweh's angel. "Look: at the sight of your wayward path, I came as your adversary.

"The ass sees me and shies away three times—if she had not swerved, I would have killed you by now and spared her."

"I was contemptuous," Balaam said to Yahweh's angel. "I couldn't imagine that you would cross my path. Seeing I have crossed you, I will turn back at once."

But Yahweh's angel said to Balaam: "Continue on your way. But not a word to those men—except what I will tell you to say."

For the Word of God in scripture,
For the Word of God among us,
For the Word of God within us,
Thanks be to God.

There are some strange stories in our Holy Bible, but this one might take the cake as the strangest. What do you think?

Thomas B. Dozeman, a professor at United Theological Seminary, writes, this “is folklore—a burlesque, even slapstick story about a clairvoyant animal who speaks a word of common sense to a blind seer.”

Harold Bloom, the great literary critic, agrees but goes further and claims that this story is among the most brilliant in literature, to be compared with Shakespeare and Homer.

Which means we have a problem. Because really good stories cannot be reduced to an easy moral. They escape our attempts to pin them down.

So, when I wrote out my synopses for this sermon series I wrote for this week, “If God can even use an ass, there’s hope for us.”

Yes, that’s a great message, and one moral you can take from this story. But my own study and preparation reminded me that if I tried to reduce this story to a simple slogan, I’d only be making an ass out of myself. This story is better than that. Stranger than that. Funnier than that.

Our problem, then, is what to make of the story of the talking donkey.

In 1967 at Tell Deir ‘Alla, an archaeological site in present day Jordan, plaster fragments were discovered bearing inscriptions. When the pieces were assembled as best they could in a form of scientific jigsaw puzzle, what emerged was a story about Balaam, a different story from the one contained here in Numbers. In this inscription, Balaam foresees a coming disaster and laments.

Scholars have concluded that Balaam must have been a legendary character in the Ancient Near East and that the author of this story in Numbers draws upon the larger cultural context of the people.

Balaam has always been something of a scandal, for in Numbers he appears to be a follower of Yahweh, the God of Israel, despite the fact that he is a foreigner and he is not participating in the cultic practices of the covenant at Sinai.

Of course the Bible is full of stories of foreigners who embrace God. These stories always work against any exclusivist tendency in our religion. God is not only our God, but Sovereign over all people. God doesn’t only speak to us; God speaks to all people, whomever God wants to speak to.

If you were to read in Hebrew chapters 22-24 of Numbers, which tells the larger story of Balaam, not just the talking donkey part, you would encounter a number of different names of God—Yahweh, Elohim, El, Elyon, Shaddai. Many of these names for God were generic names for the High God in the religions of the different tribes and nations of the Ancient Near East. Some of the names have very specific meanings and origins outside of the Hebrew people.

Thomas B. Dozeman concludes, “The range of divine names employed in Numbers 22-24 indicates that the biblical writers are exploring the different ways in which the God of Israel is known to other people.”

War among sister nations is a common theme in Numbers. The Bible tells us that we can read more detail about this time period in a book that did not survive, but which it calls the “Book of the Wars of the Lord.”

Yet in the midst of these holy wars, we get a story borrowing a figure from another culture, in which God speaks to a foreigner, and in which the names of God draw from diverse traditions in a possible attempt to signify what is shared in common.

So, we might conclude that this is a story about interfaith relations or that speaks to the continued religious conflicts in this exact same part of the globe.

But, again, I want to resist any straightforward and final moral for this story.

Harold Bloom, the literary critic, writes that “If the high humor of this passage is to be fully appreciated, we need to remember its appalling context.” What’s the context? Bloom tells us:

We are stumbling out of the Wilderness toward Canaan, and we have been immersed in a nightmare of sensory deprivation, dangerous proximity to an uneasy and irascible Yahweh, and all the unruly rebellions, backslidings, murmurings, and laments of a wretched host that can scarcely be blamed for its outrage at learning that the Blessing pragmatically has bestowed the better part of their lives as a wandering in the wastelands.

Bloom goes on to point at that Moses who is leading the people seems to be past-his-prime at this point, “half-mad” and reduced to extreme and even violent measures to keep the people obedient.

And what we get in this moment of turmoil is a speaking donkey. Bloom writes, “The she-ass is more human and more likable not only than her master, Balaam, but clearly than anyone else, divine or mortal, in Numbers!”

Bloom says the donkey “speaks a universal protest against violence and blindness” and in the story comes across as more sensible and nicer even than God does.

The brilliance of this ancient story is that the ass is the hero.

We must discover truth and meaning in our stories, but doing so isn’t easy. The better the story, the more rich and complex and difficult it is to make meaning.

Two weeks ago I was in Baltimore for the General Synod of the United Church of Christ, our biennial meeting at which we discern what the Spirit is calling us to say and do. And that discernment occurs through a democratic process whereby a few thousand people use whatever individual means—prayer, academic research, how they were feeling that morning—to debate and vote about the vital issues facing our church and our culture.

It is a messy, complicated process.

And that’s what I love about it.

Easy reductions to simple morals. Black and white understandings of truth. Those make me nervous.

Because the great stories of God and God’s people aren’t simple. The search for truth is often difficult and complex. The Holy Spirit seems to enjoy defying our expectations and our attempts to pin her down.

Like giving voice to a wise, kind, and sensible donkey.

