

Numbers 22, 31-35



³¹ Then the Lord opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with his sword drawn. So he bowed low and fell facedown. ³² The angel of the Lord asked him, "Why have you beaten your donkey these three times? I have come here to oppose you because your path is a reckless one before me.^[a] ³³ The donkey saw me and turned away from me these three times. If it had not turned away, I would certainly have killed you by now, but I would have spared it." ³⁴ Balaam said to the angel of the Lord, "I have sinned. I did not realize you were standing in the road to oppose me. Now if you are displeased, I will go back." ³⁵ The angel of the Lord said to Balaam, "Go with the men, but speak only what I tell you." So Balaam went with Balak's officials.

The story of Balaam and his stubborn donkey has inspired both adults and children. To refresh our memory, I will repeat the main points: During their forty-year journey through the desert, the Israelites came close to Moab. The Moabites were hostile to the Israelites and wanted to defeat them militarily. In order to ensure victory, the messengers of King Moab asked the prophet Balaam to curse the Israelites first. But God came to Balaam and asked him not to go with the messengers of Moab and not to curse the Israelites. When the king of Moab heard this, he raised the price so that Balaam would pronounce the curse against God's will. This time God allowed Balaam to go, but on the condition that he could only say those things that God commanded. But Balaam went straight to Israel and apparently wanted to really curse them thus disregarding God's voice. After all, he had received a lot of money to do just that. Then God became angry and blocked the way with an angel who had a sword in his hand. But Balaam could not see this angel. Only his donkey could. At first she refused to continue on the way and ran off into the field. Then she trapped Balaam's foot on a wall. And finally she just lay down on the ground and refused to go any further. Balaam beat the donkey until God finally opened Balaam's eyes and he saw the angel. Then he repented. God allowed him to continue on the way to Israel. But this time, not to curse Israel, but the opposite. He was now to bless her. That was a scam for King Moab and was to have repercussions.

This story is not only a fantastic children's story, but inspires us adults just as much. Because a donkey seems to have more knowledge of God and his angels than the prophet. This might seem funny to us and we may marvel about those invisible or unknown things between heaven and earth... and also amidst the animal world and our world that yet remains unfathomable by us. On second thoughts thought to myself: „But how on earth are you supposed to preach about that? And anyway. How do you talk about angels?“ They are mostly invisible to us and, like Balaam, we cannot see the many guardian angels around us who protect us day and night. But before we talk about the appearance of angels, we must first try and understand how this story of Balaam and the donkey made it to the Bible. Balaam, the prophet, apparently had no antennae for angels and yet was able to have a normal conversation with a donkey. Balaam is not a funny children's story, but shows us how blatantly even a prophet can be in contradiction to God. And this is made clear precisely through Balaam. This is why the New Testament repeatedly uses Balaam as a negative example: The Second Epistle of Peter warns us not to become like Balaam who was no longer able to hear the voice of God. The Epistle of Jude even puts Balaam on a par with Cain, who heard the voice of God but nevertheless followed his own hatred instead of God's will. Later in his life we learn more about this exotic Balaam. Despite his talent for blessing and cursing and although God was so close to him and even though he

repented in the instance of today's sermon reading, Balaam thereafter went to the Moabites and hatched a plan with them to seduce the Israelites into idolatry. And this is precisely why John in the Revelation accuses the church in Pergamum of corrupting God's church from within with cunning and deceit and then quotes... "just like Balaam did." Both Balaam and the church in Pergamum reflect something that is not unknown to all of us. Faith in God and at the same time rebellion against God and his holy will. In Balaam we see a prophet who is in blatant contradiction to God's Will and is eventually able to corrupt the Israelites from within. This is a particularly dangerous and evil negative example that the Bible gives to us. In our modern church I can see both deception and corruption from within the church as well as a general fatigue and unwillingness to engage the world with God's Word. The story of Balaam is a warning to us that Faith and rebellion against God can be very close to one another. We can also see traits of Balaam in us. We do recognize God's Will and we become unwilling to follow this will and eventually become totally deaf and blind to his voice. The amazing thing about the story of Balaam is that he is bent on cursing God's people, but God turns this into blessing!

However, it is not immediately apparent that this story would have a "happy ending" And we do not immediately recognize God's blessing in this story. You can only see all of this in retrospect. At first, God's plan of blessing appears to be such that the path of Balaam was blocked. In other words, it was anything but a blessing. Balaam was angry at the donkey and angry that he could not fulfill his task. I believe that we can all understand Balaam's experience in one way or another. We are all familiar with the fact that decisions we make and paths we have set out for ourselves may seem hopeless, blocked or impossible. You can see this in the following examples, for example: The boss calls you for a meeting. The company is in financial crisis. The boss gives you a decision: "Either a radical downgrade or you have to look for another job." Or, you have decided on a career and the corresponding course of study, but you realize that you just can't pass the exams. Or you are an enthusiastic athlete and suddenly you get an illness that thwarts all your plans. Balaam finds himself in just such a situation. What this story shows us is that God can and does speak to us through very ordinary things. Even things that happen in our practical lives. Yes, even by means of a donkey! And most of the time, when God intervenes in our lives like this, we do not recognize his intervention as a blessing. Angels are not always the loving beings who look like children and play musical instruments, but can be awkward and even hurtful. And yet it is precisely these awkward angels that are vital. In the story of Balaam, the angel's intervention decides between life and death. Because Balaam wanted to pronounce a curse that would bring death. Instead, God wanted blessing! We humans cannot always recognize this blessing from God. And the paths that I have chosen are not always blessed paths. And God then has to act differently than my will. Thank God that it is so! Because if I now take a very long retrospective view and look at God's road of salvation with the people of Israel as a whole. Then I see the story of Balaam repeated a thousand times. Israel wanted to make itself great. But they did not realize that God wanted to bless not just Israel, but the whole world. That God would go to such lengths to save human beings was always incomprehensible to people. For example, we see Jonah who quarreled with God because God persisted to forgive the Ninevites. That God would ultimately go so far as to die on the cross for us, no one would have thought! Not even in their dreams! So Peter warns Jesus: "You must not go this way to the cross!" But because of this cross on Golgotha, we now know that God has a good and blessed goal in mind for us. Balaam saw an open path before him and suddenly the path was inexplicably blocked. On Good Friday, a path also seemed to come to an end. At least that is what most people thought. The cross and the grave represented a total dead end. But the path did not end with Good Friday, but with Easter. And here too an angel was involved. First of all, he

opened the way by rolling the stone away from the grave. This angel was not there to block the way but to open it. "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" was his final question. The women who wanted to embalm Jesus on Easter Monday did not immediately recognize the great blessing either. At first the message of the rolled away stone and the missing body was awkward and inappropriate. This can happen to all of us when God works with us. When we reach a point where we don't know what to do or think that the way is closed, it could be God who has placed an angel in our way. That is painful. Sometimes we can only realize much later what God had planned for us at one point or another. It is precisely at such points that we do well to keep God's great plan in mind. God's great plan is Easter. With the rising of the sun on Easter Monday, a completely new light has risen over us, over our plans and over our entire lives. God has pronounced the final and lasting blessing over our lives. And Jesus pronounces his blessing over us and over all our plans by saying: I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even if he dies (John 11:25). Amen.