

Balaam's Ass

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Numbers 22: 4b-38

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The scripture for the day is the wonderful story of Balaam's Ass- the traditional title from the King James Version of the Bible. It's a great story. Israel has left Egypt, and is moving through the wilderness, fighting those who oppose their passage. Now they have come near Moab, present day Jordan. The main characters in the story are Balak, King of Moab; Balaam, a soothsayer evidently known for being able to curse or to bless effectively; and Balaam's Donkey.

My sermon is heavily dependant on a Sermon by Peter Sawtell a UCC Minister who heads Eco-Justice Ministries. He writes a weekly column and he said, This "is a story -- with a pertinent prophetic point, and one which is never found in the Revised Common Lectionary. It could be fun to tell at, say, an informal summer worship service." And then he said, "*I dare ya!*" I am a bad one to dare. I can hardly not take a dare. So I wrote and said, I'll do it and he said go for ti!

I am not going to put everything he wrote into quotations. It would be too cumbersome. But copies of his sermon are in the back and you can see how much I owe to him. The story of Balaam and his ass in Numbers 22-24 is a wonderful piece of storytelling. Sawtell wrote, "This is a Bible story that should be told as if we're all gathered around a campfire, with lots of laughter and joy."

Let us pray: Holy God for your word which speak across centuries and cultures and continues to shape our lives, we give you thanks. Open our minds now to your will that this may be for us a living word, taking root in our minds and bearing fruit in our lives.

It is written: Numbers 22: 4b-38

Now Balak son of Zippor was king of Moab at that time. He 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. Come 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 whomsoever you bless is blessed, and whomsoever you curse is cursed.' 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. Balaam said to them, 'Stay here tonight, and I will bring back word to you, just as the Lord speaks to me'; so the officials of Moab stayed with Balaam. God came to Balaam and said, 'Who are these men with you?' Balaam said to God, 'King Balak son of Zippor of Moab has sent me this message: "A people has come out of Egypt and has spread over the face of the earth; now come, curse them for me; perhaps I shall be able to fight against them and drive them out."' God said to Balaam, 'You shall not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed.'

So Balaam rose in the morning, and said to the officials of Balak, 'Go to your own land, for the Lord has refused to let me go with you.' So the officials of Moab rose and went to Balak, and said, 'Balaam refuses to come with us.' Once again Balak sent officials, more numerous and more distinguished than these. They came to Balaam and said to him, 'Thus says Balak son of Zippor: "Do not let anything hinder you from coming to me; for I will surely do you great honor, and whatever you say to me I will do; come, curse this people for me." ' But 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. You remain here, as the others did, so that I may learn what more the Lord may say to me.' 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.' So Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey, and went with the officials of Moab. 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 Balaam was riding on the donkey, and his two servants were with him. 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 on to the road. Then the angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side. 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. 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. 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. 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?' 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!' 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 in this way?' And Balaam said, 'No.' 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. 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. 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.' 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.' 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. When Balak heard that Balaam had come, he went out to meet him at Ir-moab, on the boundary formed by the Arnon, at the farthest point of the boundary. Balak said to Balaam, 'Did I not send to summon you? Why did you not come to me? Am I not able to honor you?' Balaam said to Balak, 'I have come to you now, but do I have power to say just anything? The word God puts in my mouth, that is what I must say.' Amen.

Based on Balaam's Ass by Peter Sawtell
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Great Story, and there are stories within the story. I want to look at the role of the donkey. Balaam's eyes are opened to what is really happening when he realizes that his reliable and obedient donkey who does not normally run into fields, walk into walls, or collapse in the road, is acting peculiarly for a reason, God speaks, in this story, through a trustworthy animal acting in unexpected ways. When what has been reliable, suddenly becomes unpredictable, maybe we should consider whether God may be telling us to STOP and pay attention

When the Audubon analysis of forty years of bird population data reveals the alarming decline of many of our most common and beloved birds, maybe God is trying to tell us something. In just four decades, all 20 birds on the national Common Birds in Decline list lost at least half their populations and some lost as much as 80%. When Polar bears are starving and drowning because the ice flows they count on to fish are fewer and further out to sea, maybe God is trying to tell us something.

Bill McKibben, Vermont Environmentalist in an Article called *Keep Calm and Carry On* wrote, "Everything frozen on the face of the planet is busily melting. Those famous Apollo pictures of the earth from outer space? They're out of date. There is much less white up top, because there's 1/3 less ice. Because warm air holds more water vapor than cold, there's a lot more moisture in the atmosphere—5 percent more than 40 years ago. That's an astonishing change in a basic physical feature of the planet, and it occurred in the blink of an eye. It means that we're seeing not only more drought in arid areas, but also outlandish increases in big storms, the kind that drop huge quantities of rain." Maybe recent record flooding from Montpelier, to Australia to Pakistan means we should pay attention. Is God trying to say STOP! Are these changes in predictable patterns telling us something? Texas and Florida and the West have had unprecedented fires and the drought is worse than the "Dust Bowl" ever was. "When it routinely gets hotter than it used to, and when storms are more severe and droughts are drier and glaciers and ice caps melt; maybe God is trying to tell us something. When the Arctic has melted for the first time in thousands of years, and the snows of Mount Kilimanjaro may be entirely gone in 20 years, maybe God is trying to tell us something?

"Even the oceans are changing with astonishing speed." McKibben said, You think that black oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico last summer was bad? "What if the oil hadn't spilled but had been burned in our cars as it was intended?" "If you burn a gallon of gas, which weighs a little more than seven pounds, you put about 22 pounds of CO₂ into the atmosphere. The average American car, driven the average American distance releases its own weight in CO₂ annually. As the oceans have tried to absorb the extra carbon we've put in the atmosphere, they've turned 30 percent more acidic in recent decades.

That's enough so that in every ocean on the earth, creatures at the bottom of the marine food chain are having trouble forming shells and reproducing. That's enough to lead coral reef researchers to think that the entire coral ecosystem may be extinct by mid-century." My great-grandchildren may never see a coral reef; except in books of what was lost. Maybe God is trying to tell us something?

Scientists feel the earth may be on the verge of mass extinctions . "The evidence is pieced together from details drawn from all over the world, but it adds up to a disturbing picture."The norm over eons is between 10 and 100 species lost per year counting all organisms. But we may now be losing 27,000 species per year. Many more species are "living dead" – populations so critically small that they have little hope of survival. By some estimates, as much as 30 percent of the world's animals and plants could be on a path to extinction within 100 years. Maybe God is trying to tell us something.

In today's story, Sawtell notes, "The reliable, plodding donkey is an instrument of revelation. The donkey sees the danger, and communicates by acting differently." When that happens, "The right thing to do is say, "What is going on? Why is my donkey acting like this?" "When something happens that is out of the ordinary, it may be an occasion of revelation. When something that has been utterly predictable stops being predictable, we should look for deeper meanings. Maybe God is trying to tell us something. (Maybe reliable animals and climate patterns) are letting us know that something is deeply wrong. The predictable, eons-old patterns of nature have changed. Balaam's ass said: "Am I not your donkey, upon which you have ridden all your life long to this day? Was I ever accustomed to do so to you?" What is going on? "Maybe the animals (and climate disruptions in) our world are proclaiming to us that our way of living in this world is not God's way. Maybe the rest of creation, in crisis and collapse, is calling out to us to stop and pay attention! The voices of nature are speaking to us more clearly and more vividly than Balaam's ass.

But the good news is, that when we miss the point, God can and will intervene to remind us and redirect us, and to open us to new possibilities." We are not alone. That angel with a flaming sword was there not to destroy but to warn Balaam so that he would bring a blessing and not a curse. There is so much we can do and not despair. The need is great and urgent.

I am very excited about what I've learned about the Transition Towns movement, vibrant, international grassroots community initiatives that seek to build community resilience in the face of such challenges as peak oil, climate change and the economic crisis. I think Transition Towns are the most positive, creative, encouraging response that I have seen to the challenges we face. I think not only the climate, but the coming end of cheap oil as petroleum is harder to extract and refine is a warning to change our ways.

And Transition Towns are way to unleash our concern not only for the earth but for our neighbors and to build creative resilience to help us through the changes that are coming whether we prepare or not. So why not prepare? Brattleboro has a Transition Town group already forming. Dummerston is exploring the possibility. Background information about Transition Towns is in the church entry and if you want to know more, give me your e-mail and I'll get you in touch with these new groups.

The Vermont Conference this June passed a resolution, "On Being a Green Justice Conference." I think the new Environmental Ministries Department of the UCC is the most exciting thing that's happened for us in years. You should check them out on the UCC website. In the back of the church are copies of the Resolution and a template to tell what we can do to become Green Justice Congregations. And why wouldn't we?

The times are difficult. The challenges are daunting. But we are not alone.

Back in the time of Bridges or Peace, in the late 80's, Michael and I hosted a Russian seeking political asylum. His name was Misha, he had been a Soviet physicist and dissident like Sakharov and he said, "I am often asked if there is any hope for Russia today." He said, "If there is no hope for Russia, there is little hope for the world- our world is a very small planet. So, I am asked if there is hope, and my answer, rationally speaking is 'No.' But he said, "after 15 years in the Gulag, six of it in solitary confinements, and much of that in punishment cells, it is my first hand experience, that hope by its very nature is irrational." "Hope," he said, "has a metaphysical foundation—it is beyond physics. I had no reason to hope in my solitary confinement that one day I would have the chance to talk to you. Yet here I am. I must tell you that I never lost hope during those long prison years. Rejection of Despair, more than anything else will help us in our perilous and uncertain future." Misha quoted Berdyaev, A Russian Orthodox Christian Universalist philosopher, who used to say that human forces alone are not enough to counteract the forces of evil. But then, after all, "he said, "there are still other forces active in the world."

We are not alone. We live in God's world. The whole world is in God' hands, and in ours. Maybe God is trying to tell us something. Amen.