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Numbers 22:22–33, ESV.

²² But God's anger was kindled because he went, and the angel of the LORD took his stand in the way as his adversary. Now he was riding on the donkey, and his two servants were with him. ²³ And the donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road, with a drawn sword in his hand. And the donkey turned aside out of the road and went into the field. And Balaam struck the donkey, to turn her into the road. ²⁴ Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side. ²⁵ And when the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she pushed against the wall and pressed Balaam's foot against the wall. So he struck her again. ²⁶ Then the angel of the LORD went ahead and stood in a narrow place, where there was no way to turn either to the right or to the left. ²⁷ When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she lay down under Balaam. And Balaam's anger was kindled, and he struck the donkey with his staff. ²⁸ Then the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?" ²⁹ And Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you have made a fool of me. I wish I had a sword in my hand, for then I would kill you." ³⁰ And the donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your donkey, on which you have ridden all your life long to this day? Is it my habit to treat you this way?" And he said, "No."

³¹ Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way, with his drawn sword in his hand. And he bowed down and fell on his face. ³² And the angel of the LORD said to him, "Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out to oppose you because your way is perverse before me. ³³ The donkey saw me and turned aside before me these three times. If she had not turned aside from me, surely just now I would have killed you and let her live."

The famous talking donkey.

Numbers is the fourth book in the Pentateuch, which is Latin for Five Books, and what Jews call the Torah; "Torah" means "the Teaching" or "the Doctrine".

Numbers continues the story that begins in Exodus, telling the tale of the People of God escaping Egypt and eventually populating the Promised Land; the story continues after Numbers in Deuteronomy. Numbers, in the original Hebrew texts, was called "*In the wilderness*", which makes sense because it describes events that happen while the People of God are in the desert between Egypt and the Promised Land. Numbers first describes the Chosen People as they prepare to leave Mount Sinai, where Moses has been handed the law by God. Then the Israelites approach the land of Canaan. Today's passage contains a story that most find amusing. There are only two times in the Bible where animals speak. The first is the talking serpent in Genesis which tries to convince Adam and Eve that if they eat the fruit of the forbidden tree they will instantly become like God. The second talking animal – the donkey in Numbers - is quite different in that it speaks with the voice of godliness, not evil. The entire story was a bit too long to quote in its entirety in our passage today, so I only included the latter part of the story. Here is an overview of all of it.

There was a man named Balaam living in a town near the Euphrates, far from Moab. Even though he lived at a distance, he was highly regarded by the Moabites and Midianites – pagans who were enemies of the Chosen People. Balaam was reputed to be a powerful soothsayer or prophet. He could bless or curse people with his words. Although he was a Gentile and lived among enemies of Israel, he

professed to have a great knowledge of and to be a follower of the true God. As the Israelites entered Moab on their way to the Promised Land, the king of the Moabites, Balak, summoned the great Balaam. The king feared that the Israelites would attack Moab, so he wanted Balaam to put a curse on them. King Balak says this to Balaam: *“Behold, a people has come out of Egypt. They cover the face of the earth, and they are dwelling opposite me. ⁶ Come now, curse this people for me, since they are too mighty for me. Perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them from the land, for I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed.”* Clearly, the King has an exaggerated view of the numbers of the Israelites, so he believes he needs Balaam. But God tells Balaam not to put a curse on his people. Balaam seems to obey God, and he sends the Moabites away.

Then, just before our passage, we read this exchange between Balaam the prophet and God. Balaam speaks: *“Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command of the LORD my God to do less or more. ¹⁹ So you, too, please stay here tonight, that I may know what more the LORD will say to me.” ²⁰ And God came to Balaam at night and said to him, “If the men have come to call you, rise, go with them; but only do what I tell you.” ²¹ So Balaam rose in the morning and saddled his donkey and went with the princes of Moab. Balaam is tempted by what the King of Moab might give him – vast riches –*

yet he tells God that he will not disobey God. But God tells Balaam that he can go to the Moabites, adding that he can do only what God commands. Clearly, God is letting Balaam be tested by having him start out toward the land of the Moabites.

Now comes the fun part. Balaam is riding his donkey along a road, on his way to the Moabites. *The donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road, with a drawn sword in his hand. And the donkey turned aside out of the road and went into the field. And Balaam struck the donkey, to turn her into the road.* ²⁴ *Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side.* ²⁵ *And when the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she pushed against the wall and pressed Balaam's foot against the wall. So he struck her again.* ²⁶ *Then the angel of the LORD went ahead and stood in a narrow place, where there was no way to turn either to the right or to the left.* ²⁷ *When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she lay down under Balaam. And Balaam's anger was kindled, and he struck the donkey with his staff.* ²⁸ *Then the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?"* ²⁹ *And Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you have made a fool of me. I wish I had a sword in my hand, for then I would kill you."* ³⁰ *And the donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your donkey, on which you have ridden all your life long to this day? Is it my habit to treat you this way?" And he said, "No."* We see that

God sends an angel to turn Balaam away, so he does not do what King Balak of the Moabites wants. It's not clear exactly what happens, but apparently, in his greed, Balaam doesn't see the angel blocking the road. This symbolizes Balaam being blinded to the will of God. Balaam has failed God's test. The donkey, however, is more godly than Balaam, and she does see the angel. Three times, the donkey steps aside, refusing to challenge the angel. The last time, the donkey refuses to go anywhere and she lays down. Each of the three times, Balaam gets angry and beats his poor donkey with his staff. As further evidence that Balaam the soothsayer is morally inferior to a donkey, the donkey starts talking. But this is really God speaking through the donkey. The donkey asks why Balaam is beating her.

Here is how the story ends: ³¹ *Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way, with his drawn sword in his hand. And Balaam bowed down and fell on his face.* ³² *And the angel of the LORD said to him, "Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out to oppose you because your way is perverse before me.* ³³ *The donkey saw me and turned aside before me these three times. If she had not turned aside from me, surely just now I would have killed you and let her live."* God forces Balaam to see the angel blocking his way, telling him that he should go no further. God tells Balaam that the talking donkey just saved his life – because if Balaam had gone any

further, God would have killed him and spared the donkey. This is a great humiliation for the prophet and soothsayer Balaam.

This story indicates that there is indeed humor in the Bible. The author – and we don't know who wrote the Book of Numbers, although traditionally the entire Pentateuch was attributed to Moses - uses a donkey to illustrate the stupidity of valuing the things of this world over the things of God's world. There are a handful of serious lessons here. First, it shows us that even though someone may profess to be a follower of God, and may have been greatly gifted by God, and may even promise God to follow God's wishes, that person might waver in their faith. Many sincere believers, when tempted, are blinded to the sight of the angel standing in the road before them. Even someone who should be a true leader can fall to the temptations of this world and act in very selfish ways.

There is a second, important lesson. It has to do with redemption. Later in Numbers, Balaam reappears and this time he does speak out as a true prophet serving God and Israel. He doesn't say what the king of Moab wants. He proclaims:

*"From Aram Balak has brought me,
the king of Moab from the eastern mountains:
'Come, curse Jacob for me,
and come, denounce Israel!'*

⁸ *How can I curse whom God has not cursed?*

How can I denounce whom the LORD has not denounced?

⁹ *For from the top of the crags I see him,*

from the hills I behold him.

Here is something else that Balaam declares:

*“The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor,
the oracle of the man whose eye is opened,
4 the oracle of him who hears the words of God,
who sees the vision of the Almighty,
falling down with his eyes uncovered:
5 How lovely are your tents, O Jacob,
your encampments, O Israel!
6 Like palm groves that stretch afar,
like gardens beside a river,
like aloes that the LORD has planted,
like cedar trees beside the waters.*

Here is the truth about the story of Balaam. It is very complicated, and therefore much more representative of everyday life for us. Later in Numbers, we come across this passage, written by the author of the book: ¹⁶*Behold, these, on Balaam’s advice, caused the people of Israel to act treacherously against the LORD in the incident of Peor, and so the plague came among the congregation of the LORD.* Balaam at some later point flipflops again and causes the Israelites to go against the will of God. But let’s consider the entire story of Balaam, including this later fall from grace, the story of the talking donkey, and Balaam’s oracle of declaration of dedication to God. There is something for us, as believers, to think about. Balaam is not an Israelite. He is not one of the chosen people. But he has inherited the God of the People of God. He is surrounded by a secular, worldly culture. Yet he

believes. He has done something truly amazing. He didn't have the blessing that an Israelite would have, and that is to be raised in a society that believes in God. On the other hand, his story isn't perfect. He can be tempted by the things of this world. He can long for riches and glory. Part of what drove him to want to serve the King of the Moabites was simply the glory with which they would lift him up. He even later does turn away from God. He is a bit like us. He wants to believe. He wants to follow the teachings of God. He wants to live in a way that honors that God. But he is only human, and he does stand alone in the world as his own people are not believers. He is a man of strength and faith, but still, he is only a human.

Here is a verse in Jude, the very short book that focuses on the dangers of false and immoral teachers: *"¹¹ Woe to them! For they walked in the way of Cain and abandoned themselves for the sake of gain to Balaam's error and perished in Korah's rebellion."* Jude here is offering up examples of people who opposed God and as a result failed spiritually. We know who Cain is; he is jealous when his brother's offering to God is accepted by God and Cain's offering is not – and so he kills his brother. Cain ends up cast out of society and living a lonely, desolate life. Kalam helped maintain the tabernacle, but he is dissatisfied with this position and wants to be more important. Kalam leads a revolt against Moses and ends up dying along with his co-conspirators. Given that Jude lists Balaam along with Cain and

Kalam, it appears that at least in the mind of Jude – and we don't know just who Jude was – Balaam in the end failed in his desire to follow God. Jude at least believes that Balaam ended his life without being redeemed.

That is the lesson for all of us. We don't need to win the race. There is no spiritual competition among the faithful, as Cain, Kalam, and perhaps Balaam believed. We don't need to always do the right thing. But we do need to finish the race in the right place, even if we come in dead last, even if we are not remembered by anyone as being any kind of blessed person, filled with God's grace. We know that the best way to get there is to live the way Jesus did, with love for all people, and with a deep love for God. However, we certainly do not have to be perfect.

A while back, I was talking to a patient who happened to have been brought over from the jail. He was badly injured in a fight that he apparently did not start. He had serious facial injuries and a concussion. He said something that I will never forget. He told me that he loved being a Christian because it meant that he could screw up over and over – and still be loved by God. Please join me in a prayer.

God, help us accept our imperfections. Help us accept the fact that we have our limitations in life. But we ask you to fill us with your grace, to help us always come back to you after we screw up. When you give us gifts, may we use them only to serve you and your people. And may we end up in the end in your arms. Amen.