

August 12, 2018
12th Sunday of Pentecost

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Choose Your Own Adventure”
The Rev Melanie Marsh Baum



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Note: During our summer series, "Word," members of the Covenant family will choose a scripture passage and share how it has been or become God's Word for them.

Numbers 22:1-39

The Israelites set out, and camped in the plains of Moab across the Jordan from Jericho. 2 Now Balak son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. 3 Moab was in great dread of the people because they were so numerous; Moab was overcome with fear of the people of Israel. 4 And Moab said to the elders of Midian, 'This horde will now lick up all that is around us, as an ox licks up the grass of the field.' Now Balak son of Zippor was king of Moab at that time. 5 He sent messengers to Balaam son of Beor at Pethor, which is on the Euphrates, in the land of Amaw,* to summon him, saying, 'A people has come out of Egypt; they have spread over the face of the earth, and they have settled next to me. 6 Come now, curse this people for me, since they are stronger than I; perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them from the land; for I know that whomsoever you bless is blessed, and whomsoever you curse is cursed.' Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road, with his drawn sword in his hand; and he bowed down, falling on his face.

32 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. 33 The donkey saw me, and turned away from me these three times. If it had not turned away from me, surely I would by now have killed you and let it live.' 34 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.' 35 The angel of the Lord said to Balaam, 'Go with the men; but speak only what I tell you to speak.' So Balaam went on with the officials of Balak. When Balak heard that Balaam had come, he went out to meet him at Ir-moab, on the boundary formed by the Arnon, at the farthest point of the boundary. 37 Balak said to Balaam, 'Did I not send to summon you? Why did you not come to me? Am I not able to honour you?' 38 Balaam said to Balak, 'I have come to you now, but do I have power to say just anything? The word God puts in my mouth, that is what I must say.' 39 Then Balaam went with Balak, and they came to Kiriath-huzoth.

Reflections by Susanne Carter

I like stories, and the ones in Hebrew scripture are among my very favorites. 30 years ago, in preparation for seminary and particularly for the dreaded Bible Content Exam, I decided to read through the Bible front to back. In Genesis and the early parts of Exodus this is an easy task, almost like reading a novel. But then things begin to drag on. Can you imagine my delight when, in the Book of Numbers, I stumbled across the story of Balaam's donkey, a text I had never heard or read before?

Its themes have since grown on me. The image of God who changes God's mind is dear to me – how can God forgive without a previous change of God's mind? Instead of a static view of God, I have embraced the image of a dance, God taking a step, followed by my step, then followed by God's step again.

And then the donkey who obeys by laying down! So often we are told that being a Christian means saying "yes," yes to God, yes to following Jesus, yes to our neighbor, yes to what happens to us in our lives. Take it from the donkey: sometimes we are called to say "no" in the most dramatic fashion.

Choose Your Own Adventure

We serve an Omnipotent, Creative God who remains in constant conversation with humanity and all of creation transforming and re-creating for the good of all things.

If you're around my age or know someone who is, you might be familiar with the phenomenon of Choose Your Own Adventure books. They were a popular series of interactive children's books in the 1980's and 90's. Each story was written from the point of view of the second person, so it felt like the narrator was talking directly to you, the reader. At the end of each chapter, the reader was given several options. Something like: "If you want to walk into the cave, turn to page 55", or "If you want to drink the magical potion, turn to page 40" In other words, we as kids, became the hero or heroine of the story, and the choices we made throughout the book determined the hero's actions and the outcome of the story itself.

We all make choices. Some may be mundane or insignificant. Others may alter the course of our lives and our destiny. The story of Balaam's donkey is one that might make us curious about the choices that we make, and it might make us wonder about the choices that God makes.

It's easy to believe in a God who is static .Who set the world in motion long ago, set the rules, and never wavers, never diverges from the predestined course of the arc of the Universe. But the God we see in today's story from Numbers is a different kind of God altogether. This is not a stone-faced and static God. The God revealed to us in this story is a "choose your own adventure" kind of God. This story presents us with an interesting assertion about the nature of the God of all creation. It suggests that we truly serve an Omnipotent, Creative God who has, since the beginning of time, been in constant conversation with humanity and all of creation transforming and re-creating for the good of all things in every moment.

Balaam believed that he was in complete control of his own destiny, but God did not permit the consequences of his disobedience to work against God's purposes. Yes, we always have free will, but whatever choices we make, God's creative will, in a divine dance with our own action, is still in control of the outcome. Like a book filled with infinite storylines and endings, all the possible cases are set before us, and they each have their own consequences.

One striking example of this comes to us from another story in the Hebrew Bible, the story of Jonah. Jonah was a prophet who was sent by God to the wayward people of Ninevah with a message:

Repent, or in 40 days God will destroy you. Now God felt that the people of Ninevah were worthy of redemption, and deserved a chance to get their act together – thus the message. Jonah, on the other hand, believed that the people of Ninevah deserved God’s wrath, and so decided to defy God, not only not delivering the message, but traveling in entirely the opposite direction, to a far-off land, across the sea. It didn’t take long before the boat Jonah was traveling on encountered monstrous storms in the middle of the ocean, and the crew – figuring Jonah was cursed – decided to throw him overboard, where he was promptly swallowed by a giant fish. Three days later, the fish coughs up the shaken and soggy Jonah where else, but on the shores of Ninevah. After his ordeal at sea, Jonah decides he better go ahead and give the people that message from God, and to his great surprise, the people heed his warning, repent of their wickedness, and God has mercy on them all.

Our lived experience may often reflect our own choices as well as the choices of others. But no matter what choices are made, God finds a way to make the holiest, most redemptive possible outcome from even our worst possible choices, because God created and reigns over the whole system. The entire system of choices and outcomes is God’s good creation.

Collectively we may affect the experience of this world by how we interact with it, and still, God works and moves in, and through, and sometimes in spite of our choices. God acts. We choose. God moves. We sometimes respond for the better, sometimes for the worse yet God recreates, God redeems, and the dance goes on. Amen.