

Saved by a Donkey

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship with Communion
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
October 6, 2024 – RAINBOW BRIDGE SUNDAY
Text: Numbers 22:22-35

Ever since the idea for this Rainbow Bridge Sunday came to me over the summer, I have known I wanted to preach on this particular Scripture story – about Balaam and his donkey. It’s a great story for so many reasons. But before we can talk about it, we need to understand a little more about the book in which it is found – the Book of Numbers. This book, the fourth book in the bible, is part of the Pentateuch or the Torah, as the first five books are known. It’s title in English would lead you to think it’s about numbers and counting things but it’s not really. This book was called *Arithmoi* in the ancient Greek Septuagint version of the Hebrew Scriptures and over the centuries that has been translated in our bibles as “Numbers.” But in the original Hebrew this book was called *Bemidbar* which is translated as “in the wilderness.” This is a more accurate description of what the book is about – the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness which the Israelites had to endure after their sin of Baal worship while Moses was up on the mountaintop receiving the Ten Commandments from God. The “Numbers” title comes from the two census lists which appear at different points in the book, but they are not the primary focus. Numbers is, in fact, a very complex book which depicts the changing and evolving relationship between God, Moses and the people. It also marks the time as the “first generation” who proved to be so rebellious and unfaithful died. Then the “second generation” rose up to change the dynamic once more, this time in a positive direction where folks got along with each other, leaders were respected, and God was honored and obeyed.¹

The next thing we need to clarify is just who this Balaam guy we will be hearing about is. Biblical scholarship explains that Balaam,

¹ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* notes on the Book of Numbers, pp. 185-188.

though not an Israelite, is a key person in this story precisely because he is not an Israelite. Rather, he is “a professional seer ... with less than sterling credentials” whom God uses to bring a message to Israel that clearly articulates God’s promises and God’s will for the people.² This is truly ironic in that it is not the Israelite leadership structure that God calls to do this. It’s a man who is a possible scam artist whom God uses to proclaim God’s truth. This is really quite something, especially as we see how the story unfolds. To me, it is also proof positive that God loves the unexpected and that God has an excellent sense of humor.

Let’s look at the context of this particular story next. That is revealed in the verses we didn’t read but which explain the why of what happens with Balaam and his donkey. Balak, the king of the lands of Moab and Midian was getting worried as he heard the stories of the Israelites making their way further and further toward their territory. The text says, “Moab was in great dread ... and overcome with fear of the people of Israel.” So were the people of Midian. The leaders wondered what to do since they felt totally inadequate to deal with the encroaching threat of the Israelites. Balak decided his best bet was to send messengers to approach Balaam, a “seer” or “diviner” who was believed to be able to offer either blessings or curses on other nations, as long as a generous fee was involved. They pleaded with him on behalf of Balak to “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.”

Now this is where it gets interesting, and confusing. Balaam, who was not an Israelite, tells them he needs to check with God about this before he does anything! So he tells the messengers to stay the night while he goes to communicate with God. Sure enough, God tells Balaam he cannot return to Balak with the messengers to curse the Israelites. So they return to Balak and tell him Balaam says “no dice.” Then Balak sends the messengers back to Balaam to promise him great honor and

² Ibid. p. 222.

riches if he will just return to Balak and curse these people. Once again Balaam tells the messengers to stay the night while he confers with “the Lord my God.” This time God tells Balaam that he may return with the messengers to Balak BUT he can only do what God tells him to do in that moment. So, Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey and proceeds to travel to Balak. This is where today’s text picks up.

First, it’s important to note that God comes across in this text as a bit fickle, with perhaps even a touch of gaslighting, because the text clearly says, “God’s anger was kindled (against Balaam) because he was going.” Okay ... Weird. God said he could go but now God is angry he’s going. But this is where the donkey comes in. As they are traveling along, God’s angel – a big, scary looking warrior angel brandishing a sword – suddenly blocks the road in front of them. The thing is, Balaam can’t see the angel. Only the donkey can and the donkey veers off the road into the pasture so he can avoid the huge angry angel with the drawn sword. Balaam, who can’t see the angel, gets angry at the donkey and hits him. The donkey then tries to get back on the road, this time following a narrow path between the vineyards and a wall. Again the angel appears and the donkey scrapes against the wall because it’s so afraid. Unfortunately, this also scraped Balaam who was furious and he hits the donkey again. The donkey plods forward and this time the angel appears on a very narrow part of the road where there is no room for the donkey to move away from the angel so he just stops and refuses to move. Again, Balaam is furious and hits the donkey a third time.

This is the best part of the story. As Balaam hits the donkey for the third time, the text says “the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey and it says to Balaam, ‘What have I done to you that you struck me three times.’” Now, you would have thought that the donkey talking to him would have at least caused Balaam to pause for a moment, but it didn’t. He proceeds to answer the donkey: “Because you made a fool of me! I wish I had a sword in my hand! I would kill you right now!” The donkey responds: “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?” Balaam answers, “No.” At that moment “God opened the eyes of Balaam and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with his sword drawn.” Balaam fell to the ground. The angel asks him why he has struck the donkey when he was the one God was angry with having sent the angel. The donkey was trying to save him! And the angel tells him that if the donkey had not turned away, the angel would have killed Balaam and let the donkey live. At this point, Balaam says he will just go home if God is that upset about his journey to see Balak, but the angel says, no, you can go but only say what God tells you to when you are there. Now, the story goes on from here, and it’s an interesting one, as it recounts what happens when Balaam gets to Balak’s court. But that’s not what I want us to focus on this morning. I want us to think about this talking donkey.

How many times have we had pets that we wish we could talk with, really have a conversation with? If you’re anything like me and my family, this happens a lot. We look into those faces we love so much and we just really want to know what’s happening in those furry – or feathered – heads. It’s human nature, I think, to want to anthropomorphize – attribute human characteristics to – animals, especially ones we interact with every day. In fact, I’m guessing the most imaginative parts of our days are the ones where we are wondering what our pets are thinking, what they would say if they could talk. I know we do this a lot at my house. In fact, I am going to be very honest here and admit that at my house we each have our own “Leila voice.” You know what I mean – that funny voice you use when trying to give voice to your own pet. For a long time I thought my family was the only one who did this, but then I realized other families do as well. Not all for sure, but enough that we feel less weird about it. My point here is that our pets are so much a part of our lives that we imagine we know what they are thinking. Maybe we do. Maybe we don’t. Unfortunately the only way this question would ever be answered is by the pets themselves telling us

and, unlike Balaam's donkey, I sincerely doubt the Lord God Almighty would give voice to your cat just to tell you they are sick of the cat food you've been buying. They will find other ways to let you know!

When you think about it, though, our pets do have their own unique ways of communicating with us, of taking care of us. They know when we are stressed or sad or not feeling well. Your cat might climb into your lap for a snuggle and a purr. Your dog might lay at your feet. They know and you know they know, and it is so incredibly comforting. Pets also have incredible instincts that enable them to provide a unique insight into other people for us. I confess to being a dog person, primarily because Jack is violently allergic to cats, so dogs are what I know. And up until we got Leila, we always had big dogs. I mean BIG dogs, like 80+ pounds big. Even when I was a kid, we had big dogs, usually German Shepherds. All of these dogs of various sizes have taught me one important lesson. Those of you with cats will have to tell me if cats do the same thing. When my dogs, especially my German Shepherds and Wiley, our Coy dog, started acting hinky around someone, it was time to pay attention. Out on a walk, or when someone came to the door, sometimes campaigning, sometimes selling something, if my dog reacted poorly, I made my way away from them quickly or closed the door in their face. Admittedly, when you have a 70 pound Coy dog giving a stranger the side-eye, they tend to move on quickly. Not so much with my 15 pound Shih Tzu, but she still lets me know she doesn't like them, and they know I know. Of course, this also means that Halloween is an adventure. And trust me when I tell you a German Shepherd in a clown costume is still a German Shepherd, with big teeth and a deep growl.

So, okay, we all admit that our pets – whether furry or feathered or reptilian (yes, I admit that lizards and snakes can be pets) – these animals we love are such an important part of our lives. Yes, they somehow know how to take care of us and how to let us know what they need. But the most important thing they do is teach us about love.

When we talk about the unconditional love God has for us, we tend to use images like the love a father or mother has for their child. The weakness in this metaphor is that, if you have a really lousy relationship with one or both parents, or whoever raised you, this metaphor immediately falls flat. We all interpret God and who and what God is through the lens of our experience, especially in our formative years. If our parents or guardians were ruthlessly strict or completely uncaring, we have no real good example of unconditional love through which to approach our relationship with God. But, add a beloved pet into the mix and that all changes. Admittedly I am straying into borderline heretical territory here but I would like to suggest to you today that the unconditional love you see in the eyes of your cat when you come home at the end of a long, frustrating day – that is God looking back at you through those eyes, trying with all her might to love you beyond your exhaustion and frustration. Or, when your dog of any size tries to crash through the window to protect you from the marauding UPS or Fed Ex guy, that’s how fiercely God wants to protect you. Or, when you are enthralled by the birds flitting around your feeders and even the squirrels gathering up the seed that falls to the ground, they reveal all the beauty and wonder of God’s Creation that God surrounds you with every day.

And in case you are wondering, I am not a vegan or a vegetarian, so I know when I am eating animal protein that an animal gave its life for that meal. That’s when I am grateful that I discovered through the writings of Robin Wall Kimmerer the Native American/First Peoples practice invoked when hunting or even taking animals from their own herds or flocks. Before the animal is killed, they would ask its permission and give God thanks for the gift of this animal. This deep understanding of the ways of the natural world and the honor and reverence with which the First Peoples approach it is a lesson we should have learned from them eons ago. But in our pride-filled, arrogant and sinful ways, we just ignored them because they were “savages,” and we

were the smart ones. And haven't we discovered what nonsense that is. More about this next Sunday as we celebrate Indigenous Peoples Sunday.

For now, all I ask is that on this Rainbow Sunday when we remember and honor all those loved ones who graced our lives with their purrs and their shredded squeaky toys, their growls at strangers and their hysterical antics, we pause to thank God for the incredible gifts they have already given us just by coming into our lives. May their memories sustain us and give us hope and strength for the future. May they continue to bring out the best parts of us as we love them through their too short span of years with us. May their language of love transcend their loss from our everyday lives and may we be better persons for having loved them. May their lessons on unconditional love continue to open up the pathways of our lives before us, because we know that's what they want for us, even as they wait for us at the end of it, across the Rainbow Bridge. Amen.