

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church
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Unlike the Arrival of Something Long Awaited
Numbers 22.22-35; Matthew 8.5-13
Russ Dean, July 22, 2008

The Rabbi's son came in from the yard, and the look of dejection on his face was too obvious to miss. As good fathers do, the Rabbi inquired, "What's wrong, buddy... and where are friends?" The young boy looked up, fighting tears, and said to his dad, "We were playing 'hide and go seek.' I hid – and no one came looking for me!" Because Rabbi's, like their protestant counterparts, are always looking for fodder for sermons, the Rabbi made the connection, and thought, "I wonder if that is how God feels about us?"

Where is God? When did you last see God? How have you known God's presence? During this past week's youth mission trip, at the end of each of our long work days, Michael Kellett asked those of us who had worked that day, "Where did you see God today?" In the paint and the construction dust, through breathless exertion or full-bellied laughter, in an old friend, a new one, in a stranger on the street... where did you see God? It is a question that should never be far from the conscious thought of those who believe. Where is God?

Writer Avery Brooke says God, and the things of God are "hidden in plain sight."¹ It is true. God is ever among us – and faith is the lifelong discipline of learning to see. But... there are also times in our lives when God's revelation comes not just because we've learned to see. Our STORY² [pick up Bible]... and our stories [point to congregation]... are accented by

¹ This quote comes to me from the journal, *Weavings*, May/June 1987 issue, p.2. It is quoted by the editor, from Brooke's book, *Hidden in Plain Sight*.

² Several years ago we started using the congregational call/response, following the reading of scripture: You have heard the ancient STORY. **Let us listen now for the word of the Lord.** The word, story, is capitalized to indicate that it is not simply one tale, or a collection of tales, but, taken together, the scripture forms our faith STORY.

unexpected moments, serendipity, when the wind of God comes to us, and it is not something we have been waiting to see. When we wait for something, we have to have already conceived of that thing. We know what we are looking for and have expectations of how and when and where it may come. This posture itself largely determines what we will be able to see. Sometimes, God's coming strikes out of the clear blue, completely Unlike the Arrival of Something Long Awaited.³

Today's wonderful story is just such a tale. It involves an unlikely seeker after God, and one of the most unexpected messengers. And if the Church can hear it, perhaps there is even a larger story yet. Let's consider Balaam...

This is a fascinating story. I have known of Balaam's talking donkey since my childhood, but there is so much more to his story than I was aware. I had intended to preach today from that specific incident, but what I learned in studying this ancient story came to me as a surprise. How ironic! I hope that the story, as Amy has read it to our children,⁴ makes its point obvious enough: sometimes, even in our best efforts, we do not see. Sometimes we do not, or can not, or will not, see what is most important. Sometimes we miss God – standing before our very eyes. And sometimes it takes the most surprising event or person or messenger to make that obvious to us.

³ The sermon title is taken from a poem by Jeanne Emmons, an abbreviated version of which was printed in the order of service: There are things you cannot make happen, that you must / wait for, and then forget to wait, and only then they / may come. And they are to things planned / as a sudden kiss is to one stipulated / and pursued for... / Catching sight of a bluebird is one / of those things... / You can build boxes / for them to nest in, but the boxes / could be empty forever... / But today a pair of them streaked in front of my windshield / as I traveled down a gravel road. It was *unlike / the arrival of something long awaited*, / although for years / I had hoped. / It was more like the outrageous kiss of a stranger, or a splash / of cold water on a hot day, unexpected, a cry / of pleasure, as if a slit had opened in / the fabricated sky, releasing briefly / a bit of the real (emphasis added).

⁴ I had intended to preach, specifically, from the episode with the donkey, but when I realized there was so much to the story, I chose to let Amy read the story to our children as our children's time in worship, and to let that story stand, primarily, on its own.

One of the obvious takeaways from this ancient legend is that God never ceases trying to get our attention, and that God's creativity and energy and enthusiastic concern for us is sometimes downright comical, when we finally get the point. If God has to get our attention by speaking through a jack ass (actually it was a jenny ass in this story) – the joke will be on us!

But there is so much more to this story for us – and so much more that needs to be said today. You see, Balaam has an interesting history in scripture. Once again, in this story I find reason to praise this collection of literature for its amazing honesty and courage. For when you look closely at Balaam's story, there is hardly any reason it should have made it into the Jewish cannon. Balaam was not Jewish. In fact, there is no evidence from the text that Balaam was a person of any faith. He was a foreigner from the region of the Euphrates River, from a country called Pethor, which is in the territory of modern-day Iraq. He was a diviner. A sorcerer. Balaam was apparently well-known throughout his world for his ability to call upon the spirits, to cast blessings or curses. When the king first calls him, Balak says, *for I know that whomever you bless is blessed, and whomever you curse is cursed* (22.6). These ancient people believed that a word was a living thing, and that blessings and curses held a real and living power over the people on whom they were spoken. Balaam was known for this power.

And, it's surprising that it's in the Jewish canon, because in the basic narrative of his story, contained in Numbers, chapters 22-24, Balaam, the non-Jewish sorcerer is upheld as an exemplar of faith. Here's how it goes... Balak, the King of Moab, fearing the growing power and threat of this Israelite people, who have been wandering in the wilderness near his land, calls upon a diviner to curse them, so that they will not be able to overtake his country. After consulting with God, Balaam returns the king's entourage with the message that Yahweh will not allow him to curse these people. Balaam does not say, "the spirits" or "my gods," no Balaam, the

non-Jew uses the personal name of God, given to Moses in the wilderness – “Yahweh” will not let me do as you wish. How did Balaam and Yahweh get to be on a first-name basis!?

Balak tries again, this time sending more esteemed nobles to speak to Balaam and promising him *great honor*, and more than a hint of prosperity, if he will respond. But Balaam is steadfast and says: *Although Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command the LORD (Yahweh) my God...* (22.18). Here, Balaam claims the Jewish deity as his own God, and he will not do as Balak requests.

A third time Balak persists, coming this time to meet Balaam, personally. He inquires as to Balaam’s refusal to cooperate. “Have I not made my terms clear,” Balak asks? Balaam has understood, but he responds, “*But do I have power to say just anything? The word God puts in my mouth, that is what I must say.*” In a strange incantation, Balaam seeks word from Yahweh a final time, instructing Balak to build seven altars on which he can sacrifice seven bulls, as offerings to God. Balak actually builds such an altar twice, but the word that comes to Balaam from this ritual is far from a word of curse. In fact, Balaam weakens Balak’s cause by doing just the opposite, when in a final oracle of the diviner, Balaam, pronounces a word of blessing on the Israelites: *How can I curse whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce those whom the LORD (Yahweh) has not denounced?... See, I received a command to bless; he has blessed, and I cannot revoke it...* (23.8, 20).

But the story is just getting interesting! From this basic narrative, which (in all that I can see) upholds Balaam as an exemplary character of faith – one who refused offers of money and power and fame from the king in order to fulfill the promises of God – from this basic narrative, Balaam somehow becomes a suspect character in Jewish and Christian history. How? Why? In the half-dozen or so references to Balaam in the rest of the Bible, he is never upheld as a

character of faith. In fact, 2 Peter speaks of the sinful as those who have *left the straight road and have gone astray, following the road of Balaam... who loved the wages of doing wrong...* and who, in the words of the King James Bible *was rebuked for his iniquity by a dumb ass* (as in “deaf and dumb,” 2 Peter 2.15). And when we get to the book of Revelation, the story of Balaam is reversed, as Balaam there is referred to as the one who *taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel...* (Revelation 2.14).

Now you will have to listen closely to hear my word for today, and you will have to know that I acknowledge my understanding is not orthodox. But I have read, and I have studied, and I have prayed over this text, and I am actually downright baffled at what I’ve seen. From the story that we have, how can John possibly get it so wrong – how can he say that Balaam, who refused Balak’s requests, three times, who actually pronounced a blessing on the people instead of a curse, how can John say, in his book of Revelation, that Balaam led Balak to be a stumbling block to Israel? I just don’t get it!

But, here’s what I think is happening. (Disagree if you will!)

I think we read in our scriptures an amazing narrative of faith – not one, monolithic, steady, harmonized, consensus view of God and the things of God. I do not believe this is what we find. I think we have an amazing collection of texts that can show us, if we are able to see, the diversity of thought, and the tension of competing theologies and ideas about who God is and what God is doing. And I think this, when viewed for Christians through the lens of Jesus Christ, is a more helpful teaching tool than a text that just says, “Here it is.” I think this is so because it is a text that well reflects the diversity of human thought, and the competing ideas that we still have to deal with in our daily living.

In Balaam's case, I think we have a story that came down through time and oral history of a savior – literally, one who saved the Hebrews from the destructive aspirations of an opposing king. I think this story came down through tradition upholding Balaam as a person of faith, until... Until, one day, someone said, "You know, this guy was not a Jew! This guy didn't go to Sunday school! This guy doesn't look like us... think like us... believe like us! This guy can't be one of our heroes – what if our kids get the idea that it's OK not to be Jewish!?" And in this tension, the people sought ways to modify or mitigate the commendable character of a faithful pagan. The story of the talking donkey, and the questions about Balaam's character, which arose separate from the biblical account, attest to this.⁵

Textual scholars, who use their detailed and complicated methods, who know ancient manuscripts and Semitic languages, can tell us that the episode with the donkey, which is in the middle of Balaam's story, is a later addition to the story.⁶ We can see this pretty obviously as the story begins, because in verse 19 Balaam has inquired of God, "should I go to Balak to listen to his request?" In verse 20 God says to Balaam *get up and go with [Balak's men]; but do only what I tell you*. But then this inserted (later) story begins awkwardly, as we read, *So Balaam got up.. and went...* (as God told him to do... and) *God's anger was kindled because he was going...* (22)

This tension in the text, this awkwardness is, I think, a wonderful symbol of the tension and awkwardness within the Church, both Jewish and Christian, over how we should hear such a story. On the one hand, we can hear the word which says God speaks through whomever God

⁵ Obviously a body of thought developed concerning Balaam in addition to what is found in Numbers 22-24 – you simply cannot condemn Balaam for his work, vis a vis the Israelites, if all you know of him is this story. Obviously this extra-biblical understanding had a strong influence on the other biblical writers, concerning Balaam's character.

⁶ My primary source for this insight is *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume II.

will – Jewish prophets, Christian disciples, and... pagan diviners. And then we hear the more conservative, more traditional, more puritanical (trying to keep pure) voice, which adds a word of caution. In time the story of the donkey was added to the text, lest anyone think too highly of God's work through someone outside of the true faith.

So... how will you see it? And where will you look for God? I am a follower of Jesus Christ, unashamedly and unapologetically, but this does not mean that I believe God does not speak through other voices. Sometimes I hear God speaking under the yarmulke of my Jewish friend Murray Ezring. And sometimes she speaks beneath the headscarf of my Muslim friend Rose Hamid. And sometimes God speaks truth to a Baptist minister through the Buddhist tradition, which explains why those words are in our bulletin for this morning.⁷

Jesus praised the faith of a Gentile centurion, no doubt inciting Jewish anger by commending this non-Jew as being more faithful than *any in Israel*. This was not an anti-semitic remark. If he were among us today, I wonder if he would commend a Muslim or a Hindu or a Buddhist as being more faithful than any in Christendom? For *many will come from east and west*, Jesus says... into the kingdom... *While the heirs of the kingdom* (that is, those who think they are the only guardians of the truth) *will be thrown into the outer darkness...*

I believe that God is ever among us. "Hidden in plain view." But too often we limit God to only the places and the ways and the religious words and traditions that we already expect to find God. Jesus cautioned us from just such arrogance, for he said in that last day, *Many will*

⁷ "The Vietnamese Buddhist poet-monk, Thich Nhat Hanh... draws attention to the meaning of the term 'Buddha' as 'the one who is awake.' He asks: 'Are we really awake in our daily life... Are we awake when we pick up our newspaper? Are we awake when we eat an ice cream?' Thomas Clarke, Weavings, "The Extra-Ordinary in the Ordinary," May/June 1987, p.20.

*come in my name saying, 'Lord, Lord.' And I will tell them 'Depart from me... for I never knew you.'*⁸ Our world, growing in diversity and pluralism of thought, even as it shrinks by technology and innovation that brings us closer together, cannot survive the arrogance of religions which claim a monopoly on truth.⁹

Whether it comes from the mouth of your Christian pastor – or from a Jew or Muslim or Bahai or Unitarian or Secularist... If it comes in a rock-n-roll lyric or from the words and deeds of a Pagan sorcerer... Even if God's truth comes to us today from the mouth of a common donkey – I hope we are prepared to hear it, and to respond – for God is always speaking. And our world needs to hear that living word.¹⁰

May it be so, today!

⁸ *Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord", will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?" Then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers"* (Matthew 7.21-23).

⁹ Charles Kimball's book, *When Religion Becomes Evil*, is an excellent source on the dangers of "absolutizing" faith.

¹⁰ Ironically and tragically the "word of God" is, in our world, inflamed by fundamentalist religious rhetoric, too often a word which brings death a destruction, division and hatred – not the peace and life that the Word of the Lord should always bring.