

Surrendering Relevance
Numbers 22:1, 9-38
Sermon at the Invitation of the MRA Board of Directors

The reading from the Old Testament book of Numbers tells a story about Balaam, who is not an Israelite, and is not referred to in the Books of Moses with the word “prophet,” but is, according to his own self-description—which scripture does not contradict—a “man whose eye is clear, [who] hears the words of God, and knows the knowledge of the Most High, who sees the vision of the Almighty, who falls down, but with his eyes uncovered: I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near” (Numbers 24:15-17).

At this point, the Covenant People have been wandering for forty years, and they have now come to the plains of Moab, ever so close to claiming the Promised Land.

Also appearing in this story is Balak, the king of Moab, whose people are greatly intimidated by the number and power of God’s Covenant People, Israel.

And stealing the show is Balaam’s donkey. In an earlier time in the development of the English language, this was called the story of Balaam’s ass.

Numbers 22:1, 9-38

¹The Israelites set out, and camped in the plains of Moab across the Jordan from Jericho.

[Now Balak, king of Moab, sent emissaries to Balaam, to ask him to come and put a curse on the Israelite people. The dignitaries arrived, and Balaam said to them, “Stay here tonight, and I will bring back word to you, just as the LORD speaks to me.” That night,]

⁹God came to Balaam and said, “Who are these men with you?” ¹⁰Balaam said to God, “King Balak, son of Zippor of Moab, has sent me this message: ¹¹‘A people has come out of Egypt and has spread over the face of the earth; now come, curse them for me; perhaps I shall be able to fight against them and drive them out.’” ¹²God said to Balaam, “You shall not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed.”

¹³So Balaam rose in the morning, and said to the officials of Balak, “Go to your own land, for the LORD has refused to let me go with you.” ¹⁴So the officials of Moab rose and went to Balak, and said, “Balaam refuses to come with us.”

¹⁵Once again Balak sent officials, more numerous and more distinguished than these. ¹⁶They came to Balaam and said to him, “Thus says Balak son of Zippor: ‘Do not let anything hinder you from coming to me; ¹⁷for I will surely do you great honor, and whatever you say to me I will do; come, curse this people for me.’”

¹⁸But Balaam replied to the servants of Balak, “Although Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command of the LORD my God, to do less or more. ¹⁹You remain here, as the others did, so that I may learn what more the LORD may say to me.”

²⁰That night God came to Balaam and said to him, “If the men have come to summon you, get up and go with them; but do only what I tell you to do.”

²¹So Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey, and went with the officials of Moab.

²²God’s anger was kindled because he was going, and the angel of the LORD took his stand in the road as his adversary. Now he was riding on the donkey, and his two servants were with him. ²³The donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road, with a drawn sword in his 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.

²⁴Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side. ²⁵When 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.

²⁶Then 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.

²⁷When 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.

²⁸Then 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?”

²⁹Balaam said to the donkey, “Because you have made a fool of me! I wish I had a sword in my hand! I would kill you right now!”

³⁰But 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.”

³¹Then 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.

³²The 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.” ³³The 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.”

³⁴Then 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.” ³⁵The 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.

³⁶When 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.

³⁷Balak said to Balaam, “Did I not send to summon you? Why did you not come to me? Am I not able to honor you?” ³⁸Balaam 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.”

The Sermon

Beginning in mid-March of 2010, an exhibit was featured at New York City’s Museum of Modern Art, in which the groundbreaking artist Marina Abramović presented a profoundly moving, thought-provoking piece of performance art: she sat in a chair.

Sounds fascinating, doesn’t it?

But every hour of every day that the museum was open from March 14 to May 31—seven and a half hours, six days a week—the 63-year-old took her place on one of two wooden chairs, set up facing each other in the middle of a square atrium, and for all that time, she didn't move, other than almost imperceptibly, lifting or lowering her head, and opening and closing her eyes.ⁱ

The chair facing her was for members of the public. They couldn't bring any object; they couldn't say anything; they couldn't do anything other than be seated, and, if they wished, look at her. They were limited, I think, to 15 minutes.

As the first days and weeks went by, and word spread, people started lining up around the block, to try to get a chance to take their turn.

They would come to the chair and sit down, and she would lift her gently bowed head and open her eyes.

And a remarkably large percentage would sit down, make eye contact, and after minutes or seconds or no time at all, tears would come rolling down their faces—men, women, even very young people. Sometimes, she would cry, too.

Not a single word was ever exchanged. But the power of that moment was electrifying—just two people, sharing a small space from a respectful distance, making eye contact and simultaneously communicating nothing and everything about what it is, and what it means, to be who they are.

With no words exchanged, and hardly any symbolic gestures, the contact couldn't come from either person communicating anything about their histories, their accomplishments, their considered opinions, their areas of expertise, their station in life, their personal preferences, their professional or scholastic or experiential achievements.

All of that was rendered irrelevant in those silent minutes on an ordinary chair—speechless encounters that shook people to their foundations.

A quarter of a century ago, Henri Nouwen wrote, “The first thing that struck me when I came to live in a house for mentally handicapped people was their liking or disliking me had absolutely nothing to do with any of the many useful things I had done until then. Since nobody could read my books, they could not impress anyone, and since most of them never went to school, my 20 years at Notre Dame, Yale and Harvard did not provide a significant introduction. My considerable

ecumenical experience proved even less valuable. When I offered some meat to one of the assistants during dinner, one of the handicapped men said to me, ‘Don’t give him meat, he doesn’t eat meat, he’s a Presbyterian.’

“This experience,” wrote Nouwen, “forced me to rediscover my true identity. These broken, wounded, and completely unpretentious people forced me to let go of my relevant self—the self that can do things, show things, prove things, build things—and forced me to reclaim that unadorned self in which I am completely vulnerable, open to receive and give love regardless of any accomplishments.

“I am telling you all this,” he said, “because I believe the Christian leader of the future is called to be completely irrelevant and to stand in this world with nothing to offer but his or her own vulnerable self. The great message we have to carry, as followers of Jesus, is that God loves us not because of what we do or accomplish, but because God has created and redeemed us in love and has chosen us to proclaim that love as the true source of all human life.”ⁱⁱ

The temptation that Balaam faced, and with which he apparently flirted indiscreetly, was the alluring invitation to be treated as if he himself were entirely *relevant*—and to participate in that illusion—that he himself was so relevant that his own curse could turn back the masses of the People of God, on the move at God’s direction.

Balak seemed to know just which buttons to push—and they work on good, well-meaning, decent people all the time.

He sent dignitaries, and when that didn’t work, he sent *more important* dignitaries. Talk about an ego boost.

He sent Balaam the message, “don’t let anything stop you from coming to me to do this thing.”

I’ll show you honor. I’ll do whatever you tell me to do. When we’re choosing teams for basketball, I’ll pick you first. I’ll put your name highest and first. When Steve McQueen and Paul Newman were coaxed into starring in some terrible disaster movie in the 1970s—their agents must have sat around a table for weeks trying to figure this out—their names appeared in the opening credits at the same time. Steve McQueen’s name was on the left, so technically “first,” but Paul Newman’s name was slightly higher, so technically “top” billing. Who was more relevant in movies that year? Can’t say.

Balaam, if you'll come and do this thing for me, say these words I want you to say, I'll give you top billing, and people will say, now and forever, WOW. That Balaam was *so* vital. *So* important. *So relevant*.

Max Ehrmann wrote in that marvelously presumptuous poem of blessing called *Desiderata*, "Take kindly the counsel of the years, gracefully surrendering the things of youth."ⁱⁱⁱ

I am terrible at that, which is why it was so easy for me to take a swipe at Ehrmann's poem just then.

My friend Susan Baller-Shepard, who writes occasional pieces for the Washington Post (that's called "name dropping," by the way—it makes me a little more relevant), put something up about five years ago where she was commenting on the use of the term "Mom jeans," referring to a certain cut that is, let's say, somewhat different from the spray-painted-on skinny jeans that are designed to present a certain kind of youthfulness.

Sue wrote about a group of her lifelong friends as they reached a certain stage in life, "These...are the women I want helping me to raise my children. They are mothers with humor, grace, intelligence. Friends since junior high, we used to joke that as mothers, we would not eat sleeves of cookies without a blink, we'd never 'let ourselves go.' We'd remain relevant. We'd keep our wits about us. We'd retain some fashion sense. Of course," she said, "this was all our pre-planning. We had no idea what we were in for."

She said, "I remember one night at 2 A.M. catching a glimpse of my reflection in the window of an emergency room while holding my feverish infant son. My hair was literally all standing up in waves. While the sight of me was a bit shocking, I just didn't care. I didn't care who saw me, how long I'd be at the hospital, how long I'd go without sleep, as long as my sweet boy could get well. 'Something is wrong with my son,' I told them, 'and I'm not going home until we know what it is.'"^{iv}

Balak is offering a full wardrobe of skinny jeans for Balaam, who has to decide: I can go out now in my rock star relevance—or I can wear whatever you wear at two in the morning when you've rushed your kid to the emergency room.

And the signals God is sending Balaam seem to be a little bit confusing, but God sees through what you and I and perhaps Balaam himself are unable to see on our own—Balaam’s, and my, and perhaps your, inner struggle between, on the one hand, “I only do what I do to serve God’s purposes,” and on the other, “But maybe God wants me to be just a little bit special today. Just a little bit entitled. I mean, I am awfully smart. And I’m right, like, all the time. Or if I’m not right, I’m just so *charming*. Maybe today God’s giving me a little bit of the ol’ *carte blanche*. Maybe today it’s supposed to be about me.”

And maybe when Balaam sets out with his fawning party, even though God already said, “Go ahead and go with them,” God knows that there’s something else in Balaam’s well-meaning but susceptible heart—that Balaam may not have fully absorbed the part where God said, “Go with them, but *do only what I tell you to do*.”

And now, here he is, hovering, powerless, over a donkey with four flat tires and a busted suspension. Here is Balaam, the guy whose words can turn back the surge of nations, whose curse is enough to thwart the People of God, Mr. Relevant, standing helplessly in the road. Looking like an idiot. Engaging blindly in a pathetic, violent argument with his ass.

We’re here today in Montreat celebrating what God is doing. Look at what is happening in Montreat. We have a phenomenal new president who’s taken the baton from an outstanding previous president, and they both make it look so easy—and everybody in this room knows that not a single thing about it is easy.

We have a staff at the MRA who are absolutely incredible.

We have a new pastor coming in to Black Mountain Presbyterian Church who could not possibly be better equipped or more obviously gifted for that position which is so important for Montreat.

There are amazing people in this town—giants, in my book—working hard for the Presbyterian Heritage Center, keeping that ministry vital and engaged. Montreat College, Christ Community Church, the Conference Center, and the Montreat PC(USA) Church have among them a thrilling spirit and a renewed sense of mutual interest.

And just walk through these buildings. Look at these windows. Feel what God is doing here.

And here's the thing: Montreat's mission is not now, and can never be, about Montreat.

Not because it would be bad strategy, but because it would be bad theology.

Not because it would be bad public relations, but because it would be a hollow public witness.

Not because Montreat is irrelevant, but because only God is relevant, and our only relevance is in God.

And God is love, according to First Peter.

And love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things, according to Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians.

"Not to us, O God," says Psalm 115, "not to us, but to your name give glory."

"Unless the Lord builds the house," says Psalm 127, "those who build it labor in vain."

I've seen seven thousand church message boards that I've found trite and loathsome, bless their hearts. But the one I really liked was one that said, "If God is your co-pilot, switch seats."

Depending on who you are, depending on who anyone is,
 Montreat is either relevant or irrelevant;
 the Montreat gate is either relevant or irrelevant;
 the history and the stories of this place are either relevant or irrelevant;
 the crises and controversies of the day are relevant or irrelevant;
 my words are either relevant or irrelevant.

Relevance can only come with the recognition and joyful embrace of the fact that without God, we are nothing. With God, all things are possible.

It's when we surrender our own need to be relevant,
 when we dare to lay down all our accomplishments
 and all our ability and impressiveness
 at the foot of the cross,

when we allow ourselves the vulnerability
 to set aside everything we think of as “us”
 and give to God all—*all*—that we can be and do and dream,

then we may be called disciples. Then we may be effective servants.
 Then and only then can we be part of the only thing that is truly “relevant.”

I pray with Ted Loder:

Catch me in my aimless scurrying, Lord,
 and hold me in this Lenten season:
 hold my heart to the beat of your grace
 and create in me a resting place,
 a kneeling place,
 a tip-toe place

where I can recover from the dis-ease of my grandiosities
 which fill my mind and calendar with busy self-importance,
 that I may become vulnerable enough
 to dare intimacy with the familiar,
 to listen cup-eared for you summons,
 and to watch squint-eyed for your crooked finger

in the crying of a child,
 in the hunger of [those who are kept in poverty],
 in the fear of [annihilation] in all people,
 in the rage of [all who are] oppressed [...],
 in the smoldering resentments of [the] exploited [...],
 in my lonely doubt and limping ambivalence;

and somehow,
 during this season of sacrifice,
 enable me to sacrifice time
 and possessions
 and securities,

to do something...
 [...] to turn the water of my words
 into a wine of will and risk,
 into the bread of blood and blisters,

into the blessedness of deed,
 of a cross picked up,
 a savior followed.^v
 Amen.

Keith Grogg
 Upper Anderson Theatre
 Montreat, NC
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ⁱ Most of the information regarding Abramović and her exhibition is gleaned from the documentary film *Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present* (2013), directed by Matthew Akers and Jeff Dupré.

ⁱⁱ Nouwen, Henry. *In the Name of Jesus*. New York: Crossroad, 1989, 15-17.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ehrmann, Max. *The Desiderata of Faith*. New York: Crown, 1996.

^{iv} Baller-Shepard, Susan. "Mom Jeans" (<http://www.faithstreet.com/onfaith/2010/05/06/mom-jeans/1810>) May 6, 2010.

^v Loder, Ted. *Guerillas of Grace*. LuraMedia, 1984.