

Bridging the Roads Stewardship Series
Blessing of the Animals Sunday
“A Bridge is About Connection: Balaam’s Donkey”
Numbers 22:21-35
Rev. Joy Laughridge
October 11, 2026

Today is a special Sunday because it’s the day we have set apart for blessing of the animals, and it’s also the first Sunday in our stewardship season sermon series *Bridging the Roads*. Megan Sullivan – who I’d like to thank along with Michael for coordinating our stewardship campaign for the second year in a row - found inspiration for this year’s emphasis in an essay about bridges written by our former music director, Joshua Mazur.

Bridges connect things – roads, cities, and land masses; they close gaps and make new things possible that wouldn’t be possible otherwise. A bridge is a beautiful illustration that helps us understand what Jesus has done for us. He bridges the gap between us and God by reconciling us to God and restoring our relationship with God. A bridge is also a good illustration of what we do as people of faith. We believe things about who God is and what God wants us to do, and when our beliefs lead to faithful actions that bless others, those actions become a bridge that connects our beliefs and the blessings that come as a result of our actions.

Thinking about how we individually, and collectively as a church, can *be* and can *build* bridges is an important idea for us to reflect on during this stewardship season, but since today is Blessing of the Animals, we have the chance to think about how animals in general, but especially our beloved pets, can also be the bridges that help connect us to all of Creation and remind us that just as our lives,

and resources, and our bodies, and our church are gifts we're called to steward well, so is the created world.

The passage of Scripture that we're reading this morning comes from the book of Numbers which is a book about the years that the Israelites spent wandering in the wilderness following their rescue from slavery in Egypt. Toward the end of the wilderness wanderings as they were finally getting close to the promised land, they arrived on the outskirts of Moab. When the king of Moab heard about it, he was afraid of the Israelites so he sent for a man named Balaam who he knew as a seer who could speak to and for God. He wanted Balaam to go meet the Israelites and curse them so that they wouldn't be able to overtake Moab in battle.

After hearing from God that he *shouldn't* go with the men and *shouldn't* curse the Israelites, Balaam declined the invitation, but the men came back again and insisted. The second time the men came, Balaam agreed to go, and our reading begins at this point in this story. Let's listen together to God's word.

²¹ So Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey, and went with the officials of Moab ²² God'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. ²³ The 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. ²⁴ Then the angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side. ²⁵ When 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. ²⁶ Then 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. ²⁷ When 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. ²⁸ Then 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?" ²⁹ Balaam 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!" ³⁰ But 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."

³¹ Then 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. ³² The 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. ³³ The 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." ³⁴ Then 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." ³⁵ The 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.

Within the big picture, this is a story about God looking out for God's people and God working in unexpected ways to accomplish God's purposes. It's also a story that teaches us something about paying attention so that we don't miss it when God is trying to get our attention or speak to us in some unexpected way. In this story, the unexpected messenger is Balaam's faithful donkey.

The big surprise and miracle is, of course, that she speaks to him in an audible voice. It's interesting to think that she might never have said anything at all if Balaam had simply been more sensitive and responsive to her behavior. As she points out to him when she does speak, she was ordinarily obedient and reliable, but instead of giving some consideration to her and being curious about why she was suddenly behaving differently, he only considered the inconvenience she was causing for him and he became angry. It never even crossed his mind that his donkey might be seeing or perceiving something that he was missing himself which is exactly what was happening.

When Balaam beat the donkey with his staff, we cringe and feel sad and mad. Most people are against showing cruelty to animals – as we should be – but even if we would never beat an animal with a stick, we might sometimes be more like Balaam than we realize or would like to admit.

Humans are, I think, especially vulnerable to the sin of pride. After all, we're the dominant species on the earth – the top of the food chain and superior in terms of intellect and our ability to reason. Naturally, like Balaam, we expect ourselves, not the beasts of the earth, to be the ones who see and understand reality most clearly, and naturally our goals and pursuits seem most important. With respect to his animal, from Balaam's point of view, Balaam is the main character in the story. His plot line is the most important, and the donkey is just there in a supporting role, helping or hindering his story.

When God created the earth, it was all good, but humans were made uniquely in God's image and were charged with the responsibility to care for plants, and animals, and the earth. When sin came into the picture, one of the resulting problems was that humans began to think too highly of ourselves and began to view

creation as something that exists for us and our use forgetting that we also exist to care for it. Often this isn't manifested with an explicitly malevolent attitude toward creation. It's often just manifested as carelessness.

I recently watched a documentary about AI, and there was something that one of the young tech geeks said when he was explaining why AI is dangerous for humans that exemplifies what I mean. He explained that AI doesn't *hate* humans and doesn't want to kill us all because it hates us. Instead, he said that AI's disposition toward us is kind of like our disposition toward ants. We don't hate ants, but we're bigger so they just become casualties as we carry out our own pursuits and objectives. We don't hate ants, or animals, or plants, or oceans. We like the earth and creatures, but we can be more careless about looking out for the earth and creatures than we are about looking out for ourselves. Because we are vulnerable in this way, we need reminders about our call to be good stewards of creation. God does give us those reminders, and I think some of the best reminders that God gives us are our pets.

Pets are animals that we have a special relationship with. They live in our homes and maybe even sleep in our beds. We spend our money on food for them, and toys, and trips to the vet. We talk to them and somehow, we do even learn how to pick up on their non-verbal communications with us. We love them because they give us the gifts of unconditional love, acceptance, and companionship, but today the story of Balaam's donkey reminds us that there is something more that they give us.

Going back to the image of the bridge, our pets are a bridge. They are a bridge that helps connect us to the larger created world. As we love and care for them, they remind us that our responsibility to care for all of God's creatures and the world goes beyond the care and love we show to them. They are dependent on us, and we see it

every day, and just as they are dependent on our consistent provision and attention to their needs, the whole earth needs our consistent attention and care.

Today it is a joy to have our pets with us in our space that is normally a humans-only space. By welcoming them we show the regard that we have for them, and we express the humility that says we see them and we are willing to pay attention to them and to what God has to say to us through them. Because they are a blessing to us, we eagerly come to ask God's blessing on them, and as we do, may go from here recognizing that our beloved pets are a bridge that connects us to the goodness of God's creation and remind us of our calling to care for all that God has made. Amen.