

## I LOVE TO TELL THE STORY: BALAAM

Numbers 22:21-31

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Let us pray:

There is a part of me that sometimes wonders how willing we are to dive into your Word and your messages for us. Whether we are afraid to hear the message or are reluctant to understand what you are really saying to us. We really do long to hear your voice Oh God, and so we simply pray that you would speak. Then the second part of that might be that we would listen courageously. Search us, break us, and send us as your sons and daughters. May we be bold to listen and even bolder to tell your story, the story of Jesus and his love. Amen.

Last week in worship, I started with reading you a story by Dr. Seuss. This week, I want to begin by telling you a story. Now in order for you to dive into the story, I feel like you need to know three simple things. First - our youngest daughter Elisabeth has two best friends named Josi. Second important fact about this story is that school Josi lives 22 minutes north of us, Church Josi lives 22 minutes south of us. The third important fact for this story is that our Elisabeth and school Josi go to the Seneca Valley High School.

Last weekend on Friday when Elisabeth and I were out and about, I asked some random dad questions like whether she had any plans with her friends over the weekend. At that point, she told me that they had not planned anything. I guess people were just kinda "chill."

Saturday rolled around and there were several things happening around the house including Elisabeth going for her learner's permit that afternoon. By the way - she passed - and we now have a newly permitted driver in the household. When Tracy and Elisabeth returned home that afternoon, they told me that Elisabeth now had plans for the night, and she wanted to go to a play with Josi. In the course of the conversation, I only asked one question - "Where is the play?" The answer I got was, "at the High School, I think."

After returning from a run in the afternoon, I went upstairs to find that Elisabeth was getting ready so I asked when she wanted to leave. Her response to me was, "about 5:30 p.m. and if you could take me to Josi's house that would be great."

At 5:30 in the afternoon that Saturday, Elisabeth and I got in the car, left our neighborhood, took a left onto Freedom Road, traveled toward Interstate 79, crossed over 79 and headed north.

Along the way - we had a pleasant conversation about her day and the permit test. I asked about the play and what it was about. She did not know much but she knew that a lot of people spent the whole night together to develop a play and a story. She thought it was a club or something. I asked her if she knew anyone in the play and her response was, "no - but Josi does."

We traveled a little longer talking about random things and eventually we got to the Evans City Exit and 528. I turned right onto route 528, or Lindsay Road as some call it, and we headed down the first hill.

It was at this point that Elisabeth says, "Where are you going?" I said, "I thought you said I was taking you to Josi's not the high school."

"I did," she said, "but why are you going this way?" I said, "I thought that Josi lived outside of Evans City?" To which Elisabeth responded, "Josi Pietryzk!"

Head hanging low - I found the next turn around, made my way back to 79 and made our way to the Pietryzk house. On our way, I asked a lot of questions, but one that I think is important was that I asked if she thought at any point that we were going the wrong way. She said, "Well I did think that it looked an awful lot like how we go to my trumpet lesson."

I have shared that story a few times recently, most notably with her sisters who got a big kick out of it. I love telling stories and laughing because not only does it share a bit of our vulnerability, but also reveals some truths about us.

If there is one thing that is absolutely clear about this story about going to the wrong Josi's house is that I made a lot of assumptions. It was not Elisabeth's fault that I drove north. I did not ask any questions. I did not ask which Josi, which high school, and I really did not ask how they were getting from Josi's house to the play. All of them - my fault because I assumed too much and didn't ask some REALLY important questions along the way.

That is why I love stories. Some of them are pointless and simply fun to tell. They are silly or embarrassing, they are adventurous and take us to places that we might never go on our own. Love stories that have a point, or reveal simple and often deep truths. Stories are important to who we are. Stories are even more important as they reveal the truth of who God is in our lives.

That why we thought it would be fun to tell some stories from the Bible in our series this February. Some of the oft missed or overlooked stories in the Bible all have one thing in common, and that is they reveal things to us. **Some of the most important things for us to discover in any story from the Bible are truths it reveals about us, truths it reveals about others, and most importantly truths it reveals about who God is in our lives.**

In order to get to them, sometimes we have to ask those important questions. We can just make assumptions along the way because sometimes the story does not just come out and tell us. **When reading a story from Scripture, it is important for us to ask questions. It is important to sit back and ask, "What does this story say about me, what does it say about others?' and most importantly, 'what does it say about God?'"**

Balaam is one of those stories. It is fun to dig into and really ask some of those questions. It is not a simple story, although many of us know the part of the story that we shared today about Balaam and his donkey. It is probably the better known part of the story and one that is fun to share.

Those stories are often complex and deep. We could unpack it for hours and probably share multiple messages from it. It is part of a larger backdrop and a larger story of who God is in the midst of that beautiful story of the Exodus. Even more importantly, we find it in one of those places that we might not naturally gravitate to when we are looking for a story to read.

It is that we go all the way to the beginning of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Numbers is the fourth book of the bible and the fourth book of the Pentateuch. **The Pentateuch is known as the first five books.** It was a revelation in the early days of the Israelite people of who God is, it was the story of God's covenant and the rich promise of God when we enter into that covenant.

It is also the story of how God's people continued to wrestle, both literally and figuratively with God, struggling to live the way that God wants us to live.

Drop yourselves into the backdrop of the story. Numbers - the whole book of numbers - follows the story of the Israelites following the escape from Egypt. It places us in the midst of the story in that first year following the revelation of God's law to Moses in Sinai and continues all the way for 38 years as the people traveled through the wilderness.

As with much of the scripture, Numbers tells the story of how people murmur and clamber for the ways things used to be back in Egypt. The great story of Moses striking the rock and the story of the bronze serpent on a pole are also found in Numbers. Numbers also tells of unbelief, and ungrateful people, and acts of rebellion. People are charged with establishing God's kingdom, to invade a fallen humanity and to bring people to a place of redemption.

It is that we find ourselves in the midst of this larger story of the people traveling in the wilderness. They are making their way across the desert and they are encountering trouble and difficulty along the way. Miriam and Aaron both die and Moses is bringing his people closer and closer to the Promised Land.

At this point, the Israelites are a great and foreboding people. They make their way into the land of the Moabites. They have already defeated a great army in the Amorites and the king of Moab fears that they could do the same.

Balak, the king of the Moabites did not think he could defeat the troops and so he enlists the help of a foreign prophet and diviner named Balaam. His request is simple, "you have the power to bless those that you seek to bless and curse those that you wish to curse. Curse the army's of the Israelites so that we might prevail."

**While it important for us to know that Balaam was a foreign diviner and prophet,** it is also important to **know that God spoke to Balaam and Balaam heard him.** That is not to say that Balaam always did what he said that he would do, but God did indeed speak to and through him.

Balaam is not always regarded in a positive light because he was seen as being opportunistic and greedy. Some have argued that he was hungry only for money that the king offered and more interested in his own gain, and his own idolatry and his own magic.

There is this back and forth between the ensigns of the king and Balaam, and between Balaam and God. Balaam chose not to speak a curse on the people of God.

The story takes a twist at this point in the 22nd chapter. God told Balaam to go to the Moabite king, and in the morning Balaam got up and began to saddle up his donkey for the journey. Then in verse 22, we are told, "God was angry."

Sometimes scriptures have twists in them that are not entirely clear. Just a few verses earlier, God told him to go. Now he is going but God is angry. It is one of those moments that seems a bit confusing, and we are left to wonder why. What the story leads us to believe is that, while on the surface Balaam was doing what he was told, something was happening in his spirit and God knew his true intentions. He was not going to do what God had instructed him to do and God knew it.

So along the way, there is the encounter with the donkey and the angel and the messenger now becomes the recipient. The donkey sees what this supposed prophet cannot see and it is revealed to him through another messenger. It is after this encounter with the messenger angel, Balaam bows low before God and delivers the message that God gives.

There are so many things that we can discover about ourselves and about God in the midst of this story, but there are four that I would like for us to think about specifically today.

**First - I think it's important for us to listen for God's voice in the midst of competing voices in our lives.** WE live incredibly fast paced lives and our time and energy is pulled in countless directions each and every day. It is easy to fill ourselves with messages that are not in our best interest and certainly not the voice of God speaking to us.

These competing interests not only get us confused about our direction in our lives, but cause us to lose sight of God's many blessings that we have in store if only we would listen for that voice of God. The voices of greed or money or fame and fortune can be an allure that confuses and distracts. We need to listen to God, more importantly, we need to seek out the truth that God is speaking from a good source.

I think of God's revelation in Jesus Christ and in the story of Christ's Transfiguration before Peter, James and John in Matthew chapter 17 and even in Luke chapter 9 when the voice from heaven says, "This is my son, the beloved with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him."

We are called throughout scripture to listen to God, to obey God and to do everything in our power to do what he says. Scripture becomes for us that point of revelation and God's voice speaking to us. All scripture is God breathed, it is inspired by God and it is useful for teaching for reproof, correction - and it is useful for knowing the will of God. Diving into the Word is that way that we can hear the voice of God in the midst of our wilderness experiences and in the midst of those competing voices of the world.

**The second truth that I think is shared with us in the story of Balaam is that sometimes God uses others to speak truth to us. We need to listen to the truths that God reveals through others.**

Back in 2005, there was an opportunity to go to Russia for a Volunteers in Missions trip through the annual conference. While it was presented at the Annual Conference, I sat there and thought that would be something I could do.

At a break in the session, I walked up to Tracy who was sitting in a different seat that day who immediately said, "Did you hear about that trip to Moscow? I think God is calling you to go!" I could not believe that she was even saying it and I began to make excuses as to why I could not go. I could not do it, I wasn't qualified. "We can't afford to do that" was the first thing out of my mouth. Her only response was - I think God is calling you to go.

Sometimes the call of God for us to do something in our lives is revealed most vividly and most strongly when others confirm the voice of God in your life. I believe with everything in me that my call to ministry while real and vivid, became most real when others confirmed what I was thinking. We should also recognize that sometimes it may not be the voice of God if God isn't revealing it to others as well.

Guess what - three months after hearing about a trip to Moscow, Russia; in spite of the doubts and the fears that I may have had traveling out of the country for the first time, I went to Moscow. I listened to the truth that God was revealing through someone that I loved.

**The third thing that I think that we can hear through the story of Balaam is just how important blessing is in people's lives today. We are called as brothers and sisters to speak blessing into people's lives, not curses.**

There is an old saying that Knowledge is knowing the right thing to say, and wisdom is having the ability to know if you should say it.

Now I am not suggesting that we remove ourselves from the hard truths and hard statements. Sometimes the best thing to say to someone is something that they need to hear. I also think that there is also a difference between saying something that will bless and or far worse, curse them.

The story of Balaam shows that he would not curse them because it would lead to destruction. So the question we might ask when we are thinking about saying something to someone - am I seeking to destroy someone or build them up? Is this something that I should say, and is this the best way to say it?

If your motivation is to break someone down only to build yourself up, then it is not of God. It is a curse. If you are saying it only so that someone else will prevail? Maybe you need to keep it to yourself.

We are called to speak blessings in people's lives and I believe that God gives us the wisdom of when to do that and when to keep it to ourselves. We need to listen!

**And the final thing that I want you to walk away with is that God continues to love you and love others even when we are disobedient.**

God spoke to Balaam, and he did not do what he was asked to do. Balaam was disobedient, he rebelled against God and was about to do something that was in direct contrast to the things that he heard God speaking.

God pursued him. He went after him. He threw up roadblocks and sign posts and messages just to get his attention.

Three times God showed himself in the angel to the donkey on the road. Three times, Balaam beat his donkey to get him back on the road. Three times God made himself known.

It should not be lost in this story that God pursued Balaam three times. Three has always been a significant number in the scriptures as a message and symbol of Completeness. It is so significant that it is the complete attention that God sought from Balaam.

And I also would be remiss if I don't point out the completeness of God's love for us in Jesus Christ. For God continues to pursue us on this road of life and will do everything in his power to get our attention.

You and I are so important that even in our disobedience, God decided to take care of what we could not do on our own and that was our redemption through Jesus Christ. Three nails on the cross that showed his love for us. Three days later, he rose from the dead.

Because God loves us that much - he chose blessings over curses and he gave us Jesus as a final witness to his love.

I thank God for the story of Balaam - I thank God for his pursuit of us - and I thank God for the redemption that we receive in Jesus Christ.

Let's take a look at our next steps.