

I Can Follow God Too

Our scripture reading today is the story of BALAM AND HIS DONKEY, from Numbers 22:21-39:

²¹ So Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey, and went with the officials of Moab.

²² 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 he was riding on the donkey, and his two servants were with him. ²³ 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 onto the road. ²⁴ Then the angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side. ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ 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. ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ 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?" ²⁹ 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!" ³⁰ 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."

³¹ 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. ³² 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. ³³ 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 live." ³⁴ 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." ³⁵ 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.

³⁶ 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. ³⁷ 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?" ³⁸ 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." ³⁹ Then Balaam went with Balak, and they came to Kiriath-huzoth.

NRSV

The Word of God for the people of God Thanks be to God!

This Sunday we focus on animals, by blessing the ones who matter in our lives and reminding ourselves how they offer us pieces of God's kingdom and an understanding of God's grace.

This story we just heard about Balaam and his donkey is one of those stories buried in the book of Numbers. Here is what we don't hear about Balaam:

In the timeline of scripture, this story happens during the time when the people of Israel are in the desert. The time when they have followed Moses out of Israel, but have chosen fear over entering the promised land. Fear that they would be crushed as a people, and fear because they have for years been subject to pain and punishment. The people of Israel at this time are really struggling to see a clear path for themselves, and Balaam is one of the characters potentially leading them away from God.

Balaam was not known to be a good man, but he was given a gift of sharing God's words with the people. This did not make him a better man in his day, it often in fact got him in trouble because he would share God's prophecy and then be greedy in who he shared it with. In our story today he is going off to another king, not of his own people to earn money by sharing God's words with this king.

Then God stops him, and not in an ordinary or normal way of God doing this. God stops him using an animal. Now for most of us our donkey running us into things would have been enough to make us stop and think twice about the direction we are headed. Not Balaam though, he is one of those people that has to be shocked.

So as if to say, I choose who I will talk through, God has the donkey turn around to Balaam and say, "I keep running you into things, and then you hit me. Why? Don't you see God is trying to get your attention?"

Ever found moments when God is trying to get your attention? To help lead you on a new path, or the right path. Often these moments are easy to see in hindsight, but often we miss those signs from God in the moment to help lead us in God's ways.

There is a traditional Jewish tale that goes like this:

A man who considered himself poor had come to the end of his wits, and went to his rabbi for advice. "Teacher," he pleaded, "things are bad at home and getting worse. We are poor, and we all live in a small house. My wife and I, our in-laws and our six children. We are always running into each other, getting on each other's nerves. We can't go on like this!"

The rabbi thought for a minute, then said, "Do as I tell you, and things will get better. Tell me, do you own animals?"

"I have a cow, a goat and some chickens," the man responded.

"Go home, and take all of these animals into the house to live with you."

The man was flabbergasted, but he did as the rabbi had instructed.

The next day the man went back to the rabbi. "Teacher," he said, "Our life is far worse now. It is hell, our home is a barn, and life is even more chaotic. What do I do?"

“My son,” the Rabbi responded, “go home and take the chickens out of your home. God will care for you.”

So the man went home, took his chickens out of the house, and the next day went back to see the rabbi.

“Things are getting better,” the man admitted, “but the goat is smashing the house and eating everything in sight.”

“Go to your house,” the Rabbi shared, “Remove the goat from your house. God will care for you.”

The man went home, took the goat out of his house, and went back to the Rabbi the next day.

“Alright, it is better,” confessed the man, “but the cow is turning the house into a stable. We can’t keep it clean with her around. Please help!”

“You are right,” agreed the Rabbi, “go home and remove the cow from your house. God will care for you.”

So the man went home, and took the cow out of the house. The next day, he went back to the Rabbi.

“I don’t know how to thank you,” the man exclaimed, “Your advice has helped us. Now we have all the animals out of the house, our home is quiet and clean, with plenty of room, and life is good. God has cared for us.”¹

¹ Adapted from *A Goat to Many* in the book: Silf, Margaret, Collected By. *one hundred Wisdom Stories from around the world*, The Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, 2003.

As we celebrate this Blessing of the Animals it is important to remember that God often uses animals to get us to pay attention to what really matters in life. God uses their voices to welcome us home, to get us to stop and just pet them, to remember that they need the basics of life, food, water, shelter and care, so that we remember that life in God is about a certain level of simplicity and relationship. It is as if God uses animals to remind us of two things: 1. All I ask you to do is to live, you do not have to impress or revolutionize the world, you can change the world by just being you. 2. At the end of your life all that will really matter to you are the times you have loved another in my creation, loving relationships matter, with other beings and with your God.

I could find no better story than this one from 2009, about a dog in Tennessee. Ella is a dog who thought she had lost her family, and well let's just say she was a reminder that sometimes things do work out.

Watched this video:

<https://youtu.be/WDuBBN-VrLs>

Friends like Balaam may our animals not take our drive to just continue on, but instead turn to us and remind to seek God in all we do. May we be reminded of what is important by spending time caring for one another, and our world. And may God offer us the grace to remember that the things in life that matter, are love and belonging, and that in these things we will

find God's Kingdom and the power to see the world transformed.

Shalom and Amen