

Daily Reflection – May 15, 2020
St. Mary Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael Renninger

Of *course* animals can talk!

Ever since we were little children, we've encountered stories in which the animals could talk. And, usually, the animals were *the smartest people in the room!*

Most Disney movies feature animals that can talk. Bambi spoke. So did all the animals in the Lion King.

Crabs and fishes could talk in The Little Mermaid. As a matter of fact, they could also sing, dance and play instruments!

A parrot spoke to Mary Poppins. Bugs Bunny spoke. Daffy Duck. Porky Pig.

When I was growing up, I loved to watch a show called *Mister Ed*. Some of you remember the theme song: "A horse is a horse, of course, of course...." Mr. Ed was a horse who belonged to a man named Wilbur.

Wilbur had his talking horse. And Shrek had his talking donkey.

And in today's reading, we meet the 'original' Mister Ed. The original donkey. We meet a man named Balaam... and his talking donkey (or, to use the word the Bible uses, it is his talking 'ass').

As always, it appears that the talking animal is the smartest person in the room! I have firm Scriptural justification when I say that this donkey is, according to the Bible, a 'wise ass!'

And who was Balaam? Well, the scripture calls him a soothsayer. But that is an incomplete translation. Balaam was considered a wise man, someone who was attentive to God's creation. Someone who had wisdom, based on his understanding of the stars and sun.

He was one of a group of people whose wisdom gave them a special status in society. They were called – *Magi*. You've heard that word before! The Magi who come at Christmas and Epiphany are not the only magi in the Bible. There are magi in other parts of the Old and New Testament.

Apparently Balaam was one of the magi who had a reputation for having a 'direct line to God.'

That's why one of Israel's enemies, Balak, hired Balaam to come and curse the army of Israel. Israel was on the move. Balak wanted to stop them. So he sent representatives to Balaam, with

offers of money and power, if Balaam would come and curse the army of Israel.

Here is where it gets interesting. The Lord tells Balaam not to go – but Balaam is tempted by the king's generous offer. He's knows it would be wrong to go – but he can't help himself.

(Hmmm... his conscience was telling him one thing, but he gave into temptation... aren't you glad THAT doesn't happen anymore?)

So, against God's instruction, Balaam gets on his donkey and starts riding toward Balak to place the curse on God's chosen people.

The angel of Lord appears in front of them on the road. But the wise man, Balaam, doesn't see the angel. Only the 'wise ass' does. And she stops. In his anger, Balaam beats her.

A second time, the angel stands in front of them. You see, when God doesn't want you to go somewhere, when God wants you to stop something, he will keep telling you... if you'll pay attention. But Balaam is not paying attention. He beats the donkey again.

Finally, the donkey just stops and won't budge, because the angel is standing right in front of them. Balaam, who is so focused on his 'prize money,' goes into a rage, and beats the donkey a third time.

And it is then, according to the Book of Numbers, that the ass speaks. She asks, "Why are you hitting me? Haven't I served you well in the past?"

Then... after hearing the words of the wise ass... Balaam looks up and sees... sees the messenger of God standing right in front of them, telling him that he is headed in the wrong direction, doing the wrong thing, not listening to God.

Isn't it interesting? The man who is being paid big money because of his reputation for wisdom and 'contact with God,' turns out to be the foolish one. And the 'dumb donkey' is the example of wisdom.

Notice what happens next. The angel does not attack Balaam. He does not injure Balaam with his fiery sword. He points out that Balaam has been headed in the wrong direction, doing what God did not want him to do.

And he gives Balaam a chance to start listening again. He gives Balaam a chance to get on the right road again, to follow God's lead again. And ultimately, after more adventures, Balaam will actually BLESS Israel, and then return home.

Now, you may be wondering: why in the world does Fr. Mike have us listening to the story of an unwise wise man... a wayward magi? Why a reflection on the original *Mister Ed*?

Well, in many conversations with parishioners right now, I hear people asking questions. Question such as:

- + I wonder what God is trying to teach us in the middle of this quarantine?
- + or, I wonder what message God wants us to hear during this pandemic?
- + or, I wonder if we will change the direction of our lives once things get back to normal?

I don't pretend to have infallible answers to those very good questions. I don't think that God sends viruses into the world to grab our attention. But I do think that God is at work in everything we experience, calling out to us, asking us to listen.

And since God loves us, I believe that God calls us to us uniquely if we are going down the wrong path.

So, the message of this ancient reading from the Book of Numbers is as contemporary as the latest announcement from the CDC. The message of Balaam, and the donkey, and the angel, applies to my life every day – in quarantine, or out.

I need to hear this narrative from the Book of Numbers because, like Balaam, I often go down the wrong road, I often make the wrong choices, I often do precisely what I know God does not want us to do.

When we are not listening to the Lord, the Lord does not give up on us. God sends his messengers, and ultimately speaks in our conscience, reminding us of the right path and the right thing. And sometimes, God's message comes to me from the most unlikely of messengers!

Sometimes we pay attention to such messengers or angels – sometimes we just keep going the wrong way.

But, always, our God is ready to forgive us. He puts us on the right path, and leads us home... home to him... home where we belong.

We are all smart people. But sometimes we do foolish things. We are not always the smartest people in the room.

We are not the smartest. But God is wisest, and the most patient, and the most forgiving.

And today, we do not need any talking animals to show us the right way. Just listen to God's word, be open to the people who love you and to the surprising messengers of truth in your life, and trust in the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ.