

LIVING HOPE - "DO YOU SEE THE DONKEY"

Ordinary Time

Numbers 22:22-35

A Sermon Preached by
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Seattle, Washington 98125
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Scripture:

Numbers 22:22-35¹

God's anger was kindled because Balaam was going, and the angel of the Lord took a stand in the road as his adversary. Now he was riding on the donkey, and his two servants were with him. The donkey saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road, with a drawn sword in hand; so the donkey turned off the road, and went into the field; and Balaam struck the donkey, to turn it back onto the road. Then the angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side. When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it scraped against the wall, and scraped Balaam's foot against the wall; so he struck it again. 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. When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it lay down under Balaam; and Balaam's anger was kindled, and he struck the donkey with his staff.

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?"

Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you made a fool of me! I wish I had a sword in my hand! I would kill you right now!"

But the donkey said to Balaam, "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?" And he said, "No."

Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with a sword drawn in hand; and he bowed down, falling on his face.

The angel of the Lord said to him, "Why have you struck your donkey these three times? I have come out as an adversary because your way is perverse before me. The donkey saw me and turned away from me these three times. If it had not turned away from me, surely just now I would have killed you and let it live."

Then Balaam said to the angel of the Lord, "I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing in the road to oppose me. Now therefore, if it is displeasing to you, I will return home."

The angel of the Lord said to Balaam, "Go with them; but speak only what I tell you to speak."

So Balaam went on with the officials of Balak.

Ms. Audrey Musewe

Good morning everyone.

For those of you not familiar with me, my name is Audrey and I'd like to introduce myself. I am a Gemini and like long strolls through the comic book store, teaching my niece and nephews life

¹ The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). 1989. (Adapted.)

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lessons by quoting Disney movie lines, eating sugary cereal on Saturday morning as I watch SpongeBob.² Aside from being the pillar of adult behavior, my greatest and luckiest occurrences is being the offspring to this lady [Loyce Ong'udi].

If you can't tell, I'm nervous. But the great – and possibly daunting thing, too – is that my friends and family are here. Just look for any additional Brown people; they're probably with me. . . . Most likely they are with me.

The cautionary tale of Balaam is mentioned throughout the Bible, both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament by Jesus and Peter. Through this story, we find out what happens when God isn't happy with you. We generally hear about how awesome and loving and forgiving He is but there are also times that He's not very happy with the choices that we make, especially when we are speaking for him.

Balaam was a soothsayer. He was given the power to bless or curse on the authority of God. So, excuse my comic book brain, but this makes me think Spiderman when Uncle Ben told Peter that with great power, comes great responsibility. So where does the story start? Well, Balaam had made a name for himself. He gets this awesome ability and, while he may have started off with great intentions, the money and power got to his head. So we reach this Scripture after the King has already asked Balaam to come and help him with an issue.

Now, let's pause here because my Batman sense is tingling and I feel like someone has a question.

Who is King Balak? *Well, random stranger, I am glad you asked.* He was the king of Moab and he wasn't the nicest guy. The reason he was asking Balaam's help is because the Israelites were coming.

Why was that a cause for concern? *(Again, random stranger, thank you.)* Well, the Israelites were on their way to Canaan and they had a bit of a reputation. See, God was siding with the Israelites because, um, well they *are* the chosen people.

The residents of Moab worship what was considered pagan gods, and the Big Man upstairs wasn't too happy about that. So, this made the King a bit antsy because he remembered what happened to the Amorites. *(I would totally tell you about them, but we don't have enough time. So I would just Google it later, after this.)* To protect himself and his people, the King decided to hire Balaam to curse the Israelites and that's where the Scripture we just heard started. *(See that, you give a history and then you bring it back to the Scripture. I'm getting kind of good at this.)*

So, the King wants to employ Balaam. After being turned down a couple times, he sends some pretty powerful representatives to convince him. Although God comes to Balaam and tells him that he shouldn't go, the power and money kind of tempts him and he decides to head off anyway.

Here is where things get a little interesting. Generally, we know the difference between good and bad and right and wrong. Things are typically black and white, there are times when there are gray areas.

² SpongeBob SquarePants in an American animated television series created by marine biologist and animator Steven Hillenburg for Nickelodeon. It began airing in 1999. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SpongeBob_SquarePants

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Like Batman is a good guy but the Gotham PD don't think so, even though Batman helps keep the crime rates down. Kind of like that.

Now, let's look at this through the lens of our current time. I haven't heard of anybody being stopped by a burning bush, but I know sometimes there is a voice in *my* head that helps guide *my* decisions. Suspiciously, the voice sounds like my mom. But this voice is like *my* moral compass. My mom has a set of life lessons. I call them Poopy's Rules for Life. Chapter 5 is "Because I Said So." Chapter 19 is "Do Not Call Mom Before 9 a.m. Unless You Want To Tempt Fury." But Chapter 1 is my mom's most important lesson: "Always Do The Right Thing, Especially When No One Is Watching." And that's the key: "Always do the right thing, especially when no one is watching." Balaam liked attention. He got his fame from the fact that his skills are well known. He was charged with a great responsibility and he fell short.

Now we get to the donkey. Three times the donkey turned. The donkey is like that voice in your head. The donkey *should* have been his moral compass. Now, if I am part of God's cohort of beings who get super powers, and my faithful donkey starts acting weird, and I'm going to a place where I was explicitly told by the Person who gave me said super powers not to go, I'd *probably* reevaluate that – especially after the second time when my foot was crushed. But let's ask ourselves a few questions.

- * Why didn't Balaam see the Angel?
- * What does the donkey represent?
- * How is it that the Soothsayer, given powers by the Lord, was not able to see the Angel of the Lord.

This is what I got out of the Scripture and what I would like to leave you with to think about today.

There is a power dynamic in this story that I want to explore. While I was getting ready for this sermon, I talked through the story with some of my closest friends to keep me from getting caught up in my own thoughts. I had this idea in my head and I just couldn't flush it out and I was getting frustrated. It was during a conversation with my friend Sam that the lightbulb went off. So, I want to ask you the same question I asked Sam.

What does the donkey represent?

While talking to Sam, he mentioned that the donkey represents oppressed people who see the power structure and are helpless to stop or change it. And, my goodness! It's like he blew the smog away! There it was, clear as day to me.

But I want to pause and explain to you how Sam and I got to this point – Sam much faster than me. I want to give you some snippets into a day in the life of Audrey and see if that helps.

One day about four months ago, I'm sitting at work, typing away furiously at my desk when my stomach decided it wants to mimic the distress call of the a whale. So, I proceeded to risk my health and go down to Chipotle and get a burrito. Now, for context sake, 93% of the time, I'm fairly polite. I bumped into a manikin once and said, "Excuse me." So, I'm walking down Third Ave downtown and Seattle Police bike cops are out, like always. There's a man and he stumbles; and he bumps into me, which then I bump into a police officer. I turn, look at him and say, "Excuse me." He turns with this anger in his eyes and says, "Yeah! That's what I thought." Now, I'm looking at him puzzled, trying to understand his reaction. He looks me dead in my eyes and says, "Do something. I dare you." In that

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moment, I was reminded that the very people who are sworn to keep me safe are currently the biggest danger to my safety.

I'll give you another.

Last year, I just got in my car and I was leaving my goddad's retirement party in the U District. I'm about to get on the freeway and I see blue and white lights flash behind me. Realizing I was about to be pulled over, my body starts to shake. I pulled off to the side and immediately sent a text to my best friend, telling her where I was and that if something was to happen to me, to tell my mother I love her. Two police officers approach my car with hands on weapons. The one at my window asked for my license and registration. I tell him that my wallet is in my front, right pocket and my registration is in my glove compartment. I then asked him if I had permission to reach into my pocket and into the glove compartment to get the papers he is asking for. He gives me the okay. And I watch as the tension in his stance rises as I reach into my pocket. I fumble a bit because my hands are shaking with the realization that I have absolutely no control of the outcome of that situation. It is very difficult to explain the anger, fear and helplessness that I feel in that situation because that is an experience that is unique to People of Color more so than it is to Whites.

I'll switch angles. There is a verse in the Scripture that stayed with me and I couldn't really figure it out until I got close to the end.

"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?" 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."

It's a bit ironic, isn't it?

This stuck with me because I realized that this is what Yoda was talking about. ... Now. Wait! Wait! Wait! ... Stay with me! ... You had to know that I would find a way to get comics and Star Wars in this somehow. Fear can be a motivator for good and bad. One of the interesting things about studying race relations in this country is the clear ability for those who are the Donkey to see what causes the anger that is directed towards them.

Fear.

Yoda said, and I quote, "Fear is the path to the dark side ... fear leads to anger ... anger leads to hate... and hate leads to suffering." Historically, there has always been a fear of Black people, specifically Black men. That fear leads people to react. Most recently, we saw it in the events in Charlottesville that inherent fear made White men feel like they would lose their standing in society and they reacted. The fear that equity and diversity will somehow hinder their own personal gains caused

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them to go grab tiki torches and remind People of Color that *our* rights are *not* as important or *equal* to theirs.³ We saw it in the shooting and verdict of the Philando Castille case.⁴ We have also seen it

³ "Unite the Right Rally" 8/12/2017. Protesters in favor of white supremacy attacked counter-protesters; there were beatings (one severe), one counter protester (White woman) was killed when hit deliberately by a White protester in a truck, two officers were killed in helicopter crash. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unite_the_Right_rally. Accessed 8/31/2017.

⁴ **Philando Castille**, a 32-year-old Black man, was shot and killed during a traffic stop 7/06/2016 by Jeronimo Yanez, a St Anthony MN police officer while his girlfriend and 4-year-old daughter watched. Officer was acquitted. That same day he was fired. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shooting_of_Philando_Castile. Accessed 8/31/2017.

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with Freddie Gray, Tamir Rice, Alton Sterling, Sandra Bland, Michael Brown, Eric Gardner and countless of others.⁵ The officers in these cases were trained for hostile situations. They reacted emotionally. That reaction becomes the pain that stays with mothers, fathers, siblings, and community members. That pain spreads to other communities, and we feel their loss. We hold our loved ones closer. We call and speak our love and pride for each other more. That fear is what causes my mother to call and check in with me now at 29 [more] than she did when I was 19 in college. I have the 125 voicemails on my phone right now to prove that. Her hugs are longer and tighter and the sting is sharper when she leaves for Kenya.

But, we are here to talk about hope. What gives me hope in a country that disrespects my inherited Black culture through appropriation and insensitivity while simultaneously shuns me and tells me that the person that I am is not good enough because I happened to be kissed by the melanin-loving sun?

- * My best friends and family give me hope. I have a safe space to be my most authentic self with them:
- * The excitement in my Little [Brother's] face when I pick him up for our Saturday hang-outs.
- * Watching my nephew Jack think he can outsmart me in a game of tag with the carefree joy that Tamir Rice should have had the freedom to express.
- * When my niece Nugget runs towards me as though she hasn't laid eyes on me in months instead of days.
- * I have hope when Adrianna, Selena and I go and experience the magic of Beyoncé and talk about it for months later.
- * When Julian and I go get tacos and then tattoos ... (*sorry, Mom*) ... (ahem)... around midnight.
- * Discussing the positive and affirming messages of Steven Universe with Sam.

⁵ **Freddie Gray**, a 25-year-old Black man, sustained injuries while being transported in a police van 4/12/2015 after a disputed arrest and he later died. Six Baltimore, Maryland, police officers, mixed Black and White, were charged. None were convicted. The city reached a settlement with the family. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Freddie_Gray. Accessed 8/31/2017.

Tamir Rice, 12-year-old Black boy, was shot 11/22/2014 while sitting in a playground swing with a toy gun in Cleveland, Ohio. The two officers gave him no warning. Tamir died the next day. The officers were not indicted. The family sued and received a settlement. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shooting_of_Tamir_Rice. Accessed 8/31/2017.

Alton Sterling, On July 5, 2016, the 37-year-old Black man, was shot several times at close range while held down on the ground by two [Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Police Department](#) officers, H. Lake and B. Salamoni. The officers have not been charged yet by either federal or state officials. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shooting_of_Alton_Sterling. Accessed 8/31/2017

Sandra Bland, a 28-year-old Black woman, was arrested after being pulled over for a minor traffic stop 7/10/2015 in Prairie View, Waller County, Texas, by a White state trooper B. Encina who verbally abused her. She was jailed. In jail she was found hanged in her jail cell the morning of 7/13/2015. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Sandra_Bland. Accessed 8/31/2017.

Michael Brown, an 18-year-old Black man, was shot and killed 8/4/2014 in Ferguson, Missouri, a suburb of St. Louis, by police officer D. Wilson, a White man, who pursued him after an alleged robbery. The incident resulted in nation-wide protests. Investigation concluded the officer shot in self-defense. However, a federal investigation of the Ferguson Police Department turned up problems. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shooting_of_Michael_Brown. Accessed 8/31/2017.

Eric Gardner, a 43-year-old Black man, died after 7/07/2014 after being put into a (forbidden) choke-hold by White, plainclothes police officer D. Pantaleo of the New York Police Department. The grand jury declined to indict him. There were public protests. The family sued and won a settlement. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Eric_Garner. Accessed 8/31/2017.

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- * Telling Tom George that I want him up here to read the liturgy but admitting to Betsy and Lacy that I don't want him making faces at me and the congregation.

To me, the donkey represents every Black and Brown person that has felt the sting of institutionalized and systematic racism in this country, every refugee that has been at the mercy of their own country, each LGBTQ+ individual that has fought for the right to marry and argue about who drank the last of the juice and left the carton in the fridge just like straight couples do. For me, Balaam represents every negative experience I've had in this country as a woman of color, from the moment I first got my glimpse of racism at eight years old at a UCC church camp in California, wondering why all the kids would get out of the pool every time I would get in.⁶ Every time has somebody walked further away from me down the street, every time a person looked and judged me without knowing a single fact about me other than I *look* like a decadent bar of chocolate. Each moment I have had to explain why I say, "I don't see color." negates every experience I have had due to my color," when a Black man yelled at me about being a "race traitor" because I happen to be walking with a group of White coworkers and my coworkers not understanding the reason for his outburst. Every time I feel utterly alone and isolated in my office but having to put on a front of [being] the "Nice, Quiet Black Girl" so *they're* not intimidated.

But it is for those very reasons I will continue to advocate for those my immediate community and be an ally for those outside of it. I will continue to have conversations with those willing to listen but I will suffer no fools, because as Peter has reminded us many times, "the world is too dangerous for anything but truth and too small for anything but love."⁷

Thank you.

UCUCC: AM

Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew from www.universityucc.org/Sermons/2017/08/31/2017

⁶ Audrey Musewe was born in Kenya and came to the United States when she was seven years old.

⁷ Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz quoting an adaptation of a benediction by William Sloan Coffin, Jr., (6/1/1924-4/12/2006), United Church of Christ pastor and social activist. "May God give you the grace never to sell yourself short; grace to risk something big for the sake of something good; grace to remember that the world is now too dangerous for anything but truth, and too small for anything but love."