

All Saints Talk for Sunday 2nd July 2023

Sermon Title: 'True and false prophecy'

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The 10th in our series 'Journey to the Promised Land'

Readings: *Numbers 22:10-12, 21-35a, Jude 1:3-4, 11-13* (Balaam's Donkey)

I don't know about you, but I actually feel a little bit sorry for Balaam. Controversial probably, but I do. I feel a bit sorry for him. Here we have a man who was tempted, tempted by greed. Peter mentions him in 2 Peter when he talks about false teachers and their greed. And there's always a story, isn't there, behind every person, there's always a backstory. I don't speak Hebrew, I just found this out. But the Hebrew for the title of the book of Numbers, means 'in the desert', or 'in the wilderness'. So I don't think that it's a coincidence that we have this story of a man that made the wrong choices in life, in a book that translates to 'in the wilderness'. I don't think that that's a coincidence at all. I spent many years of my life wandering in the wilderness. Growing up, I was always told that I was different. And if you're told enough times that you're different, you start to believe it, don't you. Some of the things that would be said about me was, Emma is in another one of her phases. When I was 11, I became vegetarian. And apparently it was just another phase that I was going through, but here I am, aged 44 and still a vegetarian. So I'm going through a big phase, I will tell you. But it's a comment that I would hear a lot of.

And hearing that I was different, that I didn't fit in, you end up believing it. You ended up believing that you don't fit in, you end up believing that you are different from everybody else and that it's wrong; that it's not okay to be different. And with that, being different, I would overcompensate then to fit in; trying to please people that I liked; trying to please people, so people would like me; seeking approval from people. But very often, seeking that approval and doing those things would end up with me making choices that would land me in a lot of hot water.

Now, I'm not going to stand here and lie to you and tell you that it was everybody else's fault. None of it was my fault, it was all my upbringing and it was everybody else, because that clearly isn't true. Growing up, I didn't always make the right choices. In fact, I made some shockers. Some things that I'm not proud of at all, I'm not somebody that looks back on life with regret. I think everything that we do in our lives, it helps us to be able to make changes in our life. But there are a few things in

my life that I look back on with a huge amount of regret. But each time I did something, I was seeking other people's approval, somebody to like me.

And then in 2001, my life changed completely. We found out that we were pregnant with twins. A bit of a shock, I will say, but in my mind, this was my chance. This was my chance to really prove myself. To throw myself completely and fully into motherhood and most importantly, here I had the chance to have two people who would love me unconditionally. The unconditional love of a child to their parent. But on the fourth of October 2001 our twin sons were born, but sadly they didn't make it. Now when you've had a life where people have told you you're different, and people have told you that the things that you do are wrong, you can imagine how that affected me. My whole world came crashing down around me. I felt like I was being punished for all of those things that I done wrong in my life. But then, in 2008, after many years of healing, soul searching, life turned the biggest corner that it could possibly turn when our beautiful Millie was born safe and well. Many people, as I found out since working with Sands -Stillborn And Neonatal Deaths Society, and working as a baptism coordinator in my old church. After they've lost a baby, a lot of people, after they've had their rainbow baby, which is a baby, after you've lost a child, feel that they need to have them baptised. If you have them baptised, they're safe. You know, God is looking after them. Even if you don't believe in God, you feel that somebody somewhere is looking after them. And this was true for me as well. When she was born, I had this overwhelming sense that I just, well, overwhelming sense of love, but overwhelming sense of needing to keep her safe. So I went along to my local church, to have her baptised and you have to go to baptism preparation. And it was while I was at baptism prep, watching a video about putting your baby on a bus and sending them off on a journey, that it dawned on me that no way would I do that? Not a chance. I wouldn't even go to baptism prep without my baby. She was there in my arms. The only one, I will say, everybody else left their children at home. But I sat there with my baby in my arms because No, absolutely not. I didn't trust anybody with her, let alone putting her on a bus. So at that moment, I sat there and I thought, You know what, I need to find out more about this. I need to go on this journey with her get on that bus. So me and Millie started going to church and we never ever looked back.

I always thought growing up that I would die before I was 30. Clearly I haven't. It wasn't something that I was particularly scared about, but the lifestyle that I lead the

life that I lead, I never thought that I would live past 30. But on the 19th of April 2009. Milly was baptised. It was a joyous occasion. On the 16th of June 2009, I turned 30. On the 19th of November 2009, I was confirmed and gave my life to Jesus. And on the 19th of December 2009. A month later, me and Dan got married. And there's new me, the new Emma, the new surname, the Christian, the mother, the wife. She never did live past 30 Because in my 30th year I started again. I left all that had plagued me my whole life. I left it behind in that 30th year. I left all that hung over me and made me heavy and burdened, I left it. I left feeling different. I left making the wrong choices. Kind of, sometimes we still make the wrong choices, but the big ones that matter, I left all of that behind. So I never did live past 30. I will add that five days before our first wedding anniversary, our family was complete with the birth of Alice. I know that you can all do the maths. Okay, no judgement here. But this is why I feel sorry for Balaam, there's always a backstory behind somebody: behind why we make wrong choices; why we follow the wrong path and we want to go off on our own.

God works in the weirdest of ways. Sometimes he gives us a message and it's really clear and we do What we must do? We say, Yes, Lord, I'll do that for you. I once was in a pickle and I said to God; I went to Lee Abbey and I sat sat on the bench looking out to see on upper Jenny's. And I sat there and I said, Lord, give me a sign. If you give me a sign, I'll do whatever it is that you want me to do, I promise. But I just need to know that you're there. And I don't want to sign in three weeks or three months. I want it today. I want it now. And then with that, this huge bird came up from the from the bottom, up the cliff. My thoughts were no, wow God you're amazing, oh, my gosh, thank you for the sign. No, obviously, I just sat there went wow, look at that massive bird. I took no notice. Only later on that evening, because this was Maundy Thursday, to be walking across the Octag' room, after Alice needed to go to the loo for the 50 millionth time, for the warden of Lee Abbey to stop suddenly in his Maundy Thursday talk, and say 'I feel someone here needs to hear this message from God. You just need to be brave, and do it anyway. Even though it's scary'. I'll tell you something I nearly fell over. Nearly didn't make it back to the seat. So in this passage, when God tells Balaam not to go and then to go, it's all a bit of a mixed message, isn't it? We've got to try and work it out. And we read about the talking donkey. Did the donkey talk or not? Talking animals were common in folklore back then. But the only other case of a talking animal is that of the snake in Eden. So it's very significant.

Chris Rogers, an amazing priest, who writes some amazing books in a way that us dyslexics are able to actually understand and read them, and I had the pleasure of hearing him speak at spring harvest a few years ago, and he points out that Balaam beats the donkey, the same number of times that Peter denies Jesus. So while it's funny, and a bit strange to read about a talking donkey, it really should make us think about it. How much are we denying God? How many times do we deny Jesus? When I look back on my life, and the scrapes that I got into, there should be many times that I should not be stood here. I should not be here. Definitely not with a collar around my neck. But God had his hand on me. And I see that when I look back on my story. That God had his hand on me all the time. There were many times when I could have turned my life around. There were many signs, there were many chances, but I denied them. In the end, it took a really cheesy cartoon video of parents waving their child off on a bus that opened my eyes. God must have thought, oh my goodness, at last, she finally got the message. In the end, it took of the vision of talking donkeys or however it was for Balaam to see the angel of the Lord. We read later that it didn't stay that way for him. In Joshua 13:22 we read how the Israelites had put a sword into him. And I wonder about that. I wonder if it's because he still hadn't fully seen the signs. I wonder if it's because he felt that he still didn't fit in. He still didn't feel that he was good enough. But it's never too late. Is it? The Lord that we know, the Lord that loves us, the Lord that died for us and rose again, the Lord that walks with us on our journeys, even if we're different, even if we don't fit in, even if we make the wrong choices again and again and again, even if we're going through another one of our phases; the Lord that cries with us in the darkest, darkest of times, the Lord that gives us signs that we ignore, and then he sends even bigger ones, the Lord that celebrates with us, the Lord that calls us, the Lord that will never ever give up on us, on me on you; he will keep going.

So I always try to leave my talks with a question, something for us to think about as we leave this place, and we go off into our week. And today, I wonder if you are seeing the signs that the Lord has given you no matter how far fetched that they might be. And are you willing to act on them? And finally, are you willing to show someone else, through Jesus, that they are good enough, so they don't stay in the wilderness. Amen.