

Angels in the Road

Select Verses Numbers 22

Matthew 3:1-12

The themes of the four Sundays of Advent are often: hope, peace, joy, and love – all pointing towards the miracle of Christ’s birth. Advent is an expectant time – a time when we must often wait for the fulfillment of our hopes. Some Advent seasons have us bursting with hope, peace, joy, and love and other times we struggle to see light in the world. But here, we find deep wells of spiritual hope and spiritual joy that prove bottomless if only we keep faith alive and continue searching for that living water – if only we mind the path that to be carved out before us.

The story of Balaam, Balak, and Donkey, too is one of my favorites. Balaam is by no means a holy man or a righteous man. He is a magician for hire – powerful and well respected. He is, apparently, willing to curse anyone for the right price, but not the people of Israel. No, he knows of the G-d that the Hebrew people worship. He knows of G-d’s power and strength and love. So he knows that he cannot control G-d with his incantations and fancy tricks. Balaam is out for himself, but G-d says, “no.”

And sometimes, when we think that we can get away with things, when our hearts falter and we are tempted to do the wrong thing, we feel like we can get away from it all scot free. But G-d is affected by what we do. G-d cares what happens to the vulnerable ones and sends an angel who, honestly, seems to be the donkey’s guardian angel more than Balaam’s. It is the donkey who can see what G-d has in mind, who wants to spare her owner the wrath that he is facing. See, the angel in this story is not of the fluffy-winged, soft-faced, cherub variety. The angel isn’t as sweet and nice as Stephanie! This is an angry, sword wielding, take no prisoners servant of the Lord. (Although, for the record, I bet the donkey was as sweet as Margot.) The angel stops them

both, dead in their tracks. The way of the Lord isn't as simple as going through the motions and working out our own ends in the meantime. Preparing the way of the Lord requires our whole selves as a living offering – the devotion of our minds, the praise of our feelings, the work of our hands, the wonder of our spirits. There are angels in the road and they are by no means fooled by us.

The wisdom of the donkey and the turn of heart for Balaam carry forward into our Gospel reading this morning. John the Baptist preaches for anyone and everyone who will listen, crying out, "Prepare the way of the Lord." John the Baptist saw it as his role to point to Christ. He did not want to draw attention to himself – he wanted people to see that the glory of the Lord was to be revealed before their very eyes – before the eyes of all the earth. G-d who came to Abraham, who led the Hebrew people in the wilderness, who brought restoration following exile, this G-d comes into our world, into our lives when we most need a savior. This G-d will not leave us alone no matter the circumstance. And so John is out in the wilderness; he wears scratchy clothes and eats bugs dipped in honey. He yells at the people about their sins and stubbornness. He was probably loud and smelly and foul. But still he drew people. His message was a challenge – prepare. Prepare and change. Prepare and be changed.

There were some who came to the water that John didn't trust. Pharisees and Sadducees were religious Jews who were educated in schools and taught their understanding of the Torah to students and followers. They didn't inherit their religious roles like the priests and Levites did. Sadducees believed in a strict interpretation of the Torah and Pharisees believed in a looser one that included the traditions of the elders (which they called the oral Torah). That both of these groups found some truth in what John was preaching is astounding – like a revival meeting that drew equal numbers of Southern Baptists and Unitarians. John isn't saying that the Pharisees and

Sadducees as a group are wrong or bad or evil. But he does question their motives and their commitment. He says to them, “who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” What donkey, what angel told you to stop dead in your tracks and repent, repent, change your hearts. John says, “bear fruit worthy of repentance.”

John’s baptism is for repentance because preparing the way of the Lord isn’t only about outer forms or inner forms. It is about clearing away the underbrush that chokes out our hearts and blocks out our neighbors. It is about weeding out the selfishness and violence that are the cause of our undoing. It is about seeing what fruit our lives bear and returning to the living water so that from our roots to our branches to our leaves to our fruits, we may produce that which is pleasing to G-d.

And isn’t it strange – so much of John’s rhetoric is violent. He speaks of an ax that comes to chop down trees and a baptism of fire and a winnowing fork and of burning with an unquenchable fire. But look again at our call to worship. G-d forgives our sins and G-d speaks peace to the people – G-d speaks peace to the faithful who turn to G-d in their hearts. Then salvation is near and steadfast love and faithfulness meet. Righteousness and peace will kiss each other and faithfulness will spring up from the ground. Then the psalmist tells us, “Righteousness will go before the Lord, and will make a path for his steps.” Preparing the way of the Lord is not about destruction – it is about righteousness, justice, and peace. All this making straight of highways and lifting up of valleys and lowering mountains – all this uneven ground becoming level and rough places being remade into plains: it is about welcoming the Lord into our world and hearts and homes with a turning toward love and peace. This baptism of fire is clearing out the dead underbrush so that in each of our souls we may be lighter and more focused. Every step

we take towards peace is one step closer to Christ returning to our world and restoring peace and goodness to all.

So let your hearts be full and let your hearts be free. The peace of Christ is in this world – it is here and it is at hand. We do not have to climb a mountain or cross a desolate plain to find it. The Spirit brings it here to us so that love and righteousness and praise will resound from all of us in our hearts and in our lives. Let go of the guilt that torments you – the anger that controls you – the pride that despises others – the despair that plants fear in your heart. Bring all of this, all of yourself to the table, and Christ will sustain you. Christ will equip you with all the tools that you need to tend the wilds of your soul and fill the world with peace. G-d always finds a way, but what a joy it is to prepare the way of the Lord; what a joy it is to take part, to spread that love to another; what a joy to remember who we are and who we belong to. May the peace of Christ shine in our hearts and in our lives this day and always. AMEN.