

BALAAM'S DONKEY

Numbers 22:22-35

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The forty years of wandering in the wilderness are over.

The Israelites are amassed, between fifty and a hundred thousand strong, on the east bank of the Jordan River, poised to cross over into Canaan, the Promised Land. Moses is old and dying. His general, Joshua is, for all practical purposes, the leader and commander in chief of the army.

Under his leadership the Israelites have defeated in battle the Amorites and the Bashanites in the territories east of the Jordan. They are eager to finally enter this "Land of Milk and Honey." They await only a word from Moses before they make their move, cross the river, and seize the land.

Now, when the final step is just about to be taken, when the anticipation and the tension are almost unbearable, our storyteller shifts his focus and we are told a story in which the Israelites are not the main characters. Now we will pause and hear a story from the point of view of someone who already lives in the Promised Land and is watching as the Israelites approach. Now, we leave the chosen people to spend some time with some distant kin of theirs, the Moabites.

BALAK, KING OF MOAB

The Moabites were the descendants of Moab, the son of Lot, Abraham's nephew. As you may remember, shortly after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot and his two daughters, who were living in some caves in the mountains east of the Dead Sea, erroneously thought that the entire world had been destroyed. Lot responded to this perception by being depressed. His daughters responded by taking it upon themselves to begin repopulating the earth and, especially their family's bloodline, by getting pregnant. Unfortunately, the only male left on earth, they thought, was their sullen and depressed father. So they got him drunk and then snuck into his cave and had their way with him while he was passed out and didn't know what was happening.

The offspring of these incestuous unions were two males named Moab and Ben-Ammi.

Scripture does not judge the sisters harshly as they were just doing the best they could with what was given to them, or what they thought was given to them. But, when the sisters discovered that the entire population of earth had not been destroyed they were, understandably, embarrassed and vexed so, rather than joining their Hebrew kinfolk, they stayed in the mountains and the desert east of the Dead Sea.

There their sons grew up and founded the tribes that would become the Moabites and the Ammonites.

Eight hundred years later, when the Israelites arrive under the leadership of Moses and Joshua, the Moabites have become more than just a tribe. They are a relatively impressive nation taking up most of what is, today, the country of Jordan. It had three distinct states. The capital was in the mountain fortress city of Didon.

As we take up the story, their king is a man named Balak and he is worried.

Picture him standing on the wall of his capital city, looking out over the vast, flat, empty plains east of the Jordan River. He is a weathered, rugged man in his late forties. His skin is browned by the sun and his eyes are wrinkled from squinting against the desert glare. His mouth is turned down at the corners and his brow is knit with dread and concern. In the distance, north and east of his kingdom's border is a huge cloud of dust and behind him stand his outriders, his spies who have just ridden into the city and made their report to the king.

How many, do you say?

Fifty thousand at least. Maybe twice that. More than we could count in a day.

Men?

Half of the total are men of fighting age. Armed. They have camels and many mules.

What do they want?

We do not know, but if we had guess, we'd say land.

Our land?

Maybe. They are many. It will take much and fertile land to feed them all.

Can we defeat them?

There is silence. No one wants venture a guess. Finally, someone speaks.

They have already defeated the Amorites and the Bashanites. They have tasted victory. They will run into battle with confidence. They believe that their god is protecting them, that he has promised them a land of their own.

Balak is silent for a few minutes, thinking. Then he speaks again:

They have only one God?

Yes.

His name?

They do not speak it. It is, they say, unpronounceable.

They must call him something.

Yahweh. It means "I Am."

What if this "I Am" stopped defending and helping them? What if he cursed them, instead?

Again, his advisers are silent.
Bring my messengers. I have an urgent dispatch.

BALAAM, GENTILE PROPHET

King Balak gathers two messengers and some elders or advisers of his and sends them north a couple of hundred miles to Ammon. There they are to meet with a certain man named Balaam the son of Beor.

He is fairly famous because he is a seer or diviner who has the gift of second sight AND he is a prophet of the one God, Yahweh. He is a very rare case – a gentile who has been given the gift of being a spokesperson for Yahweh. But, Balak has heard the Balaam is also corrupt. He can be bought.

The messengers and elders find Balaam and give him the message from Balak: Come down to Moab and put a curse on these Hebrews who are threatening everyone and causing so much trouble down here.

Balaam asks God what he should do and God says, don't go. So he tells the messengers and elders that he asked God and God said he shouldn't go and even if God said he should go he can't just go putting curses on anyone he wants. He can only say what God tells him to say and do what God tells him to do.

The messengers and elders return to Moab and deliver the message to Balak and he gets mad and storms around and, finally decides to sweeten the offer. He sends twice as many messengers and elders.

Tell him to come down here and curse the Hebrews and I'll make him rich and famous.

They deliver the message and Balaam tells them to wait while he consults with God on this issue.

God says no.

But this time Balaam argues with God: But he said he'll make me rich and famous. Please, please, please, please, please can I go?

Yahweh gets tired of Balaam's begging and relents. Alright you can go but don't you say anything except what I tell you to say.

So Balaam climbs on his little donkey, the donkey he's owned and ridden since he was a kid, and off he goes with two of his servants and the messengers and the elders, back to Moab. He warns them, however, that though he'll listen to what Balak has to say, he, being a prophet, can say only what God tells him to say.

The messengers and elders say: Yeah, fine, whatever, and off they all go.

Somewhere about the time they arrive at the capital city of Didon, Balaam and his servants get separated from their escort of messengers and they are making their way through the city by themselves, trying to find the palace of the king.

About this same time God decides that he is mad at Balaam for being so vain and greedy that he wanted to go and listen to king Balak even though God told him he didn't want him to. So God changes his mind about the whole thing and sends a warrior angel to kill Balaam for his arrogance, greed and presumption and what follows is a sort of comedy of errors worthy of the Marx Brothers.

BALAAM'S DONKEY AND THE ANGEL OF DEATH

Balaam and his servants are riding through the outskirts of Didon on their donkeys and suddenly the Angel of Death, a seraph, one of those scary dudes with the body of a man and the head of an animal and three pairs of wings, appears in front of them, holding his sword. But for some reason the only one in the group who can see the Angel of Death is Balaam's donkey.

No fool, this donkey, he decides to avoid the sworded seraphim and he heads off the road and into an adjacent field. Balaam, who can't see the angel, whips the donkey furiously and makes him get back onto the road.

They go into the suburbs of the city and the angel appears again and, again, no one can see it but the donkey who decides that the smart thing is to go around this fearsome looking creature. Only it's kind of tight passage with a grape arbor on one side of the angel and the wall of a building on the other and when the donkey tries to squeeze by on the side with the wall of the building, Balaam's foot and leg get scraped on the wall.

Angry and in pain, he, once again, whips the donkey until the poor beast goes back to the center of the street but by then the angel has departed.

A little later Balaam comes to a street, an alley, actually, that is so narrow the donkey can't veer off and he can't go around and about half way down the alley the Angel of Death appears with his sword and, again, the donkey is the only one who can see him. But this time he can't go around and he can't veer off so he just lies down in the alley with Balaam sitting on top of him.

Balaam has had it and he lays into the donkey with a vengeance, whipping him for all he's worth when all of a sudden the donkey looks over his shoulder, opens his mouth and says, "HEY! That hurts!" Then he sort of lays into Balaam, verbally.

"Why are you whipping me? Aren't I the same donkey you've been riding since you were a kid? Haven't I been good and faithful all these years? Don't you think you should trust me just this once?"

And just about that time God makes the Angel of Death visible to Balaam and he, the angel, gets into the discussion: "Why are you beating your donkey? God sent me to kill you because you are vain and arrogant and greedy and, by golly, if it wasn't for this donkey, here, you'd be dead by now. I would have killed you and let him go."

Balaam finally finds his tongue and says -- "You know, you're right. I have been vain and arrogant and greedy and if it's all the same to you I'll just go on back home, now." And he kind of nudges the donkey a little, trying to get him to stand up and back down the alley but the Angel of Death isn't finished, yet.

"No, no, go on. You've come this far, you might as well see it through. But I'm warning you. Don't you dare say anything that God hasn't told you to say, do you hear me? Because if you do I'm coming back and, there's going to be trouble."

Balaam allows that he has gotten the message and he won't be saying anything that hasn't been okayed by Yahweh first and the Angel of Death says, well, okay then and lets him go.

About that time the messengers and elders show up and make a fuss about how they've been looking everywhere for him and how he should get a move on because the Israelites are getting closer and the king is getting impatient.

BALAK AND BALAAM

Balaam arrives at the palace and Balak comes running out and grabs him by the sleeve and drags him up on the wall of the city. *Look there and tell me what you see, he says.*

Dust cloud? Says Balaam.

Exactly! Says Balak. *And a darned big dust cloud at that that is being made by about a hundred thousand people on the move, Israelites coming this way to make war on us and take our land.*

And what do you want me to do about it, says Balaam.

I want you to curse them, says Balak.

Curse them?

Yes, curse them. They worship this Yahweh, the one God that you speak for. I figure if you curse them it will have some weight with them and they'll think twice before attacking us.

Balaam allows that that may well be the case but he isn't allowed to just go around cursing anyone he wants to curse, not even for a whole house full of silver. He has to consult with Yahweh first and he can only say what Yahweh tells him to say.

Balak says, *fine, go consult with Yahweh and we'll meet back here first thing in the morning so you can curse the Israelites.*

But when they get together in the morning Balaam doesn't have good news. Instead of cursing the Israelites, God has told him to bless them with a song, which he does.

Not to be put off, Balak says that, obviously, Yahweh hasn't seen what a true threat these people are. What they need to do is go up on a mountain where they can have a better vantage point.

He takes Balaam up onto a mountain and they look down and, sure enough, the Israelites look pretty threatening, marching as they are toward the east and raising all that dust. Balak reminds him that if he wants to be rich and famous he really needs to convince his God to curse the Israelites.

Another night passes and Balaam comes out in the morning and says, here is what my God says: And he sings another song of blessing for the Israelites.

Balak is getting desperate now. Okay, he says, maybe your God isn't impressed by your arguments or maybe you're not trying all that hard or maybe you aren't very convincing. Maybe your God needs to hear about this from my god. So here's what we'll do: We'll make seven sacrifices to Baal, my god and we'll tell him to go talk to your god, Yahweh, and see if my god can change your god's mind.

So they both make sacrifices to their respective gods and Balaam goes into his tent to pray and he comes out the next morning and Balak says, so, what have you got?

And, you guessed it, Balaam sings another song of blessing on the Israelites.

Balak is nearly beside himself with rage.

I brought you here to curse my enemies and all you have done is bless them. I promised to make you rich and famous and rich you shall be, but your own God has kept you from being famous. Now get out of my country and don't come back.

Balaam, always one to have the last word, reminds Balak of their deal. I told your messengers and elders that I would come but even if you offered me a house filled with silver I could only speak what the Lord, Yahweh, told me to say. That is what I have done. I have kept my word. If you don't like it, that's your problem.

Then he sings one more song, kind of in the face of Balak, and this song tells of the eventual downfall of Moab to the Israelites but that downfall will be a long time in the future and the Moabites have nothing to fear from the Israelites right now.

Then he gets on his donkey, calls his two servants and off they go, riding north and west, into the sunset never to be heard of or from again except as a name on a list of Ammonites who died in a plague as punishment for some unidentified sin. As to whether or not the Balaam on the list is this Balaam, there is no way of knowing.

Balak goes home and he, too, is heard of again. According to tradition, he died of natural causes a short time later. He really need not have gotten so worked up over all this. The Israelites passed right by, to the north of the Moabites and crossed the Jordan River into Canaan without so much as a tip of the hat as they went by.

The Moabites and the Israelites would live for centuries with a sort of on again, off again relationship – sometimes contentious, sometimes friendly. You will recall that Ruth, she of the story by the same name and the great grandmother of David and the greatX10 grandmother of Jesus was a Moabite woman.

SO WHAT'S THE POINT?

Both anthropologists and historians will confirm that while history is important as a record of events that happened, what is more important are the stories that are told about the events that happened.

For some reason, I'm thinking of Paul Revere. Few of us know with anything like certainty, exactly what Paul Revere did on the night of April 18, 1775. But many, if not most of us have heard and even been required to memorize portions of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem which immortalized and preserved in story form the events of that night.

History tells us that William Dawes and Dr. Samuel Prescott were also instrumental and important participants in the strategy to warn the colonists of the British army's advance that night, but STORY tells us that it was Paul Revere who was the hero, probably because by the time the poem was written Paul Revere was famous for any number of things, accomplishments and achievements that made him stand out, and the other two men had been forgotten.

History is important but story is more important.

Most scholars believe that this morning's story that students of scripture refer to as "Balaam's Donkey," was created as a framework for introducing the songs that Balaam is said to have sung as blessings upon the Israelites. Originally, we believe that these were simply folk songs about Israel at different times in her history but there was no way to identify what era they came from.

Scholars also tell us that the most important thing about the story is not really the songs or the plot but the characters. Here, in the middle of the life literature of Israel, the stories that give meaning to their lives, is a story about two people who aren't even Israelites...and a talking donkey for crying out loud.

God can act and speak through different people... and non-people, I suppose... through agencies we least expect and at the times we least expect.

We would do well to learn the experience of Balak and Balaam and not reject God's will just because it is spoken by someone we don't like or someone from whom we didn't expect to hear it.

AMEN

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Have you ever received an insight or a new understanding from someone you didn't expect to hear it from?
2. Have you ever learned something important from someone you didn't like?
3. Why would God deliver insights and information to us through unexpected sources?
4. If God can deliver a message about Israel to the Moabites through an Ammonite prophet, is it possible God could deliver a message to us through a Jew? A Moslem? A Hindu? A homosexual? A former drug addict?
5. If the message of this story is to keep an open mind as to the sources God might use to communicate his will, who might we, as a nation, start listening more closely to?