

NOVEMBER 29, 2020

Marion

weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

“Connecting people with Jesus Christ so all can experience his love and joy.”

SERMON “It’s a Miracle! Donkey’s Got Talent!” Numbers 22

As we head into Advent, we’re wrapping up this latest series on miracles. We’ll do one more next week to begin the Advent season, and that one will make a lot of sense. This week, however, we throw one into the mix that I’m guessing wasn’t on anyone’s radar. This story of Balaam and his talking donkey is a somewhat obscure one in scripture. Still, it counts in the realm of miracles.

Remember a few things we’ve driven home over the past weeks. A miracle is something inexplicable that happens and we attribute it to the divine. Miracles can be miracles of substance where something physical happens that we can’t explain or miracles of the heart where a heart that has free will chooses God over self, or is transformed. Finally, the miracle isn’t the meaning, but the miracle points us to meaning. The meaning, as we’ve seen, is found in the context of the miracle.

There have been nuances among the miracles we’ve considered that make them unique. I would say that among them, this miracle may be in a class by itself in terms of uniqueness. What is the miracle here? A donkey speaks. This is inexplicable. Donkeys don’t speak. It’s unnatural. There’s a whole lot of jokes that could be made on that front but I’ll leave it at that.

So what’s the context?

The Israelites have left Egypt and settled for a time near Balak’s kingdom. This was a time and culture of conquerors. This was a time when empires rose and fell. One kingdom conquered another and continued conquering and assimilating more and more territory. Naturally if you saw a huge horde of people creeping up, there would be fear that a battle would be imminent. Balak realizes his power isn’t up to the task of defeating the Israelites, and so he sends for Balaam, a man of God, to pronounce a curse on them.

After consulting with God when approached, Balaam refuses despite being offered a large reward. These are God’s people and God is clear that they are blessed, not cursed. Realizing Balak’s persistence, God releases Balaam to go to him but warns him to only pronounce what God will allow. As Balaam heads out, an angel blocks the way 3 times, ready to kill him. 3 times his donkey avoids the angel, saving his life. 3 times Balaam beats the donkey until the donkey finally looks at him and says “what’s your problem? Have I ever done anything like this before? Don’t you realize I’ve saved your bacon?” What is wild to me is that Balaam doesn’t seem to bat an eye at this talking donkey. He converses with it, and threatens the donkey further.

At which point Balaam’s eyes are opened and he sees what he couldn’t before. His donkey could, but he couldn’t. He sees the angel who sets him straight, letting him know that where he had purposed his heart on the journey was enough to merit death, and gives him another chance to get it right.

What had happened, while it isn’t explicit but is easily understood by the circumstance and further tradition surrounding the story, is that Balaam had allowed himself to be tempted by the reward offered. He had decided that he’d go along with Balak and curse Israel, which God would not allow. Balaam had decided to rebel against God, and arguably thumb his nose at God in the most disrespectful way possible.

Now, so we’re not left hanging. As the story unfolds, Balaam is obedient to God. Several times, rather than curse them, in Balak’s presence, he blesses them. Balak is incensed and as you might suspect doesn’t pony up a reward. In a lesson in defying God, Balak is then given not only prophecy of blessing over Israel, but in message after message pronounce curses on the people in Balak’s region. This is a very real lesson in not tempting God.

The context here, as I’ve said, is unique to this miracle. I want to suggest that this miracle demonstrates the amazing longsuffering of God, and abundant love that God has for each of us.

The miracles we’ve seen thus far have something in common. The miracles were protecting and providing for people whose circumstances were not fault of their own. The Israelites were protected from Egypt. This was the hard heartedness of Egypt, not offense by the Israelites. The disciples were saved from a storm, simply wrong place, wrong time. Widows were provided for and saved from death and starvation. No fault on their part, just a hard set of circumstances. Jesus fed the people on the hillside not once but twice. Their only sin was wanting to experience the healing and teaching of Jesus.

This isn’t the case here with Balaam. Balaam brings this potential punishment on his own head because of his disobedience. Unlike those other situations, he is unequivocally guilty. He is disregarding and disrespecting God. He is putting selfish gain over God’s direction, and on a grand scale over the well-being of the entire people of God.

We see something very instructive in this situation on the road. The intelligence, awareness, and common sense belong to the most unlikely creature. We’d think that the man of God would be able to see a divine messenger on the road. This should be part of his skill set. After all, we’ve just seen him conversing with God himself. But he can’t. He is quite literally blind to what God is doing.

Isn’t this what happens when we willfully choose to act contrary to God? Perhaps we might even draw from this, given the extremity of Balaam’s decision, that the more we purpose our heart against God, the blinder we get. We can’t see opportunities laid before us because we’ve already decided against them. We can’t see the cliff we’re about to drive off because we’ve already closed our eyes and barreled down the road. I’ve seen this happen too many times over the years. Even had it happen to myself a time or two. A mind is made up, many people surrounding the individual try to steer them back on course, seeing where things are headed. Stubbornly that counsel is ignored and the course is set and unfortunately ends with some kind of heartache, tragedy, or loss.

And who is the wisdom here with Balaam? The donkey! The simple, unassuming creature has eyes to see what the man of God cannot. The donkey becomes the protector and messenger. The donkey becomes the prophetic voice to the deaf and blind prophet. God uses the unexpected and unassuming many times to try to redirect our course when we get off track. Which is nothing short of a miracle. Here it is clearly a miracle of giving voice to an animal. In our lives it may be a comment from a stranger or witnessing God working through their actions. It may be the last person we'd ever expect to drop a pearl of wisdom to us. It may be a random phone call from an old friend or a family member. It could be any moment where God drops that right message at the right time that we can hear it. A miracle of timing that causes a miracle of the heart.

This happened for Balaam. The talking donkey jarred him enough that his eyes could be opened to just where he was, what he was doing, and the folly of it. And it changed his heart. It empowered and emboldened him. He performed what God had called him to perform.

Here is the most encouraging message in all of this.

God's working a miracle in our life doesn't only happen when we are innocent. God will work miracles even when we are guilty as sin. God's interaction and intervention in our lives and hearts isn't about how "good" we are. It is about how good God is. We understand, particularly because we know the grace and goodness of Jesus, that God's desire is that all the world be reconciled to God. "For He came into the world not to condemn the world but to save it."

Christ's coming and work is a clear message that God understands that sometimes there are things we simply can't do for ourselves or on our own. Sometimes our fallibility and stubbornness are such that without some help from God we're bent towards destruction. God isn't satisfied with this result.

Even, maybe particularly, when we are on this path, God is still putting circumstances and people in our path to get us back on track. God is tugging at our hearts, and drawing us through the Holy Spirit to move us on track with God's design and desire.

Don't miss the message in this miracle. The God we serve is a God that loves us without limit. We are loved to the point that when human standards might write us off, God is still working with us, forgiving us, and giving us chance after chance to get things right. He came into the world to save it. While this statement is a broad one, we are reminded that the broad narrows down to the individual. He came into the world to save you, and me. Not because of how good we are. But because of how grand He is.

BIBLE STUDY John 7

Jesus here in John 7 is observing some caution in going to Jerusalem. He's just boldly outed Himself, and is keenly aware that the plot to kill Him is in swing. The Feast of the Tabernacles was a week long festival celebrating the harvest and the exodus. His brothers encouraged Jesus to go to Jerusalem for the celebration, after all, He was an observant Jew.

The allure His brothers present isn't uncommon even today. "Look at the amazing things you can do. No one hides this stuff, they do it openly." We don't have a full sense of what His brothers were goading Him into. We see that they themselves didn't believe in Him, so at least in part it may have been to see if Jesus really was something special. On the other hand, perhaps there was a part of them that knew Jesus had something to offer and they encourage Him to share it and prove to the world, as well as themselves, who He is.

Jesus seemingly doesn't take the bait. Nor should we.

This kind of appeal is a direct appeal to the ego. Someone tells us that we can't do something and asks us to prove it. Depending on the attitude when they ask, they may be genuinely curious, or they may be setting us up for something. Either way, the push is intended to prick our ego and push us to "show off." Sometimes people may genuinely want us to exhibit our talents openly and publicly. Once again, it may be genuine. Particularly in the church we encourage this not as an act of pride, but as an act of service. In a more secular sense, this can easily be turned to an invitation for self-elevation, pride, and ultimately arrogance.

The point here being that one of the common themes in scripture is not just doing the right thing, but doing it for the right reason. To feed in to ego poking or pride stroking gives the wrong message and teases out a part of who we're not supposed to be. Certainly Jesus was being cautious, but perhaps this explains why He didn't go with His brothers to satisfy their desires, but went in secret for His own purposes.

In secret is what He chooses. Again, understandably so. Clearly the plot to kill Him is in high enough gear that people know it's afoot. He hears rumblings about Himself as He lurks through Jerusalem. The leaders are upset they can't find Him. The people are divided with some saying He is "good" and others He is a "deceiver." Once again, we see a parallel between Jesus experience and the experience of any solid person of faith. Faith requires that we make a stand. There will always be those that agree and those that do not.

A few days in, Jesus shows Himself at the Temple. Another bold move. Something to note that is repeated through this chapter is that Jesus was aware, and was able to make it through this experience because His "hour had not yet come." It wasn't time for Him to go to the cross. As we see the events unfold, I suggest that when He came forward in public, He likely knew that there was enough conversation going on about Him that the confusion between those who approved and those who did not would be sufficient to create just enough chaos for Him to get out, even if only by the skin of His teeth.

This is instructive for us. Of all the things Jesus is, He is NOT reckless. He is not without plan or intention. When we follow the calling of God, we are called to no less. As scripture tells us we need to "count the cost" before heading down a path. We need to read the territory, the people we are striving to serve, and make choices based on what is correct in the moment rather than fully throwing caution to the wind. This doesn't mean not taking risks. Clearly Jesus is at risk wandering Jerusalem. It's that the risks at least have some measure of thought before jumping into them.

As Jesus teaches, He begins once again to drop these senses that He has been sent from God. Leading by example He tells them that legitimacy doesn't come from one seeking "his own glory", but by those who seek the glory of God. So often this is difficult because it's nice to have the limelight and people who are fans. Many times this leads to a "both ways" kind of spirit with a false humility persona that is in truth basking in the adoration of those there. The glory is being sought for oneself rather than God. This is always suspicious because credibility is cast to doubt. Is what is being shared truth, or is it half truths and lies to tickle the ears of those gathered for the purpose of a glowing review?

Seeking the glory of God and God alone. Not just in word, but legitimately, confers credibility. Seeking God's glory relies on truth, love, and grace. It relies on the betterment of the other. It understands that the message may not be palatable to everyone, but it is real.

Clearly this is the case with Jesus. Some call Him demon-possessed. Some are not in the loop on the plot to kill Him. Nevertheless Jesus criticizes the criticism of Himself. Going back earlier in the gospel of John,

Jesus is clearly pointing out the hypocrisy of the accusations levelled against Him when He healed the man waiting by the pool. He pokes at their logic and conscience by reminding them that the work of circumcision, which is ritual, may be done on the Sabbath while He is being accused for one miracle that healed the full body of a man on the Sabbath. This is incongruent with the desires of God.

The short of what comes next is the chaos mentioned earlier.

Through the discourse, for Jesus part, He tries to, as He has been, somewhat subtly reveal His nature and His desires for them.

He tells them they know where He is from (Heaven), though they assume He means Galilee. Which is the confusion when He says that He's going somewhere they can't follow. He is talking about being assumed to Heaven while they are at the very least wondering if He is talking about some physical place in the world. They note perhaps He'll vacation in Greece and teach the Jews scattered there.

He tells them they don't know the one who sent Him. Does this mean Joseph? Some other teacher that's a kind of remote guru in the wilderness? He of course is referring to God, but they aren't quite all getting it. And in a way this statement is a bit of a dig at those who don't believe in Him if we go back further in John where we see Jesus claiming that people don't know God because they don't believe the one God sent.

The last day of the festival Jesus tosses His Living Water metaphor at them. Once again, it seems that it stirs up some confusion. Some seem to grasp what He's saying. Others don't. Jesus is talking Spirit through the image of the physical. Incidentally, we've seen that this hasn't been the best tactic to bring clarity. So why use it?

One of the things we've seen Jesus allude to and certainly we see it in the passages where the expression "those that have ears let them hear" occurs is that there are those looking to understand and those looking to refute. There are those open to God and those closed. Those who want to see the Messiah, and those who only want to see their own version of the Messiah. Sometimes this language is used as a sort of "code" so as not to overly tip His hand, yet still provide food for thoughtful, open, spirit desiring people to chew on and plumb for deeper truths.

Here it certainly serves a double purpose at least. As He teaches, we see that some seem to get it, some maybe half get it, others not at all. Some are perhaps afraid to acknowledge Him because they know He is on the Priest's blacklist. Some call Him Messiah, some Prophet, some echo Nathaniel's early response that there's no way a prophet can come out of Galilee. In other words, confusion and chaos. Chaos sufficient for Jesus to slip out because His hour had not yet come.

Again, this is also a scene that should be noted for anyone aspiring to make a public difference. Anyone aspiring to change things on a grand scale. Sometimes there will be chaos. Everyone hears something different and stacks it up against their own assumptions, presumptions, and personal baggage. This will lead to many different attitudes in response. Some will embrace, others reject, some will miss the point entirely, some will agree and stay on the sidelines, and so forth. The one at the forefront has to accept this reality, and work within it. This is what Jesus is doing right here.

Finally, we see the ugly really come out when people in power and status have their authority challenged. The temple guards don't do anything to arrest Jesus and the Pharisees are furious. The guards, to their credit, didn't seem to do anything because Jesus' character and teaching was so compelling. They come off as amazed and at least to some point persuaded by Him. The Pharisees bite their heads off and insult them as stupid. "Have any of us believed in Him?" In other words, "get in line with the ones who know better."

Nicodemus tries to thread the needle a little bit by appealing to due process and asking if it's fair to essentially condemn without giving a fair hearing. He too is scolded with another round of criticism that there is no way a prophet can come out of Galilee.

As this finishes the chapter we are left with a warning through these events. Do not expect people who are accustomed to being elevated and given high authority to give it up lightly. Do not expect any challenge to their status to go unanswered. Do not expect that even if one is in their circles or proximity that even mildly siding with the one they see as a threat will not be met with at least anger and sometimes even harsher punishment.

The Jewish leadership has made up their mind and the "kill Jesus" train has left the station. Their anger burns not just as Jesus, but at those who follow Him. As people of faith, doing the right thing may challenge people above us in power and authority. Those without scruples or a faith compass don't necessarily want someone pricking their conscience by doing what is correct. In fact if the conscience is pricked, it can elicit even more anger because it's not the fault of the one doing the right thing that they feel a sense of conviction.

When I was much younger I worked at a day/evening program for juvenile offender in Pittsburgh. There was abuse happening from the staff to the kids. I called it out multiple times, assuming the leadership would want to know so something could be done. Eventually I was labelled a negative influence to the company "culture" and lost my job.

Even the best intentioned, faithful actions can have harmful consequences.

