

Balaam's donkey

This is one of my go to stories when I have kids...or adults for that matter...do a Bible scavenger hunt. I think I had the kids at Bethlehem do it once.

If you Google "obscure stories of the Bible," this one will always come up.

It's amusing that the Bible has a talking donkey. But what's it about?

Let's talk first about Balaam. Balaam was a sort of prophet or seer. He traveled around delivering curses for money. A king, or military commander might pay him to curse their enemy. And apparently, his curses actually had the power to work.

So Balak, king of the Moabites, hired Balaam to curse the Israelites. Why?

To understand that, we need to go back further into Israel's history. The land of Canaan is the one promised to Abraham long before this story. It's the land God promised again to Moses and the Israelites as God led them out of slavery in Egypt.

The Promised Land was a symbol of freedom and new life to them. Now, after 40 years wondering in the wilderness, they were almost there, finally. In this story, they're at the brink of entering the land of Canaan.

Problem is, there were already other people living there and blocking the path, including the Moabites. To get to the Promised Land, these other nations had to be defeated. Balak had already seen what Israel had done to some of the other nations in the region. He was afraid of them.

This whole narrative has some troubling aspects. Basically, the story says that God helped Israel invade, defeat, and even decimate the peoples living in the Promised Land and those blocking their way.

It's a story that makes it impossible for me to believe that everything in the Bible truly reveals God accurately. See the whole point of Israel's existence was for them to be the family in whom all families of the earth would be blessed.

This part of the story does not look like much of a blessing to the people who were living in the land before Israel got there. And the Bible's depiction of all of them as being evil seems terribly unlikely.

I think scripture is inspired by God's work in and through people and by the relationship between God and people. But God chose to work through imperfect beings...they could only

understand God's work within the framework of their own time and place. That's the story that gets told.

If you read the Bible as one long story, you realize that the story changes over time. The violence so often attributed to God in the most ancient parts of scripture diminishes with time.

Maybe God changed. But I think it's more likely people's understanding of God changed. And the reason it changed was because of God's ongoing revelation of Godself...a revelation that changed as the peoples' capacity to understand grew.

It culminated in God's revelation to us as Jesus. In Jesus, God suffered the violence of humanity instead of the other way around. That's how we see God truly revealed.

OK, so let's go back to Balaam. King Balak was afraid of the Israelites. He hired Balaam to deliver a curse on them so that the Moabites might win over Israel.

To his credit, Balaam is resistant to Balak from the get-go. He might have some sort of mystical power, but he knows he's no match for God. He can only say what God gives him to say.

That brings us to the donkey. I don't know why God tells Balaam to go, then goes through all this to block his path. I think it may just be to emphasize that whatever Balaam does has to be under the command of God.

We ended the reading on a cliff-hanger, right? What will Balaam do?

Well, of course God will not let Balaam curse the Israelites. Instead, Balaam blesses the Israelites. Three times Balaam goes to King Balak. Three times, instead of cursing the Israelites, Balaam blesses them.

Here's where the story gets some traction for us.

The Bible is full of stories about God speaking directly to people. There are long dialogs between God and some of the characters in the Bible.

I've not had that kind of experience. I've heard people talk about something very close to actually hearing God say something. If you've had one of those experiences I'd love to hear about it.

But most of us have experienced much more subtle communication from God...and been left wondering, how do I know? In the absence of burning bushes and talking donkeys, how do we know what God might be saying to us, when it's only a thought or a faint whisper or a breath.

How do you know God might be speaking to you? And then how can you be sure what God is telling you?

Well, I don't have all the answers to this. I can say it might not ever feel very certain. It might be more like Balaam hearing God say that he should go to King Balak, and then in the next line God is the one blocking his path.

When I left medicine to go to seminary, the whole idea of seminary came out of the blue. It landed on the fertile soil of the pain of burnout. But not all ideas that come out of the blue are from God...sometimes in fact the opposite.

So that first idea or whisper or nudge is only the beginning point. For me, each step toward seminary seemed to be confirmation that I was on the right track. The process involves looking at pros and cons...it involves paying attention to what you feel...in discernment terms those are called consolations or desolations. It involves asking where the blessings are.

Discerning what God is saying to you is best not done alone. Balaam had his donkey. The people who helped me in the discernment process served that function for me – although I probably won't tell them I compared them to a donkey.

Nonetheless, you need people who can see things you might not be able to.

And here's the most important take away from the story. When God speaks to us, when we think God is working on us to do or say something, the end result will be blessing and not curse. If that's not true, you need to rethink.

See that original promise to Abraham and Sarah – that they would be blessed so that in them, all the families of the earth would be blessed – extends now to us.

The land promised to the Israelites...a land flowing with milk and honey...is a promise we are grafted into through Jesus. Only it's not a land with boundaries and people we have to fight to get there.

Instead, it's a boundaryless land to which all are invited...a land known as the kingdom of God.

If you think God is speaking to you and wants you to do something that will not be a blessing for someone, including yourself, then you need to rethink. That doesn't mean what God wants you to do might not cause discomfort, or even pain or loss. Speaking truth can hurt...and in some situations can even be dangerous.

But if it's of God, it will in some way end in blessing for you and for the world around you.

Independence Day Reflection

I've been a history buff since college. Probably the era I've read the most about is the founding of our country. Reading history as written by a good historian makes it come alive. When they present original writings and documents from the era...when letters from the founders and speeches they gave are provided...when all those pieces are woven into the story, you get a much fuller picture of history than most of us ever got in school history classes.

In this year of racial reckoning, after delving into history from some different perspectives and learning about the ongoing impact of white supremacy, Independence Day takes on a different hue. Because of course what we call Independence Day wasn't Independence Day for slaves nor for the Indigenous people who were here thousands of years before us. Their descendants today are still often much less enamored with this holiday than we are. For those of us who have dived into anti-racist work, Independence Day has a different feel this year.

But I find myself unable to be as jaded about the 4th of July as some folks are. I love the holiday. I have fond memories of shooting bottle rockets at each other across my grandparents' yard. I remember my kids' excitement when they were younger. I still like a good fireworks display, time with family and friends, and the Waverly parade.

And I love this country.

We live in a society that has a really hard time with paradox and with holding two truths in tension. One can in fact love this country and be honest about what still needs work.

Knowing the actual history in fact I think helps with that. When Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, he and most of the other founders knew that slavery was a glaring blot on their high talk of liberty and justice for all.

But they also believed they couldn't get the country off the ground if they took it on at that point. They left it for future generations to settle. 245 years later, we're still working to finally end the impact of slavery. And the rights of Indigenous people didn't even enter public consciousness until the 20th Century.

But the founders did an amazing thing. They said no to the tyranny that characterized the biggest empire in the world at that time. They fought and died to win freedom from that tyranny. They created a style of government that did not exist in Europe. They haggled and fought and compromised over the degree states and individuals could exercise their own rights, even while creating a strong federal government.

It's worth celebrating that.

We honor those ancestors and founders best by carrying on the work of freedom and justice they started.

Singing patriotic songs in worship is often controversial in the church world. We sing worship songs to worship God, so people sometimes wonder What are we worshipping when we sing patriotic songs?

To be clear, we're not singing our final hymn to worship our country. I see this one more as a prayer. As we sing, imagine the words rising as incense in prayer to God.