

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The Third Sunday after Easter

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-second Chapter of the Fourth Book of Moses, called Numbers.²

“And the children of Israel set forward, and pitched in the plains of Moab on this side Jordan by Jericho.

“And Balak [**BAY-lack**] the son of Zippor [**ZIPP-pour**] saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. And Moab was sore afraid of the people, because they were many: and Moab was distressed because of the children of Israel. And Moab said unto the elders of Midian, Now shall this company lick up all that are round about us, as the ox licketh up the grass of the field. And Balak [**BAY-lack**] the son of Zippor [**ZIPP-pour**] was king of the Moabites at that time. He sent messengers therefore unto Balaam [**BAY-lumm**] the son of Beor [**BEE-orr**] to Pethor [**PEA-thorr**], which is by the river of the land of the children of his people, to call him, saying, Behold, there is a people come out from Egypt: behold, they cover the face of the earth, and they abide over against me: Come now therefore, I pray thee, curse me this people; for they are too mighty for me: peradventure I shall prevail, that we may smite them, and that I may drive them out of the land: for I wot that he whom thou blessest is blessed, and he whom thou cursest is cursed. And the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with the rewards of divination in their hand; and they came unto Balaam [**BAY-lumm**], and spake unto him the words of Balak [**BAY-lack**]. And he said unto them, Lodge here this night, and I will bring you word again, as the LORD shall speak unto me: and the princes of Moab abode with Balaam [**BAY-lumm**]. And God came unto Balaam [**BAY-lumm**], and said, What men are these with thee? And Balaam [**BAY-lumm**] said unto God, Balak [**BAY-lack**] the son of Zippor [**ZIPP-pour**], king of Moab, hath sent unto me, saying, Be-

hold, there is a people come out of Egypt, which covereth the face of the earth: come now, curse me them; peradventure I shall be able to overcome them, and drive them out. And God said unto Balaam **[BAY-lumm]**, Thou shalt not go with them; thou shalt not curse the people: for they are blessed. And Balaam **[BAY-lumm]** rose up in the morning, and said unto the princes of Balak **[BAY-lack]**, Get you into your land: for the LORD refuseth to give me leave to go with you. And the princes of Moab rose up, and they went unto Balak **[BAY-lack]**, and said, Balaam **[BAY-lumm]** refuseth to come with us.

“And Balak **[BAY-lack]** sent yet again princes, more, and more honourable than they. And they came to Balaam **[BAY-lumm]**, and said to him, Thus saith **[SETH]** Balak **[BAY-lack]** the son of Zippor **[ZIPP-pour]**, Let nothing, I pray thee, hinder thee from coming unto me: For I will promote thee unto very great honour, and I will do whatsoever thou sayest unto me: come therefore, I pray thee, curse me this people. And Balaam **[BAY-lumm]** answered and said unto the servants of Balak **[BAY-lack]**, If Balak **[BAY-lack]** would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go beyond the word of the LORD my God, to do less or more. Now therefore, I pray you, tarry ye also here this night, that I may know what the LORD will say unto me more. And God came unto Balaam **[BAY-lumm]** at night, and said unto him, If the men come to call thee, rise up, and go with them; but yet the word which I shall say unto thee, that shalt thou do. And Balaam **[BAY-lumm]** rose up in the morning, and saddled his ass, and went with the princes of Moab.

“And God’s anger was kindled because he went: and the angel of the LORD stood in the way for an adversary against him. Now he was riding upon his ass, and his two servants were with him. And the ass saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand: and the ass turned aside out of the way, and went into the field: and Balaam **[BAY-lumm]** smote the ass, to turn her into the way. But the angel of the LORD stood in a path of the vineyards, a wall being on this side, and a wall on that

side. And when the ass saw the angel of the LORD, she thrust herself unto the wall, and crushed Balaam's **[BAY-lummz]** foot against the wall: and he smote her again. And the angel of the LORD went further, and stood in a narrow place, where was no way to turn either to the right hand or to the left. And when the ass saw the angel of the LORD, she fell down under Balaam **[BAY-lumm]**: and Balaam's **[BAY-lummz]** anger was kindled, and he smote the ass with a staff. And the LORD opened the mouth of the ass, and she said unto Balaam **[BAY-lumm]**, What have I done unto thee, that thou hast smitten me these three times? And Balaam **[BAY-lumm]** said unto the ass, Because thou hast mocked me: I would there were a sword in mine hand, for now would I kill thee. And the ass said unto Balaam **[BAY-lumm]**, Am not I thine ass, upon which thou hast ridden ever since I was thine unto this day? was I ever wont to do so unto thee? and he said, Nay. Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam **[BAY-lumm]**, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand: and he bowed down his head, and fell flat on his face. And the angel of the LORD said unto him, Wherefore hast thou smitten thine ass these three times? behold, I went out to withstand thee, because thy way is perverse before me: And the ass saw me, and turned from me these three times: unless she had turned from me, surely now also I had slain thee, and saved her alive. And Balaam **[BAY-lumm]** said unto the angel of the LORD, I have sinned; for I knew not that thou stoodest in the way against me: now therefore, if it displease thee, I will get me back again. And the angel of the LORD said unto Balaam **[BAY-lumm]**, Go with the men: but only the word that I shall speak unto thee, that thou shalt speak. So Balaam **[BAY-lumm]** went with the princes of Balak **[BAY-lack]**."

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-first Verse of the fifth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Mark.³

“... And when Jesus was passed over again by ship unto the other side, much people gathered unto him: and he was nigh unto the sea. And, behold, there cometh one of the rulers of the synagogue, Jairus [**JYE-russ**] by name; and when he saw him, he fell at his feet, And besought him greatly, saying, My little daughter lieth at the point of death: I pray thee, come and lay thy hands on her, that she may be healed; and she shall live. And Jesus went with him; and much people followed him, and thronged him. And a certain woman, which had an issue of blood twelve years, And had suffered many things of many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was nothing bettered, but rather grew worse, When she had heard of Jesus, came in the press behind, and touched his garment. For she said, If I may touch but his clothes, I shall be whole. And straightway the fountain of her blood was dried up; and she felt in her body that she was healed of that plague. And Jesus, immediately knowing in himself that virtue had gone out of him, turned him about in the press, and said, Who touched my clothes? And his disciples said unto him, Thou seest the multitude thronging thee, and sayest thou, Who touched me? And he looked round about to see her that had done this thing. But the woman fearing and trembling, knowing what was done in her, came and fell down before him, and told him all the truth. And he said unto her, Daughter, thy faith hath made thee whole; go in peace, and be whole of thy plague. While he yet spake, there came from the ruler of the synagogue’s house certain which said, Thy daughter is dead: why troublest thou the Master any further? As soon as Jesus heard the word that was spoken, he saith [**SETH**] unto the ruler of the synagogue, Be not afraid, only believe. And he suffered no man to follow him, save Peter, and James, and John the brother of James. And he cometh to the house of the ruler of the synagogue, and seeth the tumult, and them that wept and wailed greatly. And when he was come in, he saith [**SETH**] unto them, Why make ye this ado, and weep? the damsel is not dead, but sleepeth. And they laughed him to scorn. But

¹⁶ Numbers 24:25.

¹⁷ II Kings 5:1-27.

¹⁸ Jeremiah 37:3—40:6.

¹⁹ *Bruce Nolan, Vote opens Presbyterian pulpit to gays, lesbians*, The Times-Picayune, p. A-3, Wednesday, May 11, 2011.

²⁰ I Timothy 3:2 (RSV); cf. Titus 1:6 (RSV).

²¹ Romans 1:24-32; I Corinthians 6:9-10 & 11:13; I Timothy 1:10. Cf. Leviticus 18:22 & 20:13.

²² Romans 1:26.

²³ St. Matthew 13:3-9, 18-23; St. Mark 4:1-9, 14-20; St. Luke 8:5-8, 11-15.

²⁴ *Matthew Westfox, Resurrecting Pro-Life*, retrieved 5/14/11 from http://rcrc.org/news/Passover_and_Easter.cfm.

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lead us, not toward God and into compliance with God's commands, but away from God and into disobedience of God's commands. Hucksters all, they are the religious equivalents of Ponzi schemers and fraudulent junk-bond salesmen, the Bernie Madoffs and Mike Milkins of the ecclesiastical marketplace.

If they do not repent and amend their ways, their fate will be an awe-inspiring one, but that is a matter between them and the God they so signally belittle. Our task is to avoid them and their false teachings, so that neither we, nor anyone for whose spiritual well-being we are responsible, falls victim to their frauds.

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The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister²⁵
May 15, 2011.

¹ *An Alternative Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised in 1928)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, WITH THE ADDITIONS AND DEVIATIONS PROPOSED IN 1928 37 (Canterbury Press 2008); *The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928)*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxx (South Africa 1954); *A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxviii (CIPBC 1963).

² Numbers 22:1-35 (KJV).

³ St. Mark 5:21-end (KJV).

⁴ W. MURRAY SEVERANCE, PRONOUNCING BIBLE NAMES REV. ED. 74 (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers 1985).

⁵ Acts 2:22-end (KJV).

⁶ Numbers 22:18 (RSV).

⁷ Numbers 23:1-6.

⁸ Numbers 23:7-10.

⁹ Numbers 23:11-12.

¹⁰ Numbers 23:14-15.

¹¹ Numbers 23:18-24.

¹² Numbers 23:25-26.

¹³ Numbers 23:29-30.

¹⁴ Numbers 24:3-9.

¹⁵ Numbers 24:15-24.

when he had put them all out, he taketh the father and the mother of the damsel, and them that were with him, and entereth in where the damsel was lying. And he took the damsel by the hand, and said unto her, Talitha cumi [**TAL-ih-thuh-KOO-mih**];⁴ which is, being interpreted, Damsel, I say unto thee, arise. And straightway the damsel arose, and walked; for she was of the age of twelve years. And they were astonished with a great astonishment. And he charged them straitly that no man should know it; and commanded that something should be given her to eat.”

Or,

Here beginneth the twenty-second Verse of the second Chapter of the Acts of the Apostles.⁵

“... Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know: Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it. For David speaketh concerning him, I foresaw the Lord always before my face, for he is on my right hand, that I should not be moved: Therefore did my heart rejoice, and my tongue was glad; moreover also my flesh shall rest in hope: Because thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption. Thou hast made known to me the ways of life; thou shalt make me full of joy with thy countenance. Men and brethren, let me freely speak unto you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his sepulchre is with us unto this day. Therefore being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him, that of the fruit of his loins, according to the flesh, he would raise up Christ to sit on his throne; He seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ, that his soul was not left in hell, neither his flesh did see corruption. This

Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses. Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear. For David is not ascended into the heavens: but he saith [SETH] himself, The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand, Until I make thy foes thy footstool. Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made the same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ. Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do? Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the LORD our God shall call. And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation.

“Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Timothy and Titus that an ordained clergyman “must be ... the husband of one wife”,²⁰ and does so, moreover, in letters that the entire Church accepts as divinely-inspired Scripture, that means that each candidate for Holy Orders must be, at a minimum, eligible, to be a husband and, therefore, must not be eligible to be a wife.

And when that same Apostle proscribes homosexual²¹ and lesbian²² behavior, in letters that are equally accounted to be inspired Scripture, those Presbyterians can have no legitimate grounds for disregarding those prohibitions. That leaves as the only possible conclusion that those who should have served as their prophets have, unlike Balaam [BAY-lumm], sought the easy way, if not outright approval and acclaim by self-appointed molders of opinion, instead of fidelity to their prophetic task. Thus they have either abandoned or betrayed their duties.

Then, later this same week, my attention was drawn to an internet website of a pro-abortion group, where a man who purports to be a Christian minister teaches that Christ’s parable of the sower²³ authorizes a mother to abort her child. He does this by claiming that Easter is a “celebration of life” and any difficult circumstances in the mother’s own life may constitute “stony ground” that somehow justifies her plucking up the growing seed within her.²⁴

Clearly, the author of this twisted logic is false prophet who has sold out to the desire to tell people what they want to hear rather than what God wants them to hear. Thus he represents the spirit of the age, rather than the Holy Spirit, in a fashion most unlike the courageous example of Balaam [BAY-lumm] son of Beor [BEE-orr].

Conclusion:

We must be continuously alert to identify, and to eschew, such false prophets. They are the ones who would

We live in a sad time, when all too many who are commissioned to be prophets fail faithfully to carry out their appointed tasks. Instead, they do just what Balaam [**BAY-lumm**] refused to do: they deliver messages that are either what they themselves wish the people to hear or what those who pay them wish the people to hear. Just this week, I came across two stark examples of this sort of faithless, self-serving prophecy. And, sadly, these two examples dealt with the overarching moral issues of life, both of its preservation and of its creation.

The first instance of false prophecy came this past Wednesday, when I read a newspaper article¹⁹ about a regional jurisdiction within the Presbyterian Church USA which has voted to accept among its ordained ministers men and women who openly and notoriously engage in sexual behavior that is, by Scriptural standards, both unchaste and perverse. According to the article, this Presbytery's adoption of this triumph of moral relativism completed the majority required to impose this change on the entire denomination concerned.

We have all heard the sort of tired old arguments that were used to advocate for this change. One of its supporters was quoted as saying, "More people will be able to live the truth of their lives...", as though acting in ways that God has declared to be abominable can somehow result in "truth". Clearly, the church leaders who effected this immoral result were false prophets, pandering to the wishes of the academic and media elites rather than taking the hard course of teaching what God has revealed through Scripture, and thus showing themselves completely unworthy of Balaam's [**BAY-lummz**] stalwart example.

We know this proposal is one not from God but is, instead, from another source, because it flies in the face of the plain words of Scripture. Thus when St. Paul tells Saints

Text:

From the First Lesson: "But Balaam [**BAY-lumm**] answered and said to the servants of Balak [**BAY-lack**], 'Though Balak [**BAY-lack**] 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.'⁶ In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

The story of Balaam's [**BAY-lummz**] ass is one of my favorite bits of Scripture, perhaps because it appeals to the child in me. That wise, patient, and eloquent donkey just seems like a character out of the Brothers Grimm, or from Howard Pyle's "Wonder Clock", or in any of innumerable other fairy tales and moral fables.

Or perhaps it is because this is such a wonderful example of the old adage, "Never ask a question unless you are really sure you want to hear the answer." For if we continue to read the next couple of Chapters of Numbers, we discover that when Balaam [**BAY-lumm**] reached Balak [**BAY-lack**], the king erected seven altars, on which he sacrificed seven bulls and seven rams,⁷ after which Balaam [**BAY-lumm**] prophesied before the king. Only what Balaam [**BAY-lumm**] pronounced was not the curse Balak [**BAY-lack**] desired, but instead a blessing upon the Hebrew people.⁸

When Balak [**BAY-lack**] protested at this setback to his plans, Balaam [**BAY-lumm**] reminded him he had been warned that the prophet could say only what God permitted him to say.⁹ So the king tried again. Another seven altars and seven sets of sacrifices produced the same result. So the king ordered Balaam [**BAY-lumm**] to try again, and once again went through the preliminaries of building seven more altars and sacrificing seven more sets of bulls and rams.¹⁰

Again, Balaam [**BAY-lumm**] pronounced, not the curse upon the Hebrews that the king desired, but the blessing that God ordered.¹¹ So Balak [**BAY-lack**] told him, “If you cannot curse the Israelites, at least don’t bless them,”¹² So the king tried again, with a third set of seven more altars, seven more bulls, and seven more rams.¹³

Who was it who said that the definition of insanity is repeating unchanged the same unsuccessful actions, time after time, while expecting to achieve a different result?

So once again Balaam [**BAY-lumm**] disobeyed the king and obeyed God by blessing the Hebrews.¹⁴ At this, the king threw a tantrum, to which Balaam [**BAY-lumm**] responded by adding to his three blessings a fourth prophesy – this one a curse upon the Moabites.¹⁵ Then, his work there done, Balaam [**BAY-lumm**] presumably mounted his prescient donkey, for he went home.¹⁶

Be careful what you ask for, because you may, indeed, receive it.

So here we see a renowned prophet, so respected that the king will not take his army to war until that prophet has cursed the king’s enemies. And what does this prophet do? Does he do what the king so earnestly entreats him to do? Does he, like Elisha’s [**ee-LYE-shuss**] servant Gehazi¹⁷ [**geh-HAZE-aye**], ask the king for a hefty fee or a rich present in return for the service that he so desperately desires?

Quite the contrary. Balaam [**BAY-lumm**] tells the emissaries of King Balak [**BAY-lack**] that even if the king were to give him the palace filled with gold and silver, that would not be a big enough bribe to induce the prophet to do or to say anything other than what God tells him to do or to say.

Being a prophet of the Lord is not a common profession in our society, so if most of us were asked what we thought were the most important points in such prophets’ professional etiquette, we might be forgiven if we were not ready with an instant answer. However, most of us are certainly familiar with other learned professions, such as the three classic ones of the Church, medicine, and the law. And most of us, without too much thought, probably realize that society expects the members of those professions to perform their characteristic specialized services entirely for the benefit of their congregants, patients, or clients, and not primarily for their own pecuniary gain.

Well, why would it be any different for the profession of prophecy? The prophet, after all, is an agent, just an agent who happens to have one principal or client. That client is God and the prophet’s job is to represent God to mankind. So, just like any other kind of agent, or as lawyers like to say, fiduciary, the prophet must carry out his unique task with the utmost fidelity and selflessness.

That was what Balaam [**BAY-lumm**] repeatedly told Balak’s [**BAY-lacks**] nobles, and then finally told the king himself: “No matter what the king wants, I can only do what God tells me to do, nothing more and nothing less.” But the king insists and so, in the end, he gets his answer, only it is not the answer he wishes to hear; it just happens to be the answer God wishes him to hear.

And when Balaam [**BAY-lumm**] rode off to deliver that unwelcome news to the king, he certainly knew what risks he was running by remaining faithful to his divine calling, for despots are notorious for their impatience with those who fail to do their bidding. Unwelcome messages to tyrants often result in the punishment of the messengers. Just recall what happened to the prophet Jeremiah, when he was imprisoned for telling King Zedekiah [**dzedd-ih-KYE-un**] that the Babylonian army would conquer Jerusalem.¹⁸