

## Balaam and His Talkative Donkey: The Power of Blessing

Numbers 22:21-28; 23:5-8; Luke 6:27-8

Today I begin a series of sermons called Peculiar Treasures: Personalities from the First Testament. Why do I use the words “First Testament” rather than “Old Testament”? Because it helps restore the value to the Old Testament. Many Christians use the phrase “old” to mean “lesser”. The most important decision of the second century church was to be a people of two testaments rather than one. The first great heresy of the church came from Marcion, a rich ship builder in the church of Rome who wanted to throw out the whole Old Testament. The church said no. Both testaments are holy scripture. The First Testament, after all, was Jesus’ Bible.

Now to the phrase “peculiar treasures”. That’s us, with the emphasis on both *peculiar* and *treasure*. In Exodus 19:5, K.J.V., God says:

Ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people, for all the earth is mine.

We are a peculiar people, yes we are—and treasured. And God uses peculiar people, even us, to bless the world.

Now to Balaam and his talkative donkey. We could call this the Gospel of Mr. Ed, if any of you are old enough to remember the T.V. show about Mr. Ed, the talking horse. Or if you are younger, you might call it The Gospel of Shrek, with his talking donkey named Donkey! In today's text Balaam's donkey talks—on behalf of God and God's people. We are fascinated with the idea of talking animals. Maybe in heaven the animals can talk!

Now as I tell the story, don't be afraid to laugh. In the movie *Oh God!*, George Burns says that God is like a comedian playing to an audience afraid to laugh. Sometimes truth and humor go together.

## II

The story goes that Balak, king of Moab, was getting nervous about the growing strength of Israel. He wants to declare war on Israel, but feels, like most kings, he needs a little help from the gods. So he summons Balaam, a prophet notorious for his power to bless and to curse. "What you bless is blessed", the king said to him, "and what you curse is cursed." So go, he said, and plant a big fat curse on Israel, so we will conquer them. (Loosely translated from the Hebrew.)

God, however, tells Balaam not to go saying, “Do not curse this people because I have blessed them.” Balaam at first refused the king, but later relented, saying he’d go, but only do what God commanded him to do.

So Balaam set off on his donkey along with his two servants. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared standing in the middle of the road, a drawn sword in his hand, or *her* hand (who’s to know?). Balaam doesn’t see the angel but the *donkey* does and makes a sharp 90 degree turn and heads off into the adjoining field. Maybe animals see things we don’t! Balaam gets angry and strikes the donkey to get it back onto the road.

Then they came to a narrow path between two vineyards with a stone wall on each side. The angel appeared again. When the donkey saw the angel he skittishly tried to move around the angel and veered into the stone wall, crushing Balaam’s foot. Balaam gets even madder and thrashes the donkey. We don’t like Balaam here.

As they went on, a third time the angel appeared! This time the path was so narrow there was no way around the angel. The donkey, no fool, doesn’t look for a field to run to, doesn’t try to squeeze around the angel; he just plopped down in the middle of the road. Balaam began beating the donkey again.

Suddenly, miraculously, the donkey is given the power to speak and begins speaking in fluent Hebrew! The donkey says

What have I done unto Thee, that Thou hast smitten me these three times?

Balaam is so perturbed he doesn't seem to notice that the donkey has been given the power of speech and talks back to him as if there is an everyday occurrence.

He replied to the donkey:

Because you've made a fool of me. That's why! If I had a sword in my hand I would slay you!

Then the donkey replied, again in perfect Hebrew:

Am I not thine donkey, upon which thou hast ridden ever since I was thine unto this day? Was I ever wont to do so unto thee?

Balaam answered meekly, "No." Then the Lord opened Balaam's eyes, and now he saw the angel with the sword. In stark fear Balaam fell on his face.

Then the angel told him that the donkey had actually saved his life, that if the donkey hadn't balked, his sword would have ended him. And then he told Balaam to proceed on, but to say only what the Lord told him to say.

And so it happened. Balaam did not curse but blessed Israel. The moral of the story? *Never beat a donkey who balks and talks, for he will make a donkey*

*out of you!* No, the real meaning is what Balaam said to the Moabite king: “How can I curse what God has not cursed?” Balaam instead blessed Israel with the blessing God put in his mouth to say.

### III

God has blessed and is blessing the whole world, and we God’s peculiar people are called to bless all people with God’s blessing. We cannot, must not curse whom God has blessed. One of the most powerful things in the world is the power to bless, and one of the most damaging things is to withhold blessing. In the Sermon of the Plains in Luke, Jesus says we are to bless *everyone*, even those who have done us harm (Luke 6: 27-8).

Parents have the wonderful and terrible power to bless their children or withhold their blessing. Tragically, many withhold their blessing, often because they themselves have not been blessed by their own parents.

I think people live with the predominate sense of being either the blessed child or the unblessed child. The Bible traces it back to the beginning, Cain believing his brother Abel was blessed and not him and so killed him. Or look at Jacob the blessed, Esau the unblessed. Or Joseph who certainly thought he was the blessed son. And daughters, they were down the line of being among the blessed. And what about the parable of the prodigal son? The younger son felt

blessed, blessed enough to leave home and set out. The elder brother stayed home, feeling he had to earn his father's blessing and "slaving" to do so. But the father loved him too and said, "All that is mine is yours."

God's desire is to bless all God's children and that they experience this blessing. To the unblessed children of the world, we're called to bless them with the blessing of God, love them with the blessing of God, what they've not experienced in life, we give to them. In short, we are called to welcome them to the party of Grace.

Some believe that there is no party. Others know there is a party but think they do not belong. But all the children of God are invited to the party and we are called to roll out the red carpet and welcome all to God's feast of Grace.

Let us go to one another. Let us go out into the highways and byways, as the servants in Jesus' parable of the great feast, and invite people to the House of Blessing. And sing as God's people:

Let us build a house where love can dwell  
and all can safely live,  
a place where saints and children tell  
how hearts learn to forgive.  
Built of hope and dreams and visions,

rock of faith and vault of grace,  
here the love of Christ shall end divisions.

All are welcome, all are welcome,  
all are welcome in this place.

Amen