

## Balaam

When I announced a few months ago that I would be drawing my sermon topics from the lectionary provided in Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals, I knew that I was setting myself with a challenge. Because that list of scripture passages is tied to the days of our Gregorian calendar, it doesn't assign scriptures on the basis of the Church calendar, in which many of the special days we celebrate are so-called "moveable feasts;" that is, they are based on the lunar calendar which the Jews used to mark holy days. Today's celebration of Pentecost is one of those. Also, this lectionary, having 365 entries, is of far greater scope than the Revised Common Lectionary of three-year cycles of 52 weeks each, 156 entries. So, there are many passages that are usually unpreached, which was attractive to me, but also far fewer scholarly resources for those passages, which meant I was going to have to do a lot more work on my own.

The passage I just read certainly is one of those challenging passages and it brings a few challenges of its own. I'm using Numbers 24:1-13 this morning as a jumping off place for a much more extensive story, that of the prophet Balaam, which stretches from the first verse of chapter 22 through the last verse of chapter 24, with a scattered epilogue in Numbers chapters 25, 31, and Joshua 13. It's an odd story for Pentecost, but, I believe, an appropriate one, as you'll hear. It has elements more associated with fairy tale than Scripture and the epilogue I mentioned is of a very different tone. I knew those challenges when I chose the passage for today, some months ago. But what I didn't know was how Balaam's story would end up prompting questions that are very relevant for this week, questions that resound in the consciousness of the whole world.

I'll get to those challenges in due time but first, I need to answer the most elemental questions: who is this Balaam person and why does he get this big chunk of one of the Books of Moses? At this point in the narrative, the Children of Israel are still wandering in the wilderness, specifically the lands to the east of the Jordan River, and trying to stay out of the way of the populated regions, most of which are populated by those hostile to them. They ask the king of the Amorites if they can pass through his land on their way elsewhere and promise not to so much as drink water out of the wells in his domain. But King Sihon not only refuses them passage, he attacks them with his army. The Israelites defeat the Amorites and take over their land, which later becomes part of the portion of the tribe of Reuben.

All of this is seen by the neighboring king, Balak of Moab (not to be confused with Balok of the First Federation in the first season "Star Trek" episode, "The Corbomite Maneuver"). Balak doesn't want his kingdom to go the way of the Amorites and so he contacts Balaam, who is from the east, in a city on the Euphrates. Balaam was a sorcerer for hire and one with a powerful reputation. Balak sends him a messenger to say, "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 whomever you bless is blessed, and whomever you curse is cursed." It's worth noting that Balaam is one of the few Old Testament figures for whom we have independent historical attestation. As Lloyd Bailey remarks in his volume on Numbers for the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary, "A series of fragmentary inscriptions on plaster walls from the ninth/eighth century BC quote oracles of a visionary ("a divine seer"), Balaam son of Beor, just as he is named in the book of Numbers... The inscriptions were found at Tell Deir 'Allah, near the River Jabbok, in 1967, and are now in the museum in Amman, Jordan."

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So, Balaam is a foreigner, a pagan, and a diviner, not the sort of person one would expect to be the hero in a story in the Old Testament. But from the beginning of the tale, he is presented as a spiritually sympathetic character. When Balak's emissaries reach him with the king's offer, he says to them, "Stay here tonight, and I will bring back word to you, just as the LORD speaks to me." In the typography of the NRSV, the word "LORD" is in small caps, the signal that the Hebrew is the proper name of Israel's God, which we pronounce "Yahweh." This pagan magician is presented as a worshipper of the God of Israel, though perhaps for Balaam, Yahweh is one of many.

Balaam indeed has a dream in which God warns him not to accept the commission and he sends Balak's men back to Moab disappointed. But Balak persists and sends another party to Balaam. Balaam again turns them down: "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 Balaam has another dream and this time, God says 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." Balaam gets up, saddles his donkey, and heads back to Moab with his guests.

What comes next is the best known and most fairy-tale-like portion of the story. God apparently thinks Balaam needs a little reminder that he is only to do as God tells him and an angel is dispatched to warn, not Balaam, but his donkey. I should add here that the word used in the old King James version is "ass," which is perfectly correct but, as you might imagine, causes great hilarity among nine-year-old boys, or at least it did when I was nine, which I think has a lot to do with the popularity of the story among that age group. But I digress... Three times the angel appears to the donkey as the beast trudges along with its master on its back. Angels, as we know, are pretty fearsome looking to begin with and this one, Numbers tells us, has a drawn sword in its hand as it blocks the way forward. The first time the angel blocks the road, the donkey turns aside into the field by the road. Balaam, not seeing the angel, beats the donkey for its recalcitrance, and they continue. The second time the angel blocks the road, the road is edged by a wall and, in trying to skirt the angel, the donkey crushes Balaam's foot between its own side and the wall and, of course, is beaten again for its trouble. The third time, both sides of the road are blocked, and the donkey simply sits down. This time, Balaam has at the donkey with his staff.

It is at this point, for the first time since the serpent in the Garden of Eden, that God gives an animal the power of speech. "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?" the donkey asks Balaam. Balaam replies, "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 this way?' And he 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 just now I would have killed you and let it

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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.”

And, indeed, what comes to pass is exactly the opposite of what Balak had intended. He takes Balaam to a place where he can see the encampment of Israel and sits back, grinning, waiting for the powerful sorcerer to curse his enemies. But every time Balaam opens his mouth, the Spirit of God comes upon him and, instead of cursing Israel, he blesses them. It happens four times, each time with the same result. The passage we began with is the third of the four blessings and you may have recognized, in Balaam’s words, words that were also used by God when God blessed Abraham and by Isaac, when he blessed Jacob: “Blessed is everyone who blesses you, and cursed is everyone who curses you.”

As Baruch Levine writes in his commentary on Numbers, “No longer a pagan diviner, (Balaam) has become a prophet.” As is so often the case, God has used an unlikely instrument to further God’s plan. Lloyd Bailey writes, “God’s word is not always confined to spokespersons within the community. Neither Balak nor Balaam is ‘one of us.’ This is often the situation, past and present, and it is an unsettling reality.” He continues, “it is Balaam, a practitioner of divination and apparently a polytheist, who perceives the truth about Israel’s destiny, blesses the entire enterprise, and refuses to budge from the truth when pressure is applied for him to do so.” Our first Pentecost lesson, then, is a restatement of Jesus’ words in John 3:8, “the Spirit bloweth where it listeth,” or to use the NRSV, “The wind blows where it chooses.” We must stay alert for the movement of the Holy Spirit, even when it seems to us to be moving from an unlikely source in an unexpected direction.

And now for the rest of the story. In the very next chapter of Numbers, the Israelite men, for whom this seems to be an ongoing problem in the Old Testament, have entered into sexual liaisons with the women of Moab and begun to worship their gods. There is an ensuing plague and a war. A few chapters later, there is a similar situation with Israelite men and the womenfolk of an enemy. Moses, blasting his army commanders for allowing this, tells them that the women in both situations were acting under the advice of Balaam! Apparently, the old diviner couldn’t stay loyal to Israel or Israel’s God. This is how he is remembered in the New Testament books of II Peter, Jude, and Revelation. We learn in Joshua 13 that Balaam has been killed by the army of Hebrews as they take the land east of the Jordan for the tribe of Reuben.

So, our second Pentecost lesson from the story of Balaam is that not everyone who speaks in the Spirit of the LORD will continue to speak in the Spirit of the LORD. We humans are frail vessels. None of us are without sin. Sometimes, those whom God chooses for a particular task will fall away. That doesn’t mean that God has abandoned them but that they have abandoned God. We do not know their eternal fate. I believe that repentance is allowed before the throne, at the end of things, because God is love. But regardless of what happens to the fallen prophet, those who have heard the words of the prophet are expected, in the words of I John, to “test the spirits.” Let me read for you I John 4:1-3: “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from

God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God.” What does it mean to test the spirits to see if they are “confessing Jesus?” On Friday evening, Jennifer Drury and I heard Rev. Harvey Drake from Emerald City Bible Fellowship preach a stirring sermon at the NAACP Prayer Summit. Pastor Drake reminded us that the core of Jesus’ message was what Jesus called the greatest commandment and its second: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. Pastor Drake also asked us how God spells love and then responded to his own question with “O-B-E-D-I-E-N-C-E.” He was referring to Jesus’ words in John 14: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” And what was Jesus’ commandment on that same night? “A new commandment I give to you: that you love one another.” So, when we “test the spirits,” when we evaluate whether or not a teaching, an attitude, an approach is truly from the Holy Spirit, we should ask ourselves, does this sound like Jesus? Does this help me to love God? Does this help me to love my neighbor? Does this help my neighbor to love God? Test the spirits.

I am left this morning, with the uncomfortable task of looking at Balaam’s inspired blessing of Israel through the eyes of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when Israel is once again a nation among nations. We know, from the history recorded in the Old Testament and beyond, that God withheld God’s blessing from Israel on several occasions, because of their disobedience. Until the time of David, they were rarely at peace in the Promised Land. In the time of David and Solomon’s successors, Israel and Judah were again plagued by war, sometimes between each other. Eventually, the Northern Kingdom was destroyed by Assyria; the Southern Kingdom led into exile in Babylon. In the analysis of the prophets, these things happened because Israel was unfaithful to God’s call. Restored for a time to their land, they continued to be at the mercy of greater empires, finally dispersed by Rome into the Jewish Diaspora, not to have a homeland to call their own again until the United Nations divided the British Mandate of Palestine in 1947.

Was the action of the U.N. an outworking of the blessing of God upon God’s people? Perhaps, although one might certainly ask what authority that body had to actually create a nation. In the most recent issue of “The Christian Century,” editor and publisher Peter W. Marty points to the truth of Leviticus 25:23, in which God says, “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants.” The inescapable truth is that there is blood on the hands of both sides in that seemingly never-ending conflict, with both the government of Israel and the government of Hamas for Gaza. Both sides have refused to honor treaties; both sides have dishonored the aspirational dictates of Torah and of the Koran, respectively. In the incessant attack and counter-attack, in the terrorism and the police actions alike, God is not honored, and neighbors’ lives are held at naught. How do we dare call one side blessed and the other, cursed?

If there is any hope in that tragic situation, or in any place where nation lifts up arms against nation or party against party, it is that the governments or institutions involved are not the people. The people of Israel and the people of Palestine are crying out for peace. Many of them are trying to buck their leaders by instituting movements of reconciliation. The wise among them know that only by loving their neighbor and honoring God, whether they call the God of Abraham and Sarah and Hagar “Adonai” or “Allah,” only by these loving endeavors can they find peace. And that, my sisters and my brothers, seems to me to be the real lesson of Pentecost for us this morning. On that first day of the week, so many years ago, the power that came upon those who were gathered in the name of Jesus was not the power of war or the power of terror or

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the power of domination. It was the power of love. May we depart from each other this morning filled with the power of love and may God guide us to use the love which comes with the power of the Holy Spirit to bless our neighbors and all we can reach of creation with the love that sustains us and blesses us as we seek to love. Thanks be to God, Amen.