

Listen to Your Donkey **Numbers 22:15-34**

Loving God, still our minds and quiet our worries; open our ears and hearts so that we might truly hear your Word. Amen.

I. Intro

A. New story for most people

- For the next three weeks, we are going to hear stories from Scripture that may not be as familiar, or, frankly, which you may never have heard
 - Today's is from the book of Numbers, not a book we read a lot
- There are many ways that God could have communicated with us, including dictating the Bible the way Muslims believe the Qu'ran was dictated
 - Instead, God worked through humans and their stories, which were captured and compiled over a thousand years into the Bible
 - Stories are at the center of Jesus' teaching ministry in the parables
 - That's how the Bible works – teaching us through story
 - And you'll like this story because it has a talking donkey

B. And who doesn't like a talking donkey??

- Success of "Shrek" testifies to the popularity of talking donkeys

II. Balaam and his donkey

A. Who is Balaam?

- Balaam is at the center of our story
- Not an Israelite but someone who knows and fears God
- Has a special gift of blessing and cursing
 - Not a spiritual gift we talk about these days
 - Best way to think of him is as a consultant who offers advice
- The king of Moab has heard of Balaam and his gift
 - Wants him to come and curse the Israelites
 - Has heard of their military success and is worried
 - God tells Balaam not to go and Balaam obeys
 - So far, so good

- The king persists, sending envoys to ask what it will take to get Balaam to come
- **Read Numbers 22:15-21:** 15 Once again Balak sent officials, more numerous and more distinguished than these. 16They came to Balaam and said to him, ‘Thus says Balak son of Zippor: “Do not let anything hinder you from coming to me; 17for I will surely do you great honor, and whatever you say to me I will do; come, curse this people for me.” ’ 18But Balaam replied to the servants of Balak, ‘Although Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command of the LORD my God, to do less or more. 19You remain here, as the others did, so that I may learn what more the LORD may say to me.’ 20That night God came to Balaam and said to him, ‘If the men have come to summon you, get up and go with them; but do only what I tell you to do.’ 21So Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey, and went with the officials of Moab.
- Again, Balaam refuses
- But that night God speaks to him and, well, things begin to get confusing
 - Initially, it seems that God gives Balaam new instructions, telling him to go
 - And Balaam saddles his donkey and goes with the envoys
 - Then the confusion begins
- **Read Numbers 22:22:** 22 God’s anger was kindled because he was going, and the angel of the LORD took his stand in the road as his adversary. Now he was riding on the donkey, and his two servants were with him.
- So, what happened?
 - Did God change his mind, twice, and get mad at Balaam for not knowing God changed his mind?
 - That doesn’t sound like God, does it?
 - God isn’t fickle like that
 - God tells Balaam to do only what God tells him
 - Is there an instruction Balaam missed?
 - But verse 22 tells us that God’s anger was kindled because Balaam was going
 - See what I mean by confusing?
 - Maybe Balaam misunderstood God’s direction

- I know that God’s voice is not always as clear and God’s directions not as transparent as I want
- When I was applying to spend a year in England, I wrestled with that
 - Was this something God wanted me to do?
 - Or was this something that I wanted to do and I was asking for God’s blessing?
 - I never did get a clear answer, but I was accepted and spent a very fruitful year there
- Another possibility is that we deliberately ignore God’s leading
 - Did Balaam decide God wouldn’t mind if he went with the envoys, collected his fee, but didn’t actually curse the children of Israel?
 - Sounds plausible, doesn’t it?
 - Because it sounds human
 - Having your cake and eating it too
- Balaam saddles his donkey and sets off for Moab

B. The donkey’s wisdom

- **Read Numbers 22:23-30:** ²³The donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road, with a drawn sword in his hand; so the donkey turned off the road, and went into the field; and Balaam struck the donkey, to turn it back on to the road. ²⁴Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side. ²⁵When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, it scraped against the wall, and scraped Balaam’s foot against the wall; so he struck it again. ²⁶Then the angel of the LORD went ahead, and stood in a narrow place, where there was no way to turn either to the right or to the left. ²⁷When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, it lay down under Balaam; and Balaam’s anger was kindled, and he struck the donkey with his staff. ²⁸Then the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and it said to Balaam, ‘What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?’ ²⁹Balaam 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!’ ³⁰But 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 in this way?’ And he said, ‘No.’
- God is not happy with Balaam
 - Text says “God’s anger was kindled”

- But God doesn't smite Balaam
 - Instead God sends an angel to stand in Balaam's path
- The text doesn't say that Balaam can't see the angel, though he clearly doesn't
 - I mean, wouldn't you react if there was an angel with a drawn sword in your path?
 - However, the donkey can see the angel and behaves in a perfectly rational way – he avoids the angel and the sword
 - The first time he turns aside into a field
 - The second time he squeezes by him, scraping Balaam's foot against a wall in the process
 - The third time he can't turn aside or squeeze by, so he lays down in the dirt
 - Each time he protects his master and each time he is rewarded for his wisdom and care with a beating
- Then God does something extraordinary
 - He lets the donkey speak
 - “Why are you beating me?” he asks, “What have I done to deserve this?”
 - Pay attention to Balaam's response – “You've made a fool of me.”
 - Not at all surprised that his donkey is talking
 - All he is worried about is that his donkey's uncooperative behavior has made him foolish in the eyes of those with him
 - The donkey replies, “Is this how I usually react? Aren't I a good donkey?”
 - And Balaam acknowledges that this is unusual behavior and that his donkey is usually a good and faithful animal
- Now God intervenes
- **Read Numbers 22:31-35:** 31 Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road, with his drawn sword in his hand; and he bowed down, falling on his face. 32 The angel of the LORD said to him, ‘Why have you struck your donkey these three times? I have come out as an adversary, because your way is perverse before me. 33 The donkey saw me, and turned away from me these three times. If it had not turned away from me, surely I would by now have

killed you and let it live.’³⁴ Then Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, ‘I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing in the road to oppose me. Now therefore, if it is displeasing to you, I will return home.’³⁵ The angel of the LORD said to Balaam, ‘Go with the men; but speak only what I tell you to speak.’ So Balaam went on with the officials of Balak.

- Balaam’s eyes are opened and he sees the angel with the sword
- And the angel speaks: “If your donkey hadn’t saved you, I’d have killed you by now and let him live.”
- Balaam gets humble really fast
 - I’ve sinned
 - I’ll do what you tell me
 - But no apology to the donkey...

III. Reflections

A. Balaam has started believing his own press

- He thinks he’s someone special
 - He’s got kings begging him to come and help them
- We often quote the proverb “Pride goeth before a fall” and here is Balaam living it out
 - His pride is about to get him into trouble
 - His pride keeps him from seeing the angel
 - His pride causes him to beat his donkey
 - A talented organist, in the days before motor-driven or electric organs, gave a very magnificent concert in which the big pipes sent forth glorious, thunderous tones. After people finished congratulating him, the little boy who had worked with all his might at the bellows remarked, “We did pretty well, don’t you think?”

The organist scornfully replied, “And what did you do?” He gave the boy no credit at all.

A month later, during another concert, the organist came to a stormy passage that required all the wind of which the bellows were capable. Suddenly the organ began to fade away. The organist signaled for more wind.

Instead, the little lad pulled aside the curtain and said, “Is it I or is it we?”

- Pride is a dangerous thing
 - Yes, we should own and celebrate the gifts God gives us and use them to bring God glory
 - But we must always remember that they are gifts and they are to be used for God
 - When we start thinking it’s all us, when we start believing the flattery around us, we set ourselves up for a fall
 - Balaam thought HE had the power to bless or curse
 - He forgot that he spoke God’s blessing or curse
 - He thought it was all about him
- Is it I or is it we?
 - This is not OUR church or OUR ministries
 - This is GOD’S church and these ministries are about GOD’S kingdom
 - And we can never forget that

B. Balaam wouldn’t listen to his donkey

- Even before God gave the donkey the gift of speech, the donkey was talking to Balaam, if he had paid attention
 - Maybe you can excuse the first time he missed the signal, but not the others
 - As the donkey pointed out, he had never behaved that way before
 - He wasn’t in the habit of turning aside or scraping his master’s foot or laying down in the road
 - This should have told Balaam something important
 - But Balaam didn’t listen
- Why didn’t Balaam listen?
 - Too busy with his own thoughts and business
 - We often miss things because we are too busy with other things to pay attention
 - Happens in the church
 - Get so busy with the programs that we forget the mission
 - Didn’t think the donkey had anything to say

- Scorn the counsel of people or things we think are beneath us
 - Animals, children, subordinates, elderly...
- Again, that happens in the church
 - Some people's voices seem to matter more than others, to be louder than others
 - We risk missing the quiet voices and the voices who may not be counted as important
 - And that may be whom God is speaking through
- Didn't like what the donkey was saying
 - Delaying him getting to the great reward promised
 - Sometimes we don't listen to voices saying what we don't want to hear
 - Pastor in church going through a lot of changes
 - Lots of voices complaining, as people will do when anything is different
 - Then his wife points out that one change is not really working the way intended
 - It was the straw that broke his back
 - He expected complaints from everyone else but his wife should support him
 - Caused one of the biggest fights of their marriage
 - What made it worse is that he knew, at some level, that she had a point
 - But he didn't want to hear it
 - I'm sure that has never happened here...

C. Listen to your donkey

- Let's learn from Balaam – we need to listen to our donkeys
- God uses all kinds of voices to speak to us
 - Some are human, some aren't
 - God's voice is there to guide us as we follow where the Spirit is leading us
 - Let's not be like Balaam and let our voices drown out God's
 - Let's not be like Balaam and ignore the voices of those we think may be beneath us

- Let's not be like Balaam and ignore the voices saying things we don't want to hear
- And let's pay attention to the obstacles in our path
 - That's usually how I know that I am doing what pleases God – the roadblocks disappear
 - If we are following God's will, obstacles in our path tend to disappear or shrink in importance
 - If we are leaving God's path, the obstacles come up and get higher
- Learn from Balaam
 - God is leading us
 - If we get off on the wrong path, God is ready to help us get back on the straight and narrow
 - God will send us messengers to guide us, even donkeys