

Living Nativity: The Wayward Prophet
By Jason Huff
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James 3:13-18; Matthew 7:15-29; Numbers 24:15-19

Our final Scripture reading is from Numbers 24:15-19. May God add His blessing to the reading of His perfect and holy Word. "Then Balaam uttered his oracle: "The oracle of Balaam son of Beor, the oracle of one whose eye sees clearly, the oracle of one who hears the words of God, who has knowledge from the Most High, who sees a vision from the Almighty, who falls prostrate, and whose eyes are opened: "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel. He will crush the foreheads of Moab, the skulls of all the sons of Sheth. Edom will be conquered; Seir, his enemy, will be conquered, but Israel will grow strong. A ruler will come out of Jacob and destroy the survivors of the city.""

As we've reached the season of Advent, we're going to set aside our study of Revelation for a few weeks to focus once again on the miracle of Jesus' coming. We're going to look at it through a different lens. Much of the Christmas story becomes rote – we've known about it since we were little children, and we're so used to it that we're immune to its wonders. We get curmudgeonly about it or overly sentimental. This year, I want to look at it with fresh eyes.

This year's theme is "Living Nativity" because that's what we want – the Christ child fresh and alive in our hearts. It's a vibrant, real, and very strange story in so many ways. I want to look at how the most surprising elements actually show that God is living and active and wants to approach us. He uses bizarre methods, weird people, unexpected schemes, and yet they break through the story we've heard all our lives and make it come alive again to us and in us.

We're going to start our Christmas series with a story I bet you've never heard before as part of Advent. You may never have heard it at all. It's the story of Balaam, a wayward but truthful prophet in the time of Moses. He is a curiosity of the highest order. He isn't an Israelite. In fact, his home was 450 miles away from the Hebrews. In his day, the Hebrews were still wandering between Egypt and Canaan, a full month's journey from his home.

How does this guy know about the LORD? We don't know. Maybe he learned of YHWH through his ancestors who told how Abraham passed through their land as he traveled west toward Canaan. Maybe he heard how God had rescued the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. But what's odd is that this guy Balaam not only knows *about* YHWH, he is a prophet who hears *from* YHWH and talks with YHWH. As far as we know, he has no connection to God's people. Yet here he is, speaking the word of the LORD in his native country.

But here's the rub: Balaam is a prophet for hire. In that era, if you wanted to know the future, if you wanted to get blessings on your crops or have hailstones dropped on your enemies, you got in touch with the local prophet. You'd pay him good money, and then he'd pray to whatever his god for what you wanted. Some of these guys were a joke, but some were in touch with the demonic who represented their gods. No wonder these guys were revered and feared. Balaam is like the rest of them except for one thing: for reasons we do not know, the God of Israel, the God of the universe, took kindly to Balaam and spoke to him.

Here's where the biblical story begins in Numbers 22. Balak, the king of Moab, is nervous. The Israelites have finally stopped wandering. The older generation is gone and the new generation are ready to take the land God promised to their ancestors. Moab is east of the Dead Sea, right next to the promised land. The Israelites have already taken the land south of Moab, and they've camped out, hundreds of thousands of them, along Moab's border.

Balak does what any nervous tribal chieftain with some money and power might do – he sends for the most powerful prophet he can afford. That's Balaam. He's heard that Balaam's curses and blessings really work. Balak sends his elders on the month-long journey to convince Balaam to come and curse Israel, hoping the curse will allow them to drive out the Hebrews.

They arrive, and Balaam says, "Spend the night, and I'll bring you back the answer the LORD gives me." God comes to Balaam and says, "You can't go with them. The Israelites are blessed, so you must not curse them." Balaam goes out, tells them, "I can't do it," they go home. Balak says, "Ok, he's playing hardball," so he sends princes to Balaam. Balak says, "I'll reward you handsomely, I'll do whatever you say, just come curse these people for me."

Now God has already provided His answer to Balaam, right? And Balaam knows it. He tells the princes, "You can offer me a palace filled with silver and gold, but I can't do anything more than what the LORD my God commands me to do." But Balaam sees dollar signs, so he says, "Tell you what – spend the night and I'll see if God has anything more to say about this." God meets with Balaam and says, "Go with them, but do nothing I don't command you to do." So Balaam packs up and goes, probably with dreams of riches on his mind.

Now comes the famous part of the story. God is angry with Balaam. Balaam knew he couldn't curse the Israelites, yet his desires got ahead of him. So God sends His angel to oppose Balaam. Three times, Balaam's donkey sees the angel, and the donkey, being the smarter of the two of them, moves to get out of the way. The third time, the donkey lies down in the middle of the road. Each time, Balaam is angry and hits the donkey with his staff.

In one of the most bizarre things ever, God opens the mouth of the donkey, and the donkey says, "What I have done to you for you to beat me three times?" Now what's really funny is that Balaam treats this as normal! He *is* a prophet: maybe he thinks he's seeing a vision, maybe he can rationalize it somehow in his mind. Maybe he's been smoking something to get into his spiritual trances, who knows! Or maybe he really is just a little bonkers. So he starts to have a conversation with the donkey! He's like, "Lucky for you I don't have my sword with me!" And the donkey is like, "Haven't I been your donkey your whole life? Have I ever behaved like this before?" And Balaam's like, "You've got a point."

Finally, God reveals the truth to Balaam, he sees the angel, and he bows to the ground. He knows he's in trouble. And the angel chastises him. He calls Balaam reckless. Balaam's life is spared for a purpose. Balaam confesses his sin and is willing to go back. But God sends him with the angel, saying, "Only do what I tell you."

They reach the edge of Moabite territory, and Belek is already there to greet Balaam. He's like, "What took you so long?" Balaam's like, "Well, I'm here now, but I can only do what God tells me to do." Belek takes Balaam up to one of the high places where his people worshipped the god Baal, and says, "Can you curse them now, please?" And Balaam says, "Make seven altars, make sacrifices on them, and maybe God will meet with me." They go through all of that, and God does meet with him. He sends Balaam back to Balak, only the things is, he says all sorts of great things about Israel!

Now Balak's getting a little miffed. He's like, "I brought you here to curse my enemies, but you're blessing them!" Balaam says, "I told you that I can only do what God says to do." Balak takes Balaam to different mountains in different parts of his territory, thinking that maybe God is going to like this place better and will let Balaam curse Israel. But nothing doing. Every time, Balaam comes back speaking the praises of Israel and how God will protect them. The third time, the Holy Spirit came upon him and he prophesied directly to Balak. By now, Balak is just smokin' mad, enraged. He's like, "Go home, get out of here. And don't expect any money from me. "The Lord" has kept you from being rewarded."

Balaam is like, "I told you this was a possibility. And now I'm going to speak about the future of your people and the future of the Israelites." And all of a sudden, we get to the Christmas part. Balaam prophesies about a far-off king. He says, "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel." He then predicts the destruction of the surrounding nations but the growing strength of Israel.

This prophecy has long been considered the first straightforward prophecy of the Messiah's coming. Before Moses spoke of a prophet greater than himself coming to lead God's people, before King David wrote psalms about a suffering servant-king, before other prophets had visions of one born in Bethlehem coming from David's line, here's this outsider, this odd bird, not one of God's people, prophesying about Jesus.

Before we get comfortable with Balaam as God's spokesperson, Balaam says something like this... "You know, Balak, you don't actually need me to curse the Israelites for you. YHWH has made a covenant with them and given them His Law. All you have to do is get the Israelites to break faith with God, to break their agreement, to sin, and they will curse themselves."

Balaam sold out the people of Israel, the people of the God he served, to make a buck. Balak did what Balaam told him; he got the women of his tribes to commit immorality with the Israelite men and got the Israelite men to worship their gods. And it caused huge losses for the Israelites. Eventually, the faithful men of Israel got ahold of Balaam and put him to death for causing the people to fall away from God.

Now you may be thinking, "Pastor Jason has really gone off on a wild goose chase on this one. Where are Mary and Joseph? Where are the shepherds and wise men? Where are all the things I expect out of Christmas?" And those are fair questions. But before we get to the Messiah, we really have to set the stage for His coming. We have to know that for thousands of years before Jesus' coming, the people of Israel were expecting a Savior to rescue them.

The reason Jesus' birth matters so much is because God had been telling His people to expect Him to come for millennia. This was not something random that Christians made up to give Jesus legitimacy. Prophecy after prophecy after prophecy set the stage for Jesus' arrival. And while there are some vague ideas of a coming messiah before Balaam, there are none as clear and strong of a distant star and scepter coming to rule and reign over God's people in righteousness.

So why should we care about a distant prophet, especially one as messed up as Balaam? What difference do these words make to our understanding of Christmas and the whole biblical story? There really are so many that we'll only be able to discuss just a few of them today. But the first one is this: *The Balaam story teaches us to expect the unexpected from God.* When we get to the Christmas story and see miracles right and left, especially in our modern world, it's easy to write it all off, to say that it's all impossible. And yet God has been doing the unexpected from the very beginning.

Instead of fulfilling the promise that Adam and Eve would die on the day they ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, that same day God made a promise – the very first Messianic promise – that one day, the work of the serpent in the garden would be undone. God chooses to bless Abraham's line not because Abraham was exceptionally moral (he wasn't) or particularly worthy (he wasn't). The only thing Abraham really did was to believe God, to take God at His word, and then act in accordance with that belief.

God takes Joseph, the spoiled favorite son of his father Jacob sold into slavery by his brothers, and uses him to save the entire region of Egypt and Canaan from a nasty famine. God takes Moses, a man raised in a palace, a man responsible for murder, and turns him into the greatest leader of Israel until Jesus comes. God speaks through a donkey, and God speaks through wayward prophets. When we take all those things into account, the wonders of the Christmas story seem plausible.

What else? *The Balaam story shows that God's truth abides apart from its speaker.* Balaam was not a good guy. He was never truly on Israel's side. When the cash prize was on the line, Balaam sacrificed his principles to give Balak a backdoor to cursing the Hebrews. Even 1500 years later, in the book of Revelation, Jesus warned His churches about modern-day Balaamites who lured Christians away from their faith through promises of earthly pleasures. And yet Balaam's prophecy about the Savior of the world is no less true for all of that.

If we expect truth to come to us from completely pure and unbiased sources, we're in serious trouble. As Christians, we rely on the Word of God to tell us the unvarnished, unchanged truth. When it comes to everyone else, we need to be very discerning. We need to be in the Scriptures on a regular, even daily basis so that we know the ring of truth and the ring of falsehood. Even the most truthful person gets it wrong often, and as the old saying goes, "A stopped clock is still right twice a day."

In our modern situation, it means we must be very wise and discerning as to who is speaking truth. It also means that we must accept truth whenever it is spoken, whether or not we like the speaker. There are many politicians today on both side of the aisle who are Christians in name only – their actions and beliefs show they really hold to whatever is politically expedient. Only a few practice genuine Christianity. Yet amazingly, both Republicans and Democrats can, on occasion, stand for, defend, and work to bolster biblical truth. We have to listen to the message beyond the affiliation of the speaker.

For the Christmas story, it also means that we listen to those truth-seekers we might otherwise ignore. If we only trust the best and most reliable people, the wise men and the shepherds aren't the ones we'd be looking for. Do you expect God's honest truth from foreign astrologers, of all people? Do you trust the word of shepherds, one of the most disrespected and low-paying jobs in all of Israel? (As Jackson put it this week, the angels appearing to shepherds is like angels appearing to the crew working the overnight shift at the local McDonalds!) And yet as we've just learned, we have to expect the unexpected. We look beyond the surface and say, "Is this message true?" The scribes and the Pharisees, all the religious experts, they missed the birth of Jesus because they weren't really looking for Him at all. These unreliable wise men and shepherds, they're the ones who spoke the truth!

Last thing to think about: *Balaam's story shows that God's plans for us and for our salvation have been in the cards a long, long time.* Balaam lived over 1,400 years before the time of Jesus. Yet the first prophecy about Jesus came at the Garden of Eden, and that was by the most conservative reading well over 4,000 years before Jesus! In fact, because God is all-knowing, He created us knowing that we would choose our own path of disobedience and rebellion against Him. Before He put a star up in the sky or brought our world into being, He had a plan of salvation for us already in place. He knew each and every one of us...who we would be, when we would be, how we would be. And He chose us to be part of His Kingdom.

Do you know that God's design for you was in place before anything came into being in this universe? It's true. Listen to this from Ephesians 1:4 – "For he [the Father] chose us in him [Jesus, the Son] before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight." Not only did God prepare His plan of salvation, not only did He have set in mind the exact date and time of His Son's arrival to save us from our sins, but He had you, specifically you, the exact you that sits here now, planned and chosen for His family.

You think you don't matter? You think that you can't count for much, only one of seven billion? God counted on you before Genesis 1:1. He loves you and He created you for Himself. He created you to be saved by Jesus' gift to us on the cross, and He created you to co-operate with His work in your life through the Holy Spirit. You were made for eternal life with Him.

This Christmas, I want you to remember, every time you hear a carol or see a nativity, that Jesus, the one God told us about for century after century, came here in a manger, becoming nothing, so that God, having planned on you being in His Kingdom before anything was made, could rescue you. Not just all Christians, not just some big group, but you personally and me personally. We are valued and we are loved so much more than we can fathom. And that's a great way to look at Christmas entering into the holiday season.