

Faith Mennonite Church  
June 6, 2010  
“Stories of God’s People”  
Joetta Schlabach

**Blessing or Curses: Getting the Message Right**  
*Numbers 22-24*

A donkey that sees angels and can talk!

A God who first seems to say “Go!” then abruptly says “Stop!”

These are but two of the strange characteristics of this very ancient story. We could simply ignore it and say: donkeys don’t talk ... angels with fiery swords don’t show up on our highways ... and why spend time trying to figure out a seemingly fickle God anyway?

But perhaps, just maybe, this story is more relevant than we realize. Maybe a similar story, or stories, are playing out in our midst. Maybe it’s hard for us to discern, as it was for Balaam, just what God’s will is and what God desires in our day.

The backdrop for this story is the wandering children of Israel in the desert. They’ve escaped slavery in Egypt and are supposedly on their way to a “promised land.” But they can’t always see a “way” in their wandering. The promise of land is like a pipedream as they trudge through the territories of other peoples and their kings. No one welcomes them with open arms and says, “Let us be your promised land!” Instead of welcome, they are received with fear. “They’ll lick up everything we have,” said the Moabites. “They cover the face of the earth!”

This afternoon some of us will go to the Ramsey County Law Enforcement Center where a number of undocumented immigrants are detained. These persons were arrested by local law enforcement officers in an agreement with the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), not so different from the law that recently went into effect in Arizona. Our country is not very different from the land of Moab in the way we’ve responded to immigrants who have sought refuge—a promised land, so to speak—in our land. Many of those who are undocumented did not have the financial resources, the level of education, or the connections that would have led to securing a visa for legal entry into the United States. But they had a desire—as deep as the longing that made the children of Israel cry out to God in Egypt—to live in dignity. They had a desire to reap the benefits of their daily labor and provide for their families. They had a desire to share in the blessings of this world’s resources. And that desire made them risk their last peso, and sometimes their lives, to cross an increasingly unfriendly border. That desire has sustained long hours of manual labor at sub-standard wages so that they can support family members here and also send money to their home communities.

Like the children of Israel in Egypt, this population of immigrants—some with legal documentation and many without—has grown and multiplied. Children born on US soil, regardless of the status of their parents, are natural citizens. And just as the Egyptians both exploited and despised the foreigners in their midst, many in the United States (and in Europe) have been willing to turn a blind eye on unjust labor practices, ignore the economic contributions of immigrants, but loudly condemn their presence and rail against the presumption that they would get any of *our* resources. “They’ll lick up everything we have!” Ancient words of the Moabites still echo today.

Now back to Balaam and his donkey. Balaam is not an Israelite but he is described as a “prophet of the Lord” just as later Hebrew prophets would be described. Balaam was evidently a holy man, whom people recognized as one who spoke on behalf of God outside of the territorial worship practices of the day. The words he spoke were instrumental: words of blessing and curses. When King Balak sought Balaam’s services, he was not coming to ask for just any word from God—for wisdom, for understanding, for direction in how to address the arrival of unexpected visitors. No, he had a predetermined request for Balaam: please come and curse this crowd of humanity that “covers the face of the earth” and threatens us. And, we will pay you dearly to do so. (Hmmm, it looks like the mixture of money and politics is also a rather ancient practice!)

Now Balaam asks God how he should respond. And he initially hears a clear “No. Don’t go and do Balak’s bidding.” But Balak is king and kings don’t take no for an answer. So Balak sent his messengers a second time...and raised the reward. Balaam prayed again. This time he heard God say, “Okay, go, but do only what I tell you to do.”

Then we have the donkey story. We don’t have a lot of interaction with donkeys today. Sometimes we see them at the zoo. Probably our greatest interaction is in print, through political cartoons. And the democratic mascot is often portrayed as a confused and ignorant ass these days. We have bicycles to get us around and cars and trucks and trains to transport our goods. But donkeys were everyman’s—and in this case it probably was exclusively men—travel and transport package all wrapped in one. Donkeys were respected. They were small but strong, docile, and companionable. They were trustworthy.

Balaam sets off with his donkey, off to tell King Balak whatever God tells him to say. And then his donkey starts acting uncharacteristically: he goes far afield; he rams Balaam into a wall; he plums sits down and refuses to go farther; and then he talks! And not once does Balaam stop to think that maybe, just maybe, there’s a message here. Instead, he acts uncharacteristically and beats his beast, his trusted travel and transport friend, something he has never done.

He was so confident that he would know what God wanted him to say and do. He was in such a hurry to be off to meet the king, that he failed to hear the first instruction from God: slow down, be careful, you’re entering very tricky territory. Balak is going to entice you with money and favors, more than you can imagine. The Moabites—the folks you know best—are deathly afraid of these immigrant Israelites. They’re going to be loud and cantankerous. Will you be able to hear me, asks God, to hear my still, quiet voice when the riches and rage of Moab are set before you? Or are you going to do something knee jerk, like you did when you beat your donkey?

Balaam needed a timeout to get the message straight. And I think our country needs a timeout to get our immigration situation straightened out. The ancient pieces are still in play: fear of strangers, fear that there aren’t enough resources to go around. And many people who presume to speak for God are quick to beat the donkey, striking out at the innocents.

There’s also a personal message for each of us: how do we hear God? Sometimes a way seems obvious, only to be followed by one roadblock after another. It’s tempting to take the smooth path as a sign of God’s direction and blessing. Yet, today’s story reminds us that God just might be in those highly uncomfortable situations that take us far afield and press us against a wall, that really bring us to the edge. If we don’t have to struggle at least a bit, I’d say we maybe should wait just a bit longer. Because if there’s one thing sure about God it’s that God’s ways are mysterious. God will likely lead us in paths we wouldn’t first choose, but when we come to the end and look back, we see the wisdom of the way.