

PENNING THE TALE

By
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from the pulpit of
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September 1, 2024

Numbers 22:1-7; 20-35

The Israelites set out, and camped in the plains of Moab across the Jordan from Jericho. ²Now Balak son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. ³Moab was in great dread of the people, because they were so numerous; Moab was overcome with fear of the people of Israel. ⁴And Moab said to the elders of Midian, “This horde will now lick up all that is around us, as an ox licks up the grass of the field.” Now Balak son of Zippor was king of Moab at that time. ⁵He sent messengers to Balaam son of Beor at Pethor, which is on the Euphrates, in the land of Amaw, to summon him, saying, “A people has come out of Egypt; they have spread over the face of the earth, and they have settled next to me. ⁶Come now, curse this people for me, since they are

stronger than I; perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them from the land; for I know that whomever you bless is blessed, and whomever you curse is cursed.”⁷ So the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with the fees for divination in their hand; and they came to Balaam, and gave him Balak’s message.²⁰ That 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.”²¹ So Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey, and went with the officials of Moab.

²²God’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.²³ The 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 onto the road.²⁴ Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side.²⁵ When 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.²⁶ Then 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.²⁷ When 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.²⁸ Then 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?”²⁹ Balaam 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!”³⁰ But 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 this way?” And he said, “No.”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 just now I would 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.

John 12:12-15

¹²The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. ¹³So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!” ¹⁴Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: ¹⁵“Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt!”

It's Labor Day weekend, but that is not why I chose stories about a beast of burden as the final sermon in our summer series on God's creatures, great and small. I did not choose donkey stories because that animal has been used as a political symbol. And get out of your mind the characters of Eeyore in the Winnie the Pooh stories or of the creatively named character, 'Donkey' in the Shrek movies. When I first began to consider focusing on donkeys in these two biblical stories for this sermon, my mind went back to a fairly unimaginative game used at birthday parties when I was a kid – Pin the Tail on the Donkey. There was a picture of a donkey without a tail put up on a wall. A blindfolded child was given some representation of a donkey's tail to try to put it in the right location on the donkey's behind. The tail always ended up somewhere else which led to a chuckle or two. However, the name of that game got me to thinking about why whatever author of these two stories from Numbers and John decided to pen, P-E-N the tale, T-A-L-E with donkeys playing a critical role in the Balaam and Palm Sunday stories.

Don't feel bad if you are not too familiar with the Balaam story. As background, after being liberated from slavery in Egypt, then surviving in the wilderness for forty years, the Hebrew people were encamped in Moab, getting ready to cross the Jordan River and enter the land that had been promised to them by God. The king of Moab is uneasy about their presence, not knowing whether they could overwhelm his armies, because they had already defeated two kings in Transjordan. Nervously, this King Balak, tries to hire a prophet named Balaam to get him to put a curse on the Hebrew people. Balaam is hesitant because he does not want to do something against God's will. But the money and the acclaim that would come to Balaam if he did the king's bidding were enticing. He rides his trusted donkey toward the location where he could potentially place his curse on the Hebrew people. But God then sends an angel with a drawn sword to block Balaam's path at three different locations. The donkey sees the angel each time and won't go forward. Balaam is so frustrated that the donkey won't take him where he wants to go that he beats the animal. It is at this point that the author penning the tale has the donkey speak to Balaam to complain about the beatings

and to remind him that he had served him faithfully over the years. The Lord then allows Balaam to see the angel standing in his way. The angel tells Balaam his treatment of his donkey is reprehensible and reminds him that he must follow the Lord's lead regarding blessing or cursing the Hebrew people. Later in the account, all of this leads to three encounters that Balaam has with King Balak who continues to try to entice the prophet to curse the Hebrew people. But each time, Balaam blesses them instead.

In reflecting on this story, there may be times where we are being taken for a ride going toward something that will financially or politically benefit those directing us, but by our taking such a direction, it would result in harm to some of God's beloved. It could be what we are invested in or some kind of political or even religious movement that is leading us toward what could be detrimental to others. At such a point, it is my hope that we, as articulated by Abraham Lincoln, would be "touched by the better angels of our nature,"¹ when we are tempted to just go along with what could be destructive. Thank God for those encounters we have that cause us to be mindful of such ramifications, convincing us to go another direction.

We move to the more familiar biblical story where a donkey is an important figure. All four gospel accounts include Jesus' entrance riding a donkey into Jerusalem on what has been called Palm Sunday. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all include as part of their tale that Jesus instructs disciples to go find and borrow a donkey for him to ride into the holy city. The Gospel of John is much shorter in its description of Jesus' joyous entrance. But it is one of two accounts that help us understand the significance of Jesus' mount, including what was considered a messianic prophecy from Zechariah, "Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!"² It is seen as a royal entrance, but the donkey's presence helps the

¹ From the concluding sentence of Lincoln's first inaugural address;
www.battlefields.org/learn/primary-sources/lincolns-first-inaugural-address

² Zechariah 9:9

crowd and us understand that Jesus was not coming as a militant king. In such a setting, conquering kings would ride a stallion or would be in a chariot pulled by one. But a king who humbly comes in peace would ride a donkey. In the account, the donkey not only carries Jesus, but also carries the message that helps others to understand the nature of his coming.

A royal figure mounted on a donkey shows forth a reign quite different from that of other rulers. When has there been a monarch whose resources were as humble as were those of Jesus? He traveled around with no place of his own to stay the night. The donkey he rode into Jerusalem was borrowed. He would eat his final meal in a borrowed room. When he was condemned to die on a cross, he would be wearing a cloak and sandals as his only material possessions, and the Roman soldiers would cast dice to see who got to take those. He would wear no crown but one made of thorns, placed on his head in ridicule. After he died, someone would place his body in a borrowed tomb.

Yet, what Jesus did possess indicates that his reign is one that offers the deepest levels of deliverance. Jesus possessed a deep sensitivity to those who had the greatest needs. He paid attention to the hurts of the poor and rich alike, addressing that which could twist a person out of shape, showing how forgiveness could overcome shame and bitterness, ever looking for opportunities to heal the minds, bodies, and spirits of all.

He possessed hope, confidence and trust in God's will for him and for all. The word 'hosanna,' is not only an expression of praise, but also is a cry for deliverance. He had prayed "deliver me, O Lord," on the night he would be betrayed and arrested and sentenced to death, but he still sought God's will even when his deliverance took a different form than that for which he had prayed. And the place of his greatest victory would not be on a battlefield, but in an empty tomb.

His greatest possession that he shared so freely was a love for every single person, even those who wouldn't return his love, even those who

wanted to kill him. This love is one that does not denigrate people by race or religion or ethnic heritage or class. It is a love demonstrated in humble commitment, through giving all of oneself that all might be blessed. There are some today who characterize Jesus as a conquering royal presence. They want his rule imposed on others, even by force if necessary. The donkey Jesus uses in his entrance into Jerusalem is among the details of the tale that challenges such an understanding of his messianic purpose.

Many writers through the ages have generally portrayed donkeys as unintelligent, stubborn, and lacking in classiness. Shakespeare frequently used another name for a donkey in his plays as an insult for a person who was stupid or a fool. That crass characterization continues to be in use today. A hundred-year-old poem about a donkey describes the animal this way:

With monstrous head and sickening cry

And ears like errant wings,

The devil's walking parody

On all four-footed things.³

And yet, in scripture, donkeys are symbols of service, humility, and peace. During this summer sermon series on God's creatures, great and small, we have focused on a dozen biblical tales that were penned involving a big fish, livestock, a worm, a dragon, a dog, a ram, a group of icky animals from the book of Job, a mother hen, lions, a rooster, a serpent, and a partridge in a pear tree. Oh no, strike that last one - we have concluded with two stories about donkeys. If God's message and purposes can be carried forward by such creatures, then we too have a chance to carry such things of grand importance. In part, we get to pen the tale of our lives so that our story carries God's message and purposes forward. So, let's travel in service, in humility, in peace carrying the message if not the messenger of God that the donkeys have helped us

³ From 'The Donkey,' The Collected Poems of G. K. Chesterton (Dodd Mead & Company, 1927)

focus on this day. With the wide-spread blessings that result, at some point, we may just hear the angels themselves joining the shouts of “Hosanna,” as we approach. Thanks be unto God.

Amen.