

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa**  
**Sunday, July 12, 2020 – Elizabeth Bryce**

**Reading: Numbers 22-24**

**Sermon: The Sign You Cannot Miss**

It was one of those signs you cannot miss. Bigger than your average poster board, professionally printed, in shockingly bright colours. It wasn't just another white 8 ½ by 11 inch sheets, like you print off your computer at home. This was big. It said: Please do not bring bags from home, we will supply new plastic bags at no charge. Plain as day, it was planted right at the place where all the customers line up to enter the store. You really couldn't miss it.

Except I did. I Missed it entirely. I stood in line with my green bin full of cloth grocery bags all the way into the entranceway, where the store employee stopped me and said (from behind his mask) "Sorry, you can't bring that in here" And he pointed at the sign outside that I hadn't seen, and the sign on the wall No personal bags or outside carts.

I had already waited about 10 minutes to get in. "Do I have to take these to my car and start over?" I asked. "No," he said, "I will put them over here and you can pick them up on your way out." So he took my bin and bags away as if he were handling hazardous waste, and put them in the corner.

I kept thinking to myself: how did I miss that sign? Was I scrolling through facebook on my phone? Was I thinking about what I was going to make for supper? Because it was just so OBVIOUS! Clearly I was caught up in some internal dialogue because I was definitely not paying attention to the world around me.

Often when I am with someone in crisis – someone going through a terrible diagnosis, a broken relationship, a family conflict or trouble at work addiction – they will say "Now when I look back, the signs were always there. I just didn't want to see them."

The signs are always there, according to our Bible story today. But it's up to us to pay attention.

The next installment of our Stump the Preacher sermon series is the story suggested by Alyce, who read the story for us. Balaam's talking donkey – have you ever heard it in church before?

Most people never have. It's one of those stories that didn't make it into the common lectionary, or SS curriculums or Bible story books. And yet it is such a great story, it is hard to imagine why it hasn't had more attention.

Here are some of the reasons I think it has rarely been told:

- First of all, let's get this over with: In most traditional translations this story contains the word “ass” – and it was a talking ass to make it even worse.

Unless you had an absolutely fearless preacher or a Sunday School teacher (like my Mrs Mackenzie, who just read from the King James Version and stared us down to the dust at the first giggle or elbow poke), very few church leaders wanted to tackle this particular dilemma. Or ask themselves was it more important to read the literal word of the bible or to avoid saying the dreaded “a” word in church.

So, on to some more serious reasons:

- The main character in the story, Balaam, is a prophet who hears God's voice and who shares God's word with the people around him in a series of oracles;

He is prophet just like Isaiah and Jeremiah and Deborah, the list of great prophets in the Bible goes on and on, right?. But here's the catch. Balaam the prophet is not one of the Israelites – he's from the other side. As a matter of fact, his king, King Balak of Moab, has commissioned Balaam to go and to curse Abraham's descendants. Balak wants to ensure that the Moabites are victorious in any upcoming conflict, as the Israelites try to make their way back into the promised land.

Balaam the prophet is not “one of God's people” – so according to orthodox tradition, Balaam is not supposed to be hearing God's word. In other parts of the Bible Balaam would be what is called a false prophet. But even before Balaam encountered Israel, it is clear that Balaam already had an established and reverent relationship with Yahweh, he obeyed the same God as Israel.

For preachers and biblical scholars who hold a very exclusionary vision of God, this was not a story they wanted to teach their flock. If God would speak to an outsider, what was the point of being an insider? If outsiders were already listening to and obeying God, as Balaam clearly does in the bible story, how can salvation be tied to the one group that claims to be God's only people?

Today, I think we should be telling this story all the time – to say to our congregations and Sunday School classes – look, there are many paths to faith, and there are many names for God. Just pay attention, and find the path that is most faithful to you. While we should be leading people deeply into faith, it should be so deep that they can't see and respect the faith of other people around them. We should be paying attention to how listening to God is important to other faith traditions as well.

- Another reason the story is under-represented in lectionaries and sermons in the Christian church – it contains a talking donkey.

So, as Rabbi Lawrence Kushner says, it is the fundamentalist readers' nightmare. He calls it “the lollapalooza granddaddy of all the off-the-wall Bible stories. It's so preposterous, he writes, it makes splitting the Red Sea look like child's play.

If you take the Bible literally, you probably have to bend your theology into a pretzel to make sense of the talking donkey. One rabbi suggested these unbelievable events were secret miracles from the sixth day of creation. Think of them as "post-release software fixes" which God only accesses when they are absolutely necessary. (Rabbi L. Kushner)

The literal reader would likely gloss over the many contradictions in the story. I gave Alyce a patched together version to streamline the narrative, but if you read all three chapters continuously, there are parts where Balaam does exactly what God wants him to do, and God still threatens to kill him. The story reveals generations of editing, and the result would make an excellent blooper track.

If you are someone who takes a more metaphorical approach to the Bible, however, there is no problem. This story contains all the signs and symbols of a traditional teaching parable, never meant to be taken as history. For example it is three times the donkey stops Balaam before the prophet finally gets the message. Balaam also takes two servants with him, so that there are three men on the road. It is a detail that is never used in any other way in the story. The servants are simply there to fill out the head count. Because the number three is very powerful in Judeo-Christian scripture – it foreshadows that something unusual is going to take place. (like rising from the dead.)

So it is no accident that the donkey tries three times to re-route the prophet. First by taking him off the road, then second by squeezing the prophet into a wall, then finally the third time the donkey just plain refuses to go any further.

The third time that the donkey actually speaks with a human voice! Balaam is so shocked that he finally perceives the angel of God, whom the donkey has apparently seen the whole time. The angel of God then tells the prophet to go where Balak has ordered him to go. But when Balaam gets there he should only say what Yahweh tells him to say.

Oh the irony – that a stubborn donkey, never known to be the brightest of domestic animals, has better vision than the respected “seer”, the one who is famous for his ability to see the future and to discern the way ahead.

Sometimes being human, being at the top of the food chain, so to speak, that privilege blinds us from seeing signs of God at work in the world around us. This story suggests that Creation’s wild and wooley creatures are actually better at reading the signs – even though no one has ever taught them to read. So the uncomfortable question out of this story is: Can we raise ourselves to their level? Can we pay attention when we need to and listen to God’s voice.

Bible stories are usually full of signs and symbols. Look at the parables of Jesus, the visions of Daniel, the prophesy of Ezekiel, the Revelation of John. This story of Balaam and his donkey is both a story about signs and, at the same time, a sign in itself. But are we paying attention?

Whether you read it in an obscure scripture story or whether you read it in a much better known scripture like the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm or John 3:16, the message is this:

God loves us.

- not because we are members of the right group,
- not because we have opposable thumbs and a human ability to choose and create and be independent.

God loves us because we belong to God.

And God will apply every measure possible to provide us with signs that keep repeating that message – even if it means making the lowly see what the wise and powerful should have already seen. Even if it means making donkeys speak the words of welcome that prophets and leaders should have been proclaiming.

God's love is the sign we cannot miss.

May God bless us so that our spiritual blindness can be healed and our ears are opened to gospel's song of grace and hope.

Thanks be to God, Amen.