

April 17, 2016

Animal Planet  
*Balaam's Donkey*  
Numbers 22:21-34

**Opening words:** Nobel Prize winner Anatole France once said, "*Until one is loved by an animal, a part of one's soul remains unawakened.*" As an animal lover myself, I can agree with that quote. There has never been a time when animals were not part of my home. In my home right now I have two pets: Madelyn, who is very smart and has us well trained, is a long haired white cat. Macy, the best dog in the world, is my thirteen-inch beagle. You know it is true. We consider our pets part of our family.

Have you ever stopped to consider how many animals are found in the Bible? This is sermon number two in my four-part sermon series, *Animal Planet*. Last week, we began by looking at Daniel's lions. That story is about faith and courage. The next two weeks we will look at Jezebel's dogs and Moses' calf. Those stories are about accountability and priorities. Today, we are going to look at Balaam's donkey. It's a story about discerning God's will.

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. Our scripture reading for today is Numbers 22:21-34. I could have called this message *Animal Abuse* but instead I have called it *Balaam's Donkey*.

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**Numbers 22:21-34** <sup>21</sup> Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey and went with the Moabite officials. <sup>22</sup> 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. <sup>23</sup> 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.

<sup>24</sup> Then the angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path through the vineyards, with walls on both sides. <sup>25</sup> 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.

<sup>26</sup> 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. <sup>27</sup> When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it lay down under Balaam, and he was angry and beat it with his staff. <sup>28</sup> 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?"

<sup>29</sup> 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."

<sup>30</sup> 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.

<sup>31</sup> 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.

<sup>32</sup> 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."<sup>33</sup> 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."

<sup>34</sup> 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."

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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 are 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. The brother was caught in the middle, between his king and God. 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 does something extremely unusual to get the prophet to listen. He opens the animal's mouth and the prophet listens. In the end, the curse is not delivered, and the prophet returns home.

Let me ask you two questions. First, what does this ancient story teach us? Second, why is the ancient Old Testament 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 tried 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 why we have a hard 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. According to the federal government, 14% of Americans have impaired hearing. The vast majority are over 65 years old. That is one of the reasons we struggle with the sound system here. Younger ears and older ears aren't the same. This sermon is not directed at the hearing impaired. This sermon is directed at those of us who have perfect hearing, yet fail to hear. Earnest Hemingway once said, *"I like to listen. I have learned a great deal from listening carefully. Most people never listen."* If you will admit you have a hard time listening, then say, **"Amen!"**

### **Preoccupied**

Sometimes we don't hear because we are preoccupied. How many of you have tuned me out already 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 lunch? I know it is true because I fight preoccupation all the time. I have always fought with preoccupation. It is a form of selfishness. Our preoccupations deafen our ears. 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. It was nothing fancy. 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 looked at me and said, "You didn't hear me. My mother has cancer. She is going to die. 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 will confess you have a hard time hearing at times because of preoccupation, say, **"Amen!"** God tried to speak to Balaam three times. How many times has he tried to speak to you?

### **Preconditioned**

One of the dark days of American history was December 7, 1941. You know the date. How could you ever forget Pearl Harbor? The Japanese Empire attacked our Naval Base and the United States would enter World War II. So much happened over the next few years. It is easy to glorify past victories, but it is hard to forget all the ugliness. Part of the ugliness was the creation of American internment camps. They were created by Franklin D. Roosevelt to hold Japanese Americans. Executive Order 9066, which created those camps, was issued less than three months after Pearl Harbor. In time, approximately 120,000 lived in those camps. 62% of the internees were United States citizens. Military historians tells us they were not created due to any military threat.

They were created for one reason: racism! They were guilty of nothing but having Japanese ancestors. No matter how you spin it, it was ugly. That ugliness is not an isolated case.

Our world is filled with prejudicial behavior. 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. Our prejudices act like a filter. They make it harder for us to hear God's voice.

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. If you really want to hear God, then you have to remove all your prejudices. If you have some work to do in that 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**

Sometimes we don't listen because we are predetermined. In other words, 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 be loved and 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 they are preoccupied. Some don't listen because they 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? There is an old Jewish Proverb that says, *"No one is more deaf than a man who won't listen."*

Shelbyville, Indiana is 32 miles southeast of Indianapolis. It is the home of Erin Cramer. Like many of us, she is a dog lover. In 2014, she went to the local animal shelter and adopted a rescue dog, Clobber. She thought she was saving the dog's life, but it turned out that the dog saved her life. Several months after Clobber came to live with the family, Erin was home sick. Periodically, Erin would get up to let Clobber outside. The problem was Clobber refused to go outside. (It is important that you take your dog out occasionally.) Instead, Clobber acted strangely and kept going into the laundry room, whining and growling every step. Tired of the strange behavior, Erin walked in the laundry room and discovered the problem. The hot water tank was leaking and the room had filled with dangerous levels of gas. Erin Cramer will tell you Clobber saved her life. She said, "I am glad I finally listened to her." I am glad she listened to her dog too. I wonder how many pets have saved their owner's lives through the years? It is important that we listen to our pets. However, it is more important to listen to God.

Why is it so easy for us to listen to 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 a donkey. What does God have to do to get your attention?

Will you pray with me?