

The Great(est) Communicator  
A Message by Rev. Dr. Richard Lapehn  
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Scripture: Numbers 22:21-35; Micah 5:2-4

I. In the recent history of American politics, President Ronald Reagan was dubbed “The Great Communicator.” Both the supporters and critics of President Reagan did admit that he was very good at communicating his message.

President Reagan was prone to speak in a folksy way, employing images to which most people could relate. Classmates at Eureka College in the early 1930’s said that young Ron could be seen speaking into a broomstick when he would practice famous speeches. His years of practice eventually made him good at his craft.

II. With no disrespect to the memory of Mr. Reagan, if he were considered a “Great” communicator, what sort of superlative would best describe our God? God’s desire and ability to speak to, guide, shape and mold our hearts and minds has no equal.

In fact, the story of Scripture is a story of God communicating with creation. In the beginning God says, “Let there be light,” (Gen. 1:3) and there is light. I don’t God even needed to shout out the command to get the job done. God simply spoke light into being.

God continues communicating with our forebears in the faith. The Bible says that Adam and Eve “heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day” (Gen.3:8). God spoke to Noah about the coming flood and his need to build the ark for the safety of his family (Gen.8:15).

Abraham heard the words of God’s promise and trusted them. Jacob, Abraham’s grandson, heard from God during a vision as a young man (Gen.12:1-9). Later, he would receive another

visionary communication from God and move his family from Israel to Egypt while his son, Joseph, was second-in-command.

Moses heard the voice of God from a bush that wouldn't stop burning (Ex.3:2). The entire nation of Israel heard the voice of God when Moses delivered the Ten Commandments from the mountaintop (Ex.20:1).

Moses is a biblical figure held in such great esteem because the Bible says, "The Lord would speak to Moses face to face," it is written in Ex. 33:11, "as a man speaks with his friend."

But Moses was not alone in hearing the voice of God when they journeyed through the wilderness. Scripture tells us that still more Israelites could hear the voice of God: "Surely the Lord our God has shown us his glory and his greatness," they said, "and we have heard his voice from the midst of the fire" (Deut.5:23,24).

In this season we celebrate the divine birth of Jesus to Mary. There was a young woman in the OT who heard the Lord speak to her through an angel.

The angel told the wife of Manoah that she would conceive and give birth to a son – a boy she was to name Samson, who would be dedicated to the Lord's work and rescue Israel from the Philistines (Judges 13:6-8).

A lesser known prophet, Micaiah, said, "As sure as God lives, what God says, I'll say" (2 Chron.18:13).

Those are just a few of the hundreds of examples of the word of God heard audibly by the people. My point is that God spoke throughout the OT and NT and God still speaks today.

III. One of the more fascinating communications between God and humankind is found in the story I read from Numbers. The story can sound confusing because there are several characters to remember, but you will want to hear this story.

Balaam is the name of a prophet of the Lord. The nation of Israel was growing and prospering at that time and the surrounding nations are getting worried that the Israelites will overrun them.

Balak is the name of the king of Moab, a neighboring nation who is watching the growth of Israel and getting worried. King Balak of Moab decides his best course of action is to find a prophet to place a curse on Israel in order to keep them from overtaking his nation.

Placing a curse on Israel is not something that King Balak can do; he needs a well-respected prophet to announce the curse – today we would call it a judgment on a group of people about what will come to pass.

Since Balaam is the most highly regarded prophet of that time, King Balak tries to bribe him with great sums of money. The offer of great riches interests the prophet enough that he agrees to meet with the King's representatives to see what they want.

That's where our reading picks up the story. The Bible says that God was angry that the prophet would consider selling out his own people – placing a curse on Israel – for financial gain.

As a comparison, think here of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. The Rosenbergs were American citizens who, in the late 1940's, actively shuttled sensitive documents filled with classified information to the Soviet Union. The Rosenbergs also recruited scientists at both Los Alamos and Oak Ridge lab in TN to serve as spies for the Soviet Union.

The Rosenbergs were eventually caught and later executed at the Sing Sing prison in the Hudson valley of New York State. Nearly all Americans at the time believed that the Rosenbergs got what they deserved for being traitors with nuclear secrets.

In the similar way, the prophet is considering acting as a traitor for hire by placing a curse on God's people in Israel. God

intervenes in the prophet's plan to cash in by communicating with the prophet in a most unusual way.

The Bible says, Balaam (the prophet) was riding on his donkey, and his two servants were with him. When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with a drawn sword, the donkey turned off the road into a field. The prophet beat the donkey to get her back on the road.

The donkey could see the angel, but the prophet could not. Two more times the prophet beats the poor donkey back onto the path. Then, the prophet threatens to kill the donkey.

That's when the donkey talks back!

The donkey asks the prophet a question: "have I done this to you before?" The correct answer is, "No." It is a good donkey. Then the eyes of the prophet can see the angel of the Lord blocking the path of the roadway.

After the angel scolds the prophet for beating his obedient donkey, the angel tells the prophet to go to King Balak of Moab and only speak what the Lord tells him to speak.

The prophet obeys and receives payment from King Balak for the prophecy he will render. Then he speaks.

Instead of pronouncing doom on the nation of Israel as King Balak had requested, the prophet flips the script and issues words of judgment against the people of Moab.

Before the angel of the Lord intervened and communicated God's intent to use the prophet for good, the prophet was prepared to sell out his reputation and his good name to the highest bidder.

In the end, the prophet obeyed the voice of God and Israel was not cursed but blessed.

IV. Throughout the OT and NT, God interacts with creation

in very personal ways.

Nowhere in Scripture is the personal touch evident than in the beautiful account of the birth of our savior in Bethlehem.

Each of these personal interactions between God and humankind add to the constant refrain that our faith is relational.

God listens when we pray. God speaks to us when we read and meditate upon God's word. God speaks to us through faithful Christian friends, and through the music that gives God praise and glory.

The story of Advent is the story of God speaking to us in the most personal way possible. "I love you," God can be heard saying through his actions.

"I long for you to know me," God speaks. "Accept the gift I give to you so that life eternal in my presence is yours."

May God give us the faith to hear and share that message of love. Amen.