

Summit Presbyterian Church
Preached by Rev. Sue Cyre
10/16/11
Text: Numbers 22:1-38
Title: Walking with God: Setting Priorities

I think most of you have heard the biblical story of the talking donkey. It's interesting that this just happened to fall on the Sunday before the Pet Blessing. Throughout Scripture God uses animals to accomplish his will. Think about

- Jonah and the big fish, or
- the dove that landed on Jesus after his baptism and identified him as the Son of God.
Or
- the donkey that was a key player on Palm Sunday. Or
- the lion and lamb that will lay down together as evidence of the Kingdom of God in all its fullness.
- Jesus tells us not to worry and each time we start to worry to look at the bird of the air who do not sow or reap but God cares for and feeds.

Do I believe that the donkey in today's text really spoke? Yes. This is not a metaphor or a symbol, or some other figure of speech. God is the creator of the donkey. If the Creator wants the donkey to talk, the donkey will talk. Have I seen a donkey talking recently in my life. No.

But, then I haven't seen anyone feeding 5000 with 5 loaves and 2 fish, or someone calming the seas or walking on water or raising the dead.

There are miracles today. We don't always see them. But they continue to happen. Just go to Mary Washington Hospital if you want to see the blind healed and the lame walking and the cancer cured and the almost dead, healed and given life. And one small kernel of corn does miraculously grow into a plant that feeds many people.

Miracles happen. The Creator is not bound by the laws he has established for his creation.

We want to take time this morning and look at what this text has to say to us about who God is and who we are and how we are to live.

This takes place 40 years after the Hebrews leave Egypt. They have been walking around in circles in the Sinai wilderness for 40 years. Now they stand poised on the east side of the Jordan—ready to enter the Promised Land. They are near Jericho which is in the middle of the Promised Land.

40 years earlier when they sent spies out, they were at Kadesh Barnea which is at the southern tip of the Promised Land. Now they are half-way up the east side. It's a very strategic place. This time they will enter by dividing the land in half and conquering it.

The king of Moab—is terrified. The Israelites have just defeated Sihon, king of the Amorites and Og, king of Bashan. The king of Moab now looks out from the top of a mountain and sees over a million Hebrew people. In chapter 26 they take a census and count 600,000 men, so there were over a million people including women and children and more likely several million.

The king is terrified. So, he has an idea—find a seer—Balaam son of Peor from Zippor-- a sorcerer some versions call him. He's a fortune teller. He casts spells. The king—Balak – thinks if he can get Balaam to cast a spell or curse the Hebrews, then they will be easy prey to defeat and conquer.

So, Balak sends elders from both Moab and Midian laden with gold and silver to try and convince Balaam to cast a spell on the Hebrews. Balaam is not a Hebrew. But, he apparently knows the Hebrew God and so he asks whether God wants him to do this and God says NO. The Hebrew people are a blessed people. No one is to curse them.

The envoy goes back to the king and the king sends another envoy laden with even more money—pleading for Balaam to cast a spell—curse the people. This time God gives Balaam permission to go, but Balaam is only to say what God gives him to say. It's a great day for Balaam—it's as if he's won the lottery. All he has to do is curse the people and he's a rich, rich man.

On the way, God's angel blocks the way of Balaam. Balaam can't see why the donkey refuses to go forward and eventually sits down altogether. Then the donkey speaks in his own defense.

God at that moment opens Balaam's eyes and he sees an angel with a sword standing on the path, blocking the donkey's way. God once more impresses upon Balaam that there are unseen things here—do not go forward and curse the people because I will bar the way and you too will die. Balaam has been warned—he is only to speak the word God gives him.

When he arrives at the king of Moab, the king takes him up on three different mountains—offers sacrifices—and waits each time for Balaam to pronounce a curse. But each time, Balaam blesses the Hebrew people, concluding by saying, “Blessed is everyone who blesses you, and cursed is everyone who curses you” which is the original promise God made to Abraham when he called Abraham in Genesis 12.

The fourth time Balaam not only blesses the Hebrews but he curses the Moabites, the Kenites, the Edomites, and the Amalekites.

It's an interesting story. But, the central characters in the story are not even the Hebrew people. The Hebrew people don't even know this is going on.

Balak is the king of Moab and Balaam the sorcerer it says comes from Aram—Syria. The Hebrew people are off stage and out of hearing as this drama is unfolding. The drama is between a king and sorcerer—both are foreigners.

The Hebrew people at the bottom of the mountains don't even realize the drama that is going on above them between Balak and Balaam. It's years later before they know what happened that day--the day that the king and his sorcerer tried to curse God's people and God protected them. God was ruling over even the King of Moab and his henchman Balaam. God was a banner over the Hebrew people. And they never knew it—at least not until sometime later.

Why isn't this just a nice story then about God's protection for his people. It is. One of the key lessons for us is that God is protecting our backs even when we are unawares of it.

I suspect when we get to heaven God may show us all the ways we were near death and God protected us and we never knew it. The diseases he cured us of—when we didn't think we were that sick. The cars that almost hit us—from behind. The missed meetings, or delayed flights that meant we were safe and we never knew it. If we live to be 40, 50, 60, 70, 90 it's because of all the times, God reached out his hand and protected us—and we never saw it. We never knew it.

I was talking with a group of folks at the Graduates luncheon and we were recounting all the really dumb things we did as young adults with children, that could have resulted in death for us or our children, but God was watching over us. Now we look back and give thanks for God's protection but there are many more things we still don't realize that God was there protecting us.

Now let's look back at Balaam. One author said of Balaam, that “No biblical character is more excoriated”—or denounced. Isn't that strange. What did he do that was so bad—he SEEMS to obey God.

The NT gives us more information about Balaam. In 2 Peter 2:15, Peter is writing about the unrighteous and he says, “They have left the straightway and wandered off to follow the way of Balaam son of Beor, who loved the wages of wickedness. But he was rebuked for his wrongdoing by a donkey—a beast without speech—who spoke with a man's voice and restrained the prophet's madness.”

Loved the wages of wickedness—rebuked for his wrongdoing by a donkey..

Jude writes in talking about the ungodly, “Woe to them! They have taken the way of Cain; they have rushed for profit into Balaam's error;” (Jude 11)

For profit they rushed into Balaam's error.

This is about money... profit; wages.

This is the Bible's assessment of Balaam. Why? What did he do that was so wrong? He listened to God didn't he? No he didn't.

First he tried his best to change God's mind. That's why he goes back and asks God a second time, if he couldn't just go and curse the Israelites a little. After all there are big bucks at stake. That's why God has his donkey speak to him. It's clear to God, that Balaam's eye is on the money being offered.

He's not an Israelite. He doesn't care what happens to the Israelites. He is flattered that the king of Moab has sought him out. He'd like to accommodate his friend the king and he'd also like to have the money.

The offer the elders make to Balaam from the king is, "I will reward you handsomely and do whatever you say." Wow riches and I will do whatever you say to me. That's a pretty good offer coming from a king.

The only one who stands in Balaam's way is God and the donkey.

Balaam tries to turn Israel's God away from the people. Balaam tries to convince God that a little curse is OK--make God turn away from his people. But, God refuses and instead honors his promise to the Hebrews that they would be blessed to be a blessing. Period. No foreign king will cancel that pledge. **Balaam tries to turn God away from the people and cannot.**

The next thing we read about Balaam is in chapter 31 of Numbers, the Israelites attack the Midianites because they are marrying their women and the women are leading them into the worship of idols. They kill all the males and in Numbers 31:8, it says, "they also killed Balaam the son of Beor with the sword."

But, they did not kill the women. In vs. 14, Moses said to them, "Have you allowed all the women to live?" he asked them. "They were the ones who followed Balaam's advice and were the means of turning the Israelites away from the Lord...."

When Balaam couldn't get God to turn away from his people, Balaam joined with the Midianites and working through the Midianite women, tried to get the Israelites to turn away from God.

There's more than one way to skin a cat and maybe he'd still get paid. God loved his people and wouldn't curse them. Maybe Balaam could get the people to stop loving God and then God would be happy to curse them. It didn't work. And Balaam is killed when the Israelites under God's protection attack the Midianites.

Balaam is a hypocrite. He agreed to do God's will, but all the while he was working against God's will and for his own benefit. Balaam's priority wasn't to obey God, it was to line Balaam's pockets. He tried to cut corners to get the money while not obviously disobeying God. Outwardly, he tried to look like he obeyed God. Inwardly, he was scheming to achieve his own ends.

The Bible doesn't say that "money is the root of all evil." It says, "The LOVE of money is the root of all evil." See, it's about priorities. Money itself is not evil—the problem comes when you love the money and don't love God. Your heart and mind are on the money and not on God.

Where is our heart? What do we love—the most? What is our priority? God or other things?

Balaam was willing to follow God just enough—do the minimum to avoid punishment—and it was clear from the angel with the sword that disobedience would indeed bring punishment. So what could he do to just satisfy the minimum and avoid the punishment and still end up with the cash?

First he tried pestering God—are you sure I can't give just a little curse? When God made it clear that he would not allow the Hebrews to be cursed. He went underground and tried living with the Midianites and the "followed Balaam's advice and were the means of turning the Israelites away from the Lord..." A little word here, a little conversation there, a little encouragement to sin and he hoped to turn the Israelites against God and have God himself curse them.

What are our priorities today? Really. Do we approach God the way Balaam did saying what's the minimum I can do and still go to heaven? What's the least I can donate to the church and still be OK with God? How often can I miss church and still be on the list of the saved? How can I work around God's will and still do what I want to do?

Walking with God is not about how far can I lean, bend, and contort over the line of obedience, without actually falling over. Walking with God is about being on a new road—a road of life, priorities, commitment, joy. It's not what is the least I can do, but how much more can I do.

When you are in love with your spouse. You don't say—what's the least I can do and still stay married. How much can I live my own way and still not go so far that I end up divorced?

No, being in love, being in relationship is about saying, What else can I do to delight and serve the one I love. How else can I give myself to please my loved one. All that you have is there for your spouse to enjoy and use and delight in—you want to withhold nothing.

God loves us and he hasn't loved us in a miserly way—looking for the minimum he could give us. He lavishes his love upon us. Scripture tells us that he withheld nothing from us—even his only begotten Son. His Son, entered our world, gave up his glory and was born in a stable, for us. He was hated by men, reviled, shamed and hung on a cross to die—for us. The free gift of God is eternal life. What a gift!

When God has given us so much, why would we ever want to try and negotiate to see what the smallest amount of our heart, and time and talents God will accept?

Next month will be stewardship time. If we love God, how is that reflected in our giving? We may not give our whole tithe to the church...but are we giving our tithe to the work of God? Or are we trying like Balaam to see what the minimum is that we can do and get away with?

This season of Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year is a good time to think about our priorities. Where are we spending your time? Where are we spending our financial resources? Who do we love? Who or what is the delight and desire of our heart? Now is a good time to rethink our priorities and line up our behavior to match our priorities.

Is what God says a priority? Then are we spending time reading his Word, Scripture?

Is obedience a priority? Then where are our finances being directed?

Is a relationship with God a priority? Then are we spending time with God in prayer.

Is worshiping God a priority? Then how regular is our attendance in church?

Balaam thought he could manipulate under the radar screen. Do enough publicly to make it look good while working behind the scenes to accomplish his own priorities and will. It doesn't work. God knows the desires of every heart.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son....how much do we love God? How do we show it? Amen