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Title: Beach Reads: Talking Donkeys

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Text: [Numbers 22:28-30](#)

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This is the third of four sermons in our annual Beach Reads sermon series. Beach Reads is an end of summer series that started many years that allows us to explore some scriptures or stories or people that are interesting and engaging. This year, there are four stand-alone stories that are pretty obscure and rather unbelievable. We

started with a young man who fell asleep and fell out of a third story window when the preacher was long-winded. Last week, an iron ax head floated to the surface of the Jordan River. Next week will be a bad hair day – not for me – but for a Bible character in question. Today, we’ve got talking animals.

There are only two places in the Bible that animals talk. The first happens early on in the book of Genesis when the serpent has a conversation with Eve in the Garden of Eden trying to convince her to eat fruit from one specific tree. The second place that animals talk is in our scripture today – talking donkeys – well just one donkey. I know I will date myself here, but I grew up watching MISTER ED. A talking donkey seems pretty natural after a childhood of Mister Ed. In case I’ve already lost you, Mister Ed was a sitcom in the 1960s that featured a talking horse – Mister Ed – and generally he could only be understood by his owner, Wilbur Post. A common gag was for a visitor to come upon Wilbur talking to Mister Ed and think that Wilbur had lost it. ¹ I used to think that I did a great Mister Ed impression. When he would see Wilbur coming Mr. Ed would say – “Well hel-loo Wil-bur.”

Today, rather than a talking horse, we have a talking donkey – like in the movie Shrek. To fully understand what’s happening in the short scripture that we read, it’s important to know that it’s a part of a larger story. It really takes up the entire 22nd chapter of the book of Numbers. It’s a long, drawn-out story with lots of twists and turns. The Israelites have completed their wilderness wandering and find themselves in a region called Moab, ruled over by a king named Balak.

Now Balak is more than a little concerned with this influx of Israelites into his territory. They are threatening his power and the one thing someone in power is afraid of losing is power. He prepares to go to battle with the Israelites and summons the services of a guy named Balaam. Balaam is the key character in our story, besides the donkey and an out of character angel. Balaam gets called a prophet but he really would have been a low-level prophet – more of a “seer,” or a “diviner.” He’s even been called a “prophet for hire.” Need a prophet – Balaam is your man – he can be bought.

Balaam is generally a good guy, but you get the sense that he can be wooed by money and power and people that have money and power. Balak the king asks Balaam the prophet to cast a curse on the Israelites. That would give Balak’s troops an upper hand before the battle even started.

Balaam hems and haw a bit – get it – hems and haws? Come on, I’m trying to keep with the donkey theme. In the end however, he decides to do as the king orders. The next morning, he gets on his trusty donkey and heads off to the battlefield. He has barely gotten down the street before an angel appears in the middle of the road right in front of them, blocking their way. And this is not some sweet, docile angel, dressed in white and saying, “do not be afraid.” This angel is an intimidating figure, with sword drawn with the look of “be very afraid.” We don’t usually think of angels as intimidating, but this angel was just that. And he’s standing right in front of them.

And this is where the plot really starts twisting – because Balaam does not see Mr. Intimidating Angel right in front of him. He’s totally oblivious to the angel’s presence. Even though Balaam can’t see the angel, his donkey does. Which is why the donkey understandably stops right in his tracks and then decides to detour.

Picture this scene. The donkey stops, turns off the road and heads off into the field to avoid the intimidating angel that only the donkey can see but Balaam cannot see. From the donkey’s perspective, this is the right thing to do. But from Balaam’s point of view, it makes no sense at all. Balaam is confused and gives his donkey a good whack to try and steer it back on course. No luck. Had Balaam been on the Olympic modern pentathlon team in Tokyo, he would have been disqualified right there. ²

This happens two more times. They’re traveling along the vineyard off the road, with walls on either side of this wide path. Balaam’s still perplexed about what just happened when the angel appears in front of them a second time – and again, the donkey sees it; Balaam does not. The donkey rides up against one of the walls in an attempt to go around the angel. You can

imagine how this was for Balaam – who, again, still doesn't see the angel. A wide corridor between vineyards, plenty of space, and yet his donkey is right up against the wall. He whacks the donkey again.

They continue on and the corridor begins to narrow until there's room just enough for the donkey and the rider. Mr. Intimidating Angel once again stands in their way. This time, with nowhere to go, the donkey just lays down. This sets Balaam off and earns more whacks for the donkey.

The donkey has had enough and starts talking! "Then the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey, and it said to Balaam, 'What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?'" (Numbers 22:28) It's a reasonable-enough question. For all it knows, Balaam is seeing the angel too. He doesn't understand why Balaam would treat him this way. The donkey asks Balaam why he would do such a thing.

Balaam answers his donkey. He answers as if it's not a big deal that his donkey is talking to him. It seems to me that my first question for the donkey is how he learned to talk but instead he tells his donkey that he is frustrated with his behavior. At that point the donkey gets all logical: "Am I not your donkey, which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I been in the habit of treating you this way?" (Numbers 22:30). Balaam thinks about it for a second and simply answers, "No."

It is at this moment in the story – just beyond the section that we read – that Balaam's eyes are opened and he is able to see for the first time the angel before him. Then the angel and Balaam engage in a conversation that makes it clear that God was acting through the faithful donkey to protect Balaam from this angel who would have killed Balaam for his perverse ways if the donkey had not acted as protector. It quickly became clear to Balaam why his donkey had been acting so erratically. The donkey was acting on God's behalf with a message of why he should be an agent of God and not of a human king.

In that conversation, Balaam's mission becomes clear to him. He will go and listen to the king but act on God's behalf. Anything he says in those encounters with the king will be at the direction of God. The end of this story is that Balaam does go to the battle scene with Balak, but instead of cursing the Israelites, he blesses them, and they are the ones who are victorious.

Plenty have wondered over the years if the donkey really did talk, or if it's some kind of rhetorical embellishment to add some spice and flavor to a story about a man caught between a rock and a hard place, literally and figuratively. As with a lot of things in the Bible, what truly matters goes

deeper than that. Because in the end this isn't some miracle story meant to "wow the crowds" into submission and compliance and it wasn't an early pilot to Mister Ed. The important thing isn't that the donkey speaks – the important thing is what the donkey says.

It's as if this donkey is the embodiment of Balaam's conscience, this inner conflict he's mired in. Should I do this or this? Is this what God wants me to do? He wasn't totally sure he was doing the right thing when he set out that morning. And yet - after the angel in the road he couldn't see, after the donkey doing his own thing – the end result was that the right course of action presented itself. Balaam didn't really know what was going on around him; he couldn't "see" the right thing to do. But the donkey could. And then the donkey starts talking!

That describes us. Sometimes we're cruising along, minding our business and doing our thing – and then the donkey starts talking! Other people in whom we trust give us counsel or there is a turn of events that make it clearer what our direction should be. Sometimes we make plans, and we like our plans and think they're great plans – and then the donkey starts talking! Sometimes, as the commercial says, "life comes at you fast" – and we react the best we can, changing course on the fly and waiting for the wind to fill our sails again – and then the donkey starts talking!

Discernment of God's direction is rarely an easy thing. Ask most ministers about how they discerned their call to ministry and you'll hear an interesting story. We want to think that our minister was convicted like Paul on the road to Damascus with a bolt of bright light and a voice that spoke loud and clear but that's rarely the case. Most will tell of a circuitous route that led them into the ministry. For me, it was spending time in architecture school and then working in the hotel business in college. I talk about my call to ministry as a "tug to ministry." Pastor Danny will tell you about his sojourn in corporate life with Chick-fil-A before discerning a call.

All of us have donkeys that try to talk to us throughout our life. For me, it was a mentor who suggested – in my third year of architecture school – that I might want to think about ministry. I asked him why he didn't mention it three years sooner. It would have saved a few thousand dollars and some all-nighters working on projects. He said that he had mentioned it, but my mind was made up and, in that frame of mind, I couldn't hear wisdom from anyone but me.

Knowing the difference between right and wrong is one thing but knowing the right "right" is a little harder to figure out. That's where most of us find ourselves. Likely no one here is currently weighing a decision that will save

the entire Israelite army from defeat. But we, at any age or station in life, make decisions about how we will follow God in the day, the week, the year ahead. Almost always, there are indicators – donkeys that are talking to us – if we’d just listen. It’s not just in our personal lives, it’s on a global scale as well.

Max Lucado in his book, *Gentle Thunder*, tells the story about the man who dared God to speak to him and give him direction. Burn the bush like you did for Moses, God. And I will follow. Collapse the walls like you did for Joshua, God. And I will fight. Still the waves like you did on Galilee, God. And I will listen.

And so the man sat by a bush, near a wall, close to the sea and waited for God to speak. And God heard the man, so God answered. He sent fire, not for a bush, but in the hearts of those in church. He brought down a wall, not of bricks, but of sin. He stilled the storm, not of the sea, but of a soul. And God waited for man to respond.

And he waited. . .And he waited. . .And waited. But because the man was looking at bushes, not hearts; bricks and not lives, seas and not souls, he decided that God had done nothing. Finally, he looked to God and asked, ‘Have you lost your power?’ And God looked at him and said, ‘Have you lost your hearing?’³

Even though I was certain that Mister Ed could talk when I was a kid, I’m pretty sure that donkeys will not up and talk to me today. But there are donkeys in your lives – and not in the way that we sometimes use the term “donkey.” There are people who care for you, look out for you, people you trust. They might have a word for you, even today, if you listen.

¹ Wikipedia entry for Mister Ed confirmed this information.

² Article found at: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/olympics-modern-pentathlon-coach-punch-horse/>

³ Lucado, Max. *A Gentle Thunder: Hearing God Through the Storm*; Thomas Nelson publisher; Reprint edition (August 27, 2012).