

Numbers 24:15-17 Epiphany Sermon 2023

Balaam took up his oracle and said:

The declaration of Balaam son of Beor,
the declaration of the man whose eye is open,
¹⁶the declaration of the one who hears the words of God,
who receives knowledge from the Most High,
who sees the vision of the Almighty,
who is falling down, but his eyes are wide open:

¹⁷I see him, but not now.

I behold him, but not near.

A star will come out of Jacob.

A scepter will rise up out of Israel.

Numbers 24:15-17a Epiphany Sermon 2024

A Star will come to bring mercy to all

You've heard of a Horse whisperer but what about....

A skunk whisperer
A zombie whisperer
A chicken whisperer
A placenta whisperer
A shark whisperer – one bit his foot
And my all-time favorite...
A dead-horseshoe-crab whisperer
Whatever.

Whisperers claim to be 'in touch' with stuff and animals Now imagine one of those people to claim to hold a **conversation with a donkey**? Only God in the Bible can be so bold.

Balaam was a heathen magician who had a conversation with his donkey. That's out of the ordinary to say the least. God appeared to wicked Balaam to stop him from cursing the people of Jacob and Israel that he had been hired to do. Why?

I don't think God was afraid of the Occult practices of Balaam – I think God was busy having mercy on someone who didn't deserve mercy. After this incident we don't hear anything else about Balaam in the rest of the Bible. So I don't know if we might meet him in heaven someday – or not. Did Balaam quit his job of cursing? Did Balaam continue to look more deeply into the declarations he made by inspiration of God to believe in the Messiah that would eventually come? Maybe.

Balaam admits his humility when he says, "who is falling down." And part of that humility was brought on by his own donkey. An animal tried to save its master many times and Balaam beat the donkey each time. How many times, in many different ways does God try to save us through his grace and instead of a 'thank you' we do something worse? Despite our faithlessness – God remains faithful. Despite our disobedience – God remains consistent. Despite our falling down – God stays standing as a Star and a Scepter of miracle light, truth and authority.

A dear friend pointed out that in verse 17 the two 'hims' are not capitalized and complained that they ought to be. When it comes to Capital letters to point us to Jesus I can't excuse or explain why editors do what they do. But I think we believers can see that Jesus is in all three lessons as the one showing mercy, the one who is a star and scepter and the one who is the Christ to be born.

Another believer complained about the 'election' teaching which we hear again in Romans 11 and how it is so confusing. We naturally and normally are disobedient to God because we are not perfect as he expects. So that means we are sinful, just like Balaam. But God is so gracious through Election to vote us into heaven for the sake of Jesus without our help or consent or even knowledge of his doing. Believers are merely one step away from disobedience, but as we repent and admit our mistakes to God – God is busy electing us into his

family of saints, into membership in his church. Notice how Paul is hopeful for Jews, through Gentile believers, to be convinced that Jesus is their Savior too!

The law of God shows our disobedience – the Gospel of God shows Jesus obedience in our place and even more miraculous is Jesus' innocent death and glorious resurrection. God did all the doing we need him to do – because just like Balaam we are good at 'falling down' God is good at opening eyes by faith through grace and causing us to trust his election to choose us to belong in heaven because of Jesus. Epiphany can also be seen as an extension of the teaching of Election too. God chose to promise, God chose to come down, God chose to take our shame, sin and blame and God chose to be punished for our disobedience to God. And in the middle of our stumbling and falling God is there to pick us up out of our heathen ways and make us believers in Jesus by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Through Balaam God gives a prophecy of Jesus who would eventually come to be a bright light that darkness would not understand. Jesus would eventually come to be a star that shines in the darkness of Jacob and Israel. Jesus' truth is **“a light that enlightens the gentles and is the glory of his people Israel.”**

This isn't Hollywood. **“A star will come out of Jacob.”** Can be an allusion to the miracle star that appeared over Bethlehem that miraculously lead the wisemen to Jesus. But the more immediate reference is to the fact that Jesus is a Star who rises out of Jacob. Jesus doesn't come out of the sky as everyone might expect, instead he comes out of the human and sinful bloodline of Jacob and David. His authority, the scepter, will rise up out of Israel.

Members, do you know? Apparently the meaning of Epiphany is becoming lost. Even church members forget what it means. Epiphany means that Jesus came to save you too. Jesus is not just the Savior for Jacob and Israel – as Paul teaches in Romans Jesus came to show mercy to all people, to all sinners. So. Epiphany is important for me. Epiphany means Jesus is important “for me.” Maybe we can fight against the great American forgetting with a little phrase like that. Epiphany means Jesus is for me, not against me. He doesn't make us Jacobites, or Israelites, he makes us members of his holy Christian church through his Word and Sacraments.

Jesus' truth shines to all sinners as Epiphany teaches us that all may be shown mercy – not just the people of Jacob and Israel.

From Micah to Balaam Jesus is described as a star, a scepter, a ruler. This is God coming to save us from our sins. Prophecy has a certain subtlety to it with understatement. A baby boy is born to be a man who would die on the cross. The star and scepter is Jesus' hidden identity as true God coming to truly save all people from their sins.

The wise men are miracle men of faith who follow a miracle star by faith to come and see the star, the scepter, the ruler who is God Most High and opens the eyes of the blind. Balaam was a heathen magician to whom God personally met and spoke to convince him not to curse and instead bless the People of Jacob and Israel. All of these people are Gentiles, Balaam, the wise men and the people to whom Paul was sent as Gentiles in Rome were taught the Gospel.

Both stars are miracles. Jesus is the greater star that doesn't shine in the sky for the wisemen – instead he shines hidden truth from the house where they found him with his mother Mary. The other star was the miracle one in the sky. Sometimes we need to leave God's miracles alone and not try to explain them. We can be curious about what that miracle star was but to leave it a miracle is best. That one time miracle star is gone – but Jesus the greater star is still here. He rules his church through his Holy Word in the Bible. Jesus is the kind of star that still shines even when people don't wish to see him.

Jesus for Balaam was 'not near' because time needed to pass before he would be born of a virgin mother and bear his own cross to the edge of Jerusalem. From one miracle to the next Jesus came to save Gentiles and Jews from their sins. That's you and me. Epiphany is important because Jesus is 'for me'

When Jesus takes us to heaven Isaiah 60:19 gives another prophecy **“The sun will never again be your light by day, and the moon will not shine to provide brightness for you, for the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your splendor.”**

Jesus is the Star of David, Jesus the Ruler over all who shines his gospel good news to enlighten your heart through the gift of the Holy Spirit – by grace through faith.

Jesus is the star that shines mercy to the nations out of Jacob.
Jesus is the scepter who rose from the dead out of Israel.

Jesus shines the brightness of his mercy to all who repent and believe that he is God most high who speaks mercy out of Jacob, who speaks grace out of Israel.