

7.12.26 **Wait...They're In the Bible? When God Gets Your Attention**
Balaam a Prophet, A Talking Donkey and an Angel

Last week we kicked off our summer series, *Wait... They're in the Bible?* by meeting Eutychus—the young man who fell asleep during Paul's sermon and fell out a window...

Only to discover that God's grace always meets us wherever we're at, bringing life, hope, and new possibilities.

Today, we move from a sleepy church member to a talking donkey.

And if you're visiting with us this morning in-person or online, and thinking, "Surely that's not really in the Bible..."

Well let me tell you...Oh yes. It is.

And as strange as this story sounds, it contains one of **the** most important spiritual truths we can learn: God is always speaking.

The question is whether we're listening.

But like last week and probably in most of our summer series of quirky characters...let me help set the scene.

This week we're poking into the Hebrew Scriptures—specifically the book of Numbers.

It's often called the wilderness book because it tells the story of God's people after they've been set free from slavery, but before they've reached the life God has promised them.

It's a story about the long journey of learning to trust God...and honestly, isn't that where most of us spend a good part of our lives?

Today's scripture reading is right in the middle of that wilderness journey, where we meet one of the Bible's most unexpected characters.

But before we get to the donkey...

we need to meet the man riding it—Balaam.

Balaam wasn't an Israelite.

He was a prophet-for-hire who lived far from God's people.

Kings and rulers would seek him out because he had a reputation.

People believed that if Balaam blessed someone, they would be blessed.

If he cursed someone, they would be cursed.

In other words, Balaam was respected, influential,

AND spiritually connected.

And that's what makes this story so fascinating.

Because the problem isn't that Balaam is wicked...

he's not a bad guy looking for trouble.

The problem is that Balaam is convinced...

he already knows what he's doing.

Historically speaking, it's important to note that as Ch 22 begins, the Israelites are moving across the wilderness.

Word has spread about what their God had done—rescued them, provided for them, & gave them victories over powerful kings along the way. THAT terrified the king of Moab.

He sees God's people growing stronger and stronger, so he decides to send messengers with money to hire Balaam to curse the Israelites.

To which we learn that God says to Balaam: “No, don't do that.”

And so Balaam says “No can do” to the king of Moab.

So the king sends more money. More prestige. More opportunity.

So Balaam decides to ask God AGAIN...who says, “Ok, go with them... but make sure you do absolutely nothing other than what I tell you.

*Well somehow Balaam began moving in a direction God never intended. Which is often how trouble starts.

Not with rebellion...but with rationalization.

Not because we're bad...but because we've convinced ourselves, that what WE want and what God wants are the same thing.

And like Balaam, sometimes we keep asking...
because we don't like the answer we've already received.

And that's where our story begins...**Numbers 22:21-35 The Message**
²¹⁻²³ Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey, and went off with the noblemen from Moab. As he was going, though, God's anger flared.

The angel of God stood in the road to block his way.

Balaam was riding his donkey, accompanied by his two servants.

When the donkey saw the angel blocking the road & brandishing a sword, she veered off the road into the ditch.

Balaam beat the donkey and got her back on the road.

²⁴⁻²⁵ But as they were going through a vineyard, with a fence on either side, the donkey again saw God's angel blocking the way & veered into the fence, crushing Balaam's foot against the fence. Balaam hit her again.

²⁶⁻²⁷ God's angel blocked the way yet again—a very narrow passage this time; there was no getting through on the right or left.

Seeing the angel, Balaam's donkey sat down under him.

Balaam lost his temper; he beat the donkey with his stick.

²⁸ Then God gave speech to the donkey. She said to Balaam:

“What have I ever done to you that you have beat me these three times?”

²⁹ Balaam said, “Because you've been playing games with me!

If I had a sword I would have killed you by now.”

³⁰ The donkey said to Balaam, “Am I not your trusty donkey on whom you've ridden for years right up until now?

Have I ever done anything like this to you before? Have I?”

He said, “No.”

³¹ Then God helped Balaam see what was going on:

He saw God's angel blocking the way, brandishing a sword.

Balaam fell to the ground, his face in the dirt.

³²⁻³³ God's angel said to him:

“Why have you beaten your poor donkey these three times?

I have come here to block your way

because you're getting way ahead of yourself.

The donkey saw me and turned away from me these three times.

If she hadn't, I would have killed you by this time,

but not the donkey. I would have let her off.”

³⁴ Balaam said to God's angel, “I have sinned.

I had no idea you were standing in the road blocking my way.

If you don't like what I'm doing, I'll head back.”

³⁵ But God's angel said to Balaam, “Go ahead and go with them.

But only say what I tell you to say—absolutely no other word.”

And so Balaam continued to go with king Balak's nobles.

*This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God!

Talk about a God of holy surprises!

I see three powerful movements in this amazing story

that I want to dive into this morning.

First is the gift of the Holy Interruption.

One of my favorite details in this story is that Balaam
thinks the donkey is the problem.

~Three times the donkey stops.

~Three times the donkey refuses to move.

~Three times Balaam gets frustrated & angry.

Because the donkey is interrupting his plans...

this possible sweet deal with the king of Moab.

And...I gotta say...isn't that often how life feels? Right?

~We have a plan.

~A timeline.

~A destination.

~A vision of how things are supposed to unfold...

And then something gets in the way.

Balaam thinks the donkey is literally standing in his way.

But the donkey isn't standing in the way.

The donkey is standing between Balaam and disaster.

As a pastor, I've learned that some of the best things in ministry have happened because my carefully planned schedule was interrupted. TRUTH.

~Someone stopped by my office.

~A phone call came.

~A hospital visit wasn't on my calendar.

At the time, it felt like my plans were being disrupted.

But time and time again, looking back...

I realized all these “interruptions” were without a doubt...
the very places where God was already at work
and inviting me to be a part of in some kind of way.

I imagine that every one of us could tell a story like that.

- A time when life didn't go as planned.
- A relationship that didn't work.
- A job you didn't get.
- An illness that has completely sidelined you.
- A move that never happened.
- A prayer that wasn't answered the way you hoped.
- A change we didn't want.

At the time it may have felt frustrating and churned up anger...

but looking back, it became one of God's greatest surprising gifts.

I call those times—God’s Holy Interruptions of grace and love.

Remember in today’s story, that for Balaam,

the donkey wasn't the problem...The donkey was the protection.

Three times she saved Balaam from the Angel of the Lord.

Then comes the shocking moment everyone remembers, the donkey talks.
And let's be honest...this is where people may stop reading,
and laughingly say: "Wait...That's the Bible?"
And you know...maybe we're supposed to.

Because Scripture is often more honest, more surprising,
and more imaginative than we give it credit for.

But here's the thing:

The miracle isn't really that the donkey talks.

The **miracle** is that God will go to extraordinary lengths
to get Balaam's attention.

God uses the one thing Balaam least expects...a donkey.

Not a prophet. Not a king. Not a vision. A donkey.

Which leads us to the 2nd powerful movement in this story.

God Speaks in Unexpected Ways

Friends, that's one of the great themes of Scripture.

God speaks through burning bushes.

~Through dreams.

~Through children.

~Through outsiders.

~Through fishermen.

~Through women whom society ignored.

~Through servants.

~Through strangers.

~And yes, occasionally through donkeys...

****Because God isn't limited by our expectations...**

-Sometimes God speaks through a friend who tells us the truth
we didn't want to hear.

-Sometimes through a child who asks a question we can't answer.

-Sometimes through a church member who sees something we don't.

-Sometimes through a time of helping someone.

-Sometimes through a setback.

- Sometimes through silence. AND
- Many times through an interruption.

The question isn't whether God is speaking...

The question is whether we're paying attention...and listening.

I've noticed over the years that ministry rarely unfolds exactly the way we planned it.

Really think about it for a moment...

Some of the most meaningful moments at FMC probably weren't on anyone's calendar.

- A conversation after worship that lasted 5 minutes longer than expected...
- Sitting beside someone in a hospital room...
- Sharing a cup of coffee with someone who simply needed to be heard...
- Serving shoulder to shoulder on a mission trip...
- Praying around a kitchen table...
- Watching strangers become friends while setting up for a church event...

Those aren't interruptions to ministry.

Those are often the very moments ministry happens.

That's where God so often gets our attention.

God has a remarkable way of working through ordinary people...
in ordinary moments...

to accomplish extraordinary things.

And that's what happened in today's story.

God finally opens Balaam's eyes.

And suddenly he sees what the donkey had seen all along.

The angel. The danger. The truth.

The reality that God had been present the entire time...

He just didn't see it.

Which leads to the 3rd movement of this incredible story
from the Hebrew scriptures: **God Is Persistent**

God doesn't give up on Balaam. God could have.
God had every reason to. But God keeps pursuing him.
Keeps warning him. Keeps interrupting him. Keeps speaking.
Keeps trying to get his attention. And isn't that good news?

Because there are times when we've all missed the signs.

~Ignored the nudges.

~Resisted the truth.

~Taken the long way around.

Yet God keeps showing up.

~Keeps calling.

~Keeps inviting.

~Keeps pursuing.

~Keeps finding a way...

But not because God is angry...

Because God loves us too much to let us keep going blindly...

Convinced we already know what we're doing;

We already know what God wants & expects for us.

Oh but God is persistent!

And that is such an incredible gift of grace.

The story of Balaam's donkey isn't really about a talking animal.

It's about a God who refuses to stop speaking.

~A God who uses unexpected people and surprising moments.

~A God who sometimes interrupts us to protect us.

~A God who is persistent enough to keep pursuing us
even when we don't immediately understand.

I think its fair to say that we've all had a donkey in our lives, Amen?

So perhaps the question for us this week is:

Where might God be desperately trying to get our attention?

Let's be on the watch for Holy interruptions!

Because the God who spoke through a donkey is still speaking today.

And sometimes the most faithful thing we can do is:

Stop, Listen, & Ask: "Lord, what are you trying to show me?"

May it be so! Amen & amen.