



Simple Gifts

Words to Inspire the Spirit

IMMANUEL CHURCH-ON-THE-HILL

October 1, 2024

Balaam's Donkey

By Dodd Sims, M.D.

“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?’ ” Numbers 22:28 (NIV)

It’s always exciting to visit Paris, especially with a particular goal in mind – new foods to sample, an up-and-coming neighborhood to explore, a must-see exhibit. This time it’s a specific work by Rembrandt in a relatively obscure museum. His painting of *Balaam and the Ass* in the Musée Cognacq-Jay is my goal. With all the other marvelous things to do here, why this picture?

First, it is by Rembrandt. I remember staring many years ago at a reproduction of Rembrandt’s *Return of the Prodigal Son* for what seemed like hours. A story heard dozens of times suddenly came to life. For the first time I realized there were three important characters in the story – not only the father and the son, but the older brother as well. When I saw the story

visually interpreted by a grand master, that really drove home the point – it is a complicated story involving multiple relationships, and we can easily see ourselves in each one of the characters.

But beyond the visual virtuosity of Rembrandt, the story of Balaam and his donkey has a claim on me for a very basic reason – the talking animal. This is only the second time in the Bible that God chooses to speak through an animal; the other time we know so well is the serpent in the Garden of Eden.

"Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden"?' The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die." ' But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die, for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil' "(Genesis 3:1-5).

When the snake warns us about substituting our human freedom for the will of God, we have, right in these highly condensed verses, the whole story of the Bible. So, when animals speak in the Bible, pay attention! What the animals say is key.

Balaam is a practitioner of the dark arts, and he has been enticed by the king of Moab to put a curse on the Israelites. Returning from captivity in Egypt, the Israelites want to share the land; the Moabites do not. Balaam is on the way to carry out the evil deed with a curse when Balaam's donkey balks. The donkey spies the Angel of the Lord on the road ahead. Balaam whips the donkey over and over. Finally, the donkey speaks and complains about the beatings. It is only then that Balaam realizes that the Lord is trying to stop him because the land has been promised to the Israelites. It is an essential element in God's plan of salvation for the world.

Now in Rembrandt's portrayal of the Prodigal Son, the elder brother is not in the background. He may be off to the side, but he has a key role to play. His is the voice of justice, tempering the unconditional mercy of the father toward his prodigal son. Just like a child in a sandbox who feels someone has taken all the best toys, the older brother cries out that this is not fair. It is

not just. If justice without mercy is not just, then mercy without justice may be no mercy at all. Do not ignore the minor characters. The walk-on actors may not say a lot, but when they do, pay attention.

And so it is with Balaam's donkey. When you are headed toward your goal and you feel you are being nudged off the path, pay attention. Look for a reason. Perhaps it is not the right road. Or maybe it is the wrong goal. Listen to the "minor" characters in your life – the chance conversation on a bus or waiting in line, the disheveled character asking for help, the person cleaning your house, the angry voters in those "other" places. Put yourself in their place. What are they trying to tell you? Maybe they are put in front of you to set you right.

And even better, when the opportunity arises, take on your own role as a character in this great story – the story of God's plan for God's people. When the truth needs telling, speak up. If you find yourself heading down the wrong road for the wrong reasons, stop and question.

I often picture myself as the elder son in the Prodigal son's family, a minor character standing to the side but occasionally asking important questions, like "What is mercy without justice?"

Or, on other days, I can see myself as Balaam's donkey, doing what I can to get myself and those around me to follow the best path to our true goal. And if God can use an ass to speak the truth, there is hope for all of us.

Let us bray.