

October 20, 2013
Weird Stories in the Bible

Falling on Deaf Ears
Numbers 22:21-34

Opening words: This is sermon number five in my newest sermon series, *Weird Stories in the Bible*. I will be glad to admit I did not select these passages. They came from our high school class, who assigned that task from one question-filled young man. He did a wonderful job of selecting some odd stories. This is the truth. They are stories that come from the Bible, but they don't sound Biblical. For this reason, they are not read annually like the nativity or the passion. This may be the only time you will ever hear them read in church. Maybe that is a good thing?

Today, we are in the Old Testament book of Numbers. It covers the 38-year period the Hebrews wandered in the wilderness after the establishment of the covenant at Sinai. Tradition tells us Moses is the author of the book. Yet, by the twenty-second chapter, Moses is dead and the people are waiting to enter the Promised Land. The main character in today's story is Balaam. Who is Balaam? He was a prophet, who refused to listen to God. May God give you ears to hear this morning's scripture lesson, Numbers 22:21-34. Let me call this message *Falling on Deaf Ears*.

Numbers 22:21-34 Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey and went with the Moabite officials. ²² But God was very angry when he went, and the angel of the LORD stood in the road to oppose him. Balaam was riding on his donkey, and his two servants were with him. ²³ When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road with a drawn sword in his hand, it turned off the road into a field. Balaam beat it to get it back on the road. ²⁴ Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path through the vineyards, with walls on both sides. ²⁵ When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, it pressed close to the wall, crushing Balaam's foot against it. So he beat the donkey again. ²⁶ Then the angel of the LORD moved on ahead and stood in a narrow place where there was no room 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 he was angry and beat it with his staff. ²⁸ Then the LORD opened the donkey's mouth, and it said to Balaam, "What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?" ²⁹ Balaam answered the donkey, "You have made a fool of me! If only I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now." ³⁰ The donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?" "No," he said. ³¹ Then the LORD opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road with his sword drawn. So he bowed low and fell facedown. ³² The angel of the LORD asked him, "Why have you beaten your donkey these three times? I have come here to oppose you because your path is a reckless one before me. ³³ The donkey saw me and turned away from me these three times. If it had not turned away, I would certainly have killed you by now, but I would have spared it."

³⁴ Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, "I have sinned. I did not realize you were standing in the road to oppose me. Now if you are displeased, I will go back."

Seven-month-old Finn Jordan was in need of a babysitter. His parents found twenty-two year-old Alexis Khan. After clearing all the various backgrounds checks, she seemed to be the perfect fit. Everything seemed to be fine during the first five months. Then something strange happened. The family dog, Killian, began to act strangely when the babysitter arrived for duty. Positioning himself between the baby and the babysitter, the dog began to bark as the hair stood up on his back. The parents didn't know how to respond to their dog's odd behavior, so they left their cell phone recording under the couch. What they heard was their greatest fear. Khan had been verbally abusing their son. Nearly a year later, the babysitter was found guilty of assault and battery. She is serving a three year sentence and her name has been placed on a register with other child abusers. The villain in this story is Alexis Khan. The hero in this story is Killian, a black lab and German shepherd mix. I am so glad the parents listened to their dog.

In my home we have two pets. We have a long-haired white cat by the name of Madelyn. I am not really sure what she adds to our home. However, she does tell us when it is time to feed her and she does tell us she wants the water to drip in the sink. We also have a 13-inch beagle by the name of Macy. She is a wonderful pet, who loves and is loved by everyone. She tells me when she wants to go out, eat or play. She tells the entire neighborhood when the mail and the newspaper are delivered. This is the question you must answer today. Why is it so easy for us to communicate with our family pets and so difficult to communicate with God? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

This morning we find ourselves in the twenty-second chapter of Numbers. It is a time of change for God's Chosen People. The great law giver, Moses, is dead and the people are about to enter the Promised Land. They were excited about their future. The problem is, not everyone is excited about them. They were a new political force in that area of the world. Every nation responded to them in a different way. For example, the people of Moab only wished them harm. Prior to our reading, we are told the Moabite king, Balak, wanted the Hebrews to be cursed. The one who was to deliver the curse was Balaam. Do you remember the opening words? Balaam was a prophet of God. He is a prophet who was to curse God's Chosen people. What is a prophet to do? Do you please the king of your people, or do you please God? At first, the answer is the king. As our story begins, Balaam intends to deliver the curse, but God tries to stop him. Three times God tries to stop him by sending an angel. Three times the prophet is blind to the angel and deaf to God's communications. However, all is not lost. The most unlikely character in the story, a donkey, sees the angel and tries to frustrate Balaam's progress. I hate to say it, but the story includes some animal abuse. Balaam beats the donkey with his staff. It is only at that moment that God opens the animal's mouth and the prophet listens. In the end, the curse is not delivered, and the prophet returns home.

So what does this ancient story teach us? Why is the ancient story important to our development as disciples of Jesus Christ? The answer to those two questions can be distilled down to one word, communication. In the story, God tries to communicate with Balaam three times without success. How many times has God tried to communicate with you without success? Do you see where I am going? Every day we play the part of Balaam. God is trying to communicate with us, but our ears are deaf. The problem is not God; the problem is us.

Today, I want to talk about three reasons we have a difficult time listening to God. They are the same reasons we don't listen to the people in our lives. Some people can't hear because their ears are physically damaged. This sermon is not about those individuals. This sermon is directed at those of us who have perfect hearing, yet fail to listen. Sometimes we don't listen because we are **preoccupied**. We live in a busy, fast-paced world that demands our attention. How much attention do you give God? Sometimes we don't listen because we are **preconditioned**. These are the things we learned from our parents. However, sometimes our parents were wrong. One of those things are our prejudices. They help block out God's word. Sometimes we don't listen because we are **predetermined**. It doesn't really matter what is being communicated, because we have already made up our minds. Earnest Hemingway once said, *"I like to listen. I have learned a great deal from listening carefully. Most people never listen."* So if you are ready to begin, say, **"Amen!"**

Preoccupied

Sometimes we don't hear because we are preoccupied. How many of you have tuned me out because you are preoccupied? Something else has your attention. It may be a problem you are facing. It may be something that happened in the hallway. It maybe some future event. How many of you wish I would stop talking so you could go and eat some ham? I fight being preoccupied so I can listen to the people in my life. I learned that the hard way.

When I was in college, I lived in a dormitory. In the basement there was a common room. It was a place to relax and visit. There was a television set, ping pong table and some couches. One day I walked through and found another student sitting on the couch deep in thought. I looked at him and said, "So what's new?" He responded by saying, "I have to drop out of school; my mother has cancer. The doctor tells us she doesn't have much time left." I put my money in the pop machine and said to the same student, "So what are you doing this weekend?" He said, "You didn't hear me. My mother has cancer, so I am dropping out of school." I felt about two inches tall, and listened to him for an hour. Have you ever not listened to someone because you were preoccupied? If you confess that has happened to you, say, **"Amen!"** God tried to speak to Balaam three times. How many times has he tried to speak to you?

Preconditioned

One of the lost names in American history is Elizabeth Blackwell. She was the first female doctor in America. She started her practice in New York City in 1851. She struggled at first. No one would rent office space to her, and no one wanted to be her patient. She announced that everyone would be treated for free. Still, she sat in her empty office for weeks because everyone knew women can't be doctors. Finally, a woman showed up. She was in such agony, she didn't care who treated her. All she wanted was relief. Blackwell treated the woman, who recovered. She told everyone in her life about this wonderful woman doctor. The clinic began to thrive, and is now a branch of the New York Infirmary on East Fifteenth Street. That story is a story of sexism, a form of prejudicial behavior. It is not the only one.

Our world is filled with all kinds of prejudices. You know it is true. We are prejudiced against other races. We have prejudices against other economic groups. We have prejudices against other communities, states and countries. We have prejudices against other education levels and vocations. Each one of these prejudices makes it harder for us to hear God's voice. Each one acts like a filter. Sociologists tell us three things about our prejudices. First, our prejudices reveal our insecurities. We are most threatened by those groups we are prejudiced against. Second, they give us a false sense of security. We only think we have the upper hand. Third, we learn our prejudices from our parents. That means our children will learn their prejudices from us. Sometimes we don't hear because we are preconditioned. How many prejudices do you hold? How preconditioned are you? God loves each one of us equally. God doesn't play favorites. God can't be prejudiced. If you really want to hear God, then you have to remove all the prejudices you hold in your life. If you have some work to do in this area, say, **"Amen!"**

Some don't listen because we are preoccupied. Some don't listen because we are preconditioned. God tried to speak to Balaam three times. How many times has he tried to speak to you?

Predetermined

Some don't listen because they are predetermined. Sometimes we actually hear the words, but we decide to reject them. How many times has your doctor told you to stop smoking and start exercising? How many times has your financial adviser told you to stop spending and start saving? I understand this concept, because the church is filled with predetermined listeners. Let me give you an example.

We all know and love John 3:16, *God so loved the world he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.* Even the most Biblically illiterate person knows that verse. Even the most critical church member loves that verse. Everyone loves it because everyone wants to go to heaven. We don't have the same feelings about Leviticus 27:30. It says, *"Every tithe of the land is the Lord's. It is holy to the Lord."* In other words, the first ten percent of your income goes to God. How many people do you know who love that verse? How many people do you know who practice that verse? Why is it we love John 3:16 and ignore Leviticus 27:30?

The answer is obvious. Everyone wants to go to heaven for doing nothing. No one wants to give away their money. Do you see what we do? We only listen to the Bible verses we like. We hear all the words. We accept some and reject others. Some don't listen because they are predetermined. If you find yourself a little uncomfortable at this moment, say, "**Amen!**" Some don't listen because we are preoccupied. Some don't listen because we are preconditioned. Some don't listen because they are predetermined. God tried to speak to Balaam three times. How many times has he tried to speak to you?

I love this story: History tells us Franklin Roosevelt hated the long receiving lines during his days in the White House. He complained that no one really paid any attention to what was said. One day, during a reception, he decided to try an experiment. To each person who passed down the line and shook his hand, he murmured, "I murdered my grandmother this morning." The guests responded with phrases like, "Marvelous!" "Keep up the good work." "We are proud of you." "God bless you, sir." It was not till the end of the line, while greeting the ambassador from Bolivia, that his words were actually heard. Nonplussed, the ambassador leaned over and whispered, "I'm sure she had it coming."

Why is it so easy for us to communicate with our family pets and so difficult for us to communicate with God? The problem isn't God; the problem is us. God tries to communicate with us in scripture, but we don't read the Bible. God tries to communicate with us through the Holy Spirit, but our hearts are hard. God tries to communicate with us through dreams, but we forget them. God tries to communicate with us through other believers, but we want to be left alone. God tries to communicate with us through prayer, but our prayers are filled with selfishness. Most have never meditated, because they don't want to hear what God is saying. God tries to communicate with us, but we don't listen. To get Balaam's attention, God had to speak through an ass. What does God have to do to get your attention? There is an old Jewish Proverb that says, "*No one is more deaf than a man who not listen.*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"