

TRAVELING WITH A HOLY GOD AROUSES HOSTILITY Numbers 22:1-14

INTRODUCTION

The other day I was visiting with a friend of mine who does not know Christ. He was telling me that I needed to take off more time from my work and do things I liked to do, like hunting, then he said, "...because you're not going to live forever." I responded, jokingly and without thinking, "That's not true, I am going to live forever and that is why I don't need to take more time off. I will have plenty of time to relax in heaven." After he left I thought about what I had said and realized that the way I viewed recreation and the way my friend viewed it were very different because I think of myself as a pilgrim, a traveler through this world on my way to a better world and he thinks of himself as living the only life he will ever have. He has embraced, as every non-believer should embrace, the philosophy articulated in the old Schlitz beer commercial which had as its tag line, "You only go around once in life so grab for all the gusto you can."

However, for we who are Christians, who are followers of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who are members of his church know that this is not all there is and living as if "you only go around once in life" is a fatal mistake. There is another country, another land to which we are traveling. Therefore, we live like the people of Israel on their way to the land of Canaan. Just as they were rescued by God through their prophet and leader Moses from their slavery in Egypt so we are a people whom God has rescued out of our slavery to sin and Satan and death and hell through the work of our prophet and leader Jesus. Just as God led them through the desert from one temporary camp site to another, feeding them with the bread of heaven and giving them water from the rock so does God lead us, his redeemed people, the church through this wilderness world satisfying our hunger with the true bread of heaven, Jesus and quenching our thirst with the living water of his Holy Spirit. Just as they were travelling to that land which God promised to give to all of Abraham's children so we are travelling to that new heavens and new earth which God has promised to all those who, like Abraham, are counted righteous in God's sight by their faith in the crucified and resurrected Lord Jesus Christ. We are, like them, a pilgrim people, travelers through this temporary, wilderness world to our eternal home in heaven.

In Numbers 22:1 we are informed that Israel is not yet home but has set up a temporary camp on the "plains of Moab" on the eastern shore of the Jordan River, just north of the Dead Sea and across the river from the Canaanite city of Jericho. Israel is on the edge of the Land of Promise. The fullness of the promise which God made to Abraham hundreds of years prior to this is on the verge of being fulfilled. They have, as God promised Abraham, become a great nation with as many descendants as stars in the heavens. They have only to cross the river Jordan and they will be in that land which God promised to give to Abraham and his descendants. The rest of the book of Numbers and the entire book of Deuteronomy take place at this location, while Israel is camped on the plains of Moab.

It has been almost 41 years since Yahweh led Israel out of Egypt, destroying that nation and killing the army of Egypt in the Red Sea. They spent one year camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai where God gave to them his law and where the people built the tabernacle and Moses ordained Aaron and his sons as priests and set apart the Levites to do their work of serving and guarding and carrying the tabernacle. As recorded in Numbers 10, one year after the Exodus they set out from Mt. Sinai and travelled to the southern edge of the land of Canaan, to the oasis called Kadesh Barnea. Moses sent 12 men into the land of Canaan to spy it out. Upon their return 10 of the spies reported that while it was a bountiful land, yet there were giants living in the land in cities with walls as high as the heavens. They persuaded the people that if they were to attack them they would surely be defeated and their wives and children would become the slaves of the Canaanites. The people believed the 10 spies and rebelled against God and talked of killing Moses and Aaron and appointing new leaders and returning to Egypt. Yahweh told Moses he was going to wipe out Israel and make a new nation out of Moses' descendants. Moses interceded for Israel and so the Lord relented of his fierce anger and for the sake of his

own great name did not destroy Israel. However, he did tell them that they were going to wander in the desert for 40 years until everyone who was 20 years old and up at the time of the rebellion at Kadesh Barnea was dead.

So Israel has wandered as nomads in the Arabian Peninsula for the past 40 years, waiting until all the adults were dead. Those years of wandering are recorded in Numbers 15-21. In the year prior to camping on the shores of the Jordan River, Israel has conquered the Amorite kings Sihon and Og and destroyed their people and taken over all the land east of the Jordan River and north of the Arnon gorge. It is here, while camped within sight of the long promised land of Canaan that we are told of events about which the nation Israel had no knowledge at the time. In chapters 22-24 Israel is completely passive and unaware while enemy nations plot their destruction and God turns the plans of his people's enemies back upon them.

In these three chapters the curtain is being pulled back and we are getting a look behind the scenes to see the hostility and hatred of the world against God and his people. I use this term "world" as it is used by Jesus and the NT writers. "World" does not refer to the created world or any part of it. It does not simply refer to humanity as created beings. It does not refer to any particular culture or nation or government or political system. Rather, "world" in the NT, refers to the society of human beings living in rebellion to God and under the dominion of the devil. Every human being, including every Christian sitting in this room begins life as a member of the world. When God saves a human through Christ by his Spirit and Word he takes that person out of the world and makes him or her a citizen of his kingdom, a member of his family. Christians no longer belong to the world but they belong to the people of God.

The world then is that system of thought and values and desires and beliefs that characterize the entire non-Christian society of human beings. An "ipad" is not a part of the world but the belief that I must have an ipad2 to live a full and happy life is. Houses are not part of the world but loving a comfortable and beautiful home in such a way that you invest all your time and money in it is. Being skilled in a craft or art or any other ability is not part of the world but looking down on others who do not share your skill is. Enjoying food or drink or sleep or sex or new things is not part of the world but turning to any of these things to escape the pain and disappointment of this world or to use any of them in ways that God forbids is. Praying is not part of the world but praying to a false god or praying as a form of manipulating God to give you what you really love is. In short the world is that system which believes that life and joy and security can be found apart from the true and living God, it is that system that loves the creation and its pleasures but not the God who made it. Thus the world is opposed to God, indeed, as we heard Jesus say in John 15, it hates the Triune God and that way of salvation that only comes through Jesus because faith in Christ is a renunciation of the world and all of its values and beliefs. This morning, in the opening scene of this story about Balak, king of Moab and the diviner, Balaam, we are witnessing that opposition of the world to the church because we are the people of God.

MAIN POINT

To belong to the church of Jesus means you have the world as your enemy because...

I. The world has an irrational fear of and hatred for the church (vv.1-4a)

God earlier told the Israelites that they were to not attack the countries of Moab and Ammon because their people were the descendants of Abraham's nephew, Lot. So Israel, as they traveled north from their wandering in the wilderness of Sinai had gone around Moab. While they had destroyed the Amorites who lived north of the Moabite kingdom, they had done nothing to threaten Moab, being careful not to cross the border between the Amorites and Moab. Yet, in spite of the respect of Israel for Moabite territory we are told in v. 3 that the entire Moabite kingdom was in great dread and overcome with fear of the people of God. That second word that is translated "overcome with fear" is more often translated, "loathe, despise or hate". Thus the idea expressed here is that the nation of Moab, led by their king, Balak, feared and hated Israel because of their size and the fact that they had defeated the Amorites.

Exodus 1:12 describes a very similar reaction of the nation of Egypt in regards to the people of Israel. It uses many of the same words and reads, “But the more they (Israel) were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad. And the Egyptians were in dread of (or “hated”) the people of Israel.” These linguistic connections show that the Moabites, like the Egyptians, hate and oppose the people of God for no reason. Israel in Egypt was not a threat and Israel camped on the edge of the Jordan River is no threat. Their fear and hatred cause them to go to the Midianites and recruit them as allies against Israel. Moab seeks to instill that same irrational fear and hatred in the Midianites by claiming that Israel is going to lick up everything like cattle licking up the grass in the field.

This irrational fear and hatred of the church by the world system in which we live is apparent across the face of the globe in large and small ways. We must recognize that not every criticism of Christians or of the church is a manifestation of this hatred. In the name of Jesus, Christians and churches have often said and done immoral, unethical and stupid things for which we deserve to be criticized. For example, there is a small Baptist church that goes around protesting at the funerals of veterans killed in Afghanistan and Iraq, claiming that every veteran’s death is the result of the tolerance of homosexuality in the US. They claim that the negative publicity and civil lawsuits filed against them is evidence of the hatred of the world against the church. However, they are wrong. They are disobeying Jesus by doing what he forbids Christians from doing (Luke 13:1-4). They are wrong and our culture is right to condemn them. However, there is an irrational fear and hatred of Christians and Christian churches in the world. I was continually amazed during the 20 years I worked with Campus Crusade for Christ how parents who were unconcerned for their college student children’s binge drinking and sexual promiscuity and even academic mediocrity would become hostile and angry with their children for professing faith in Christ and getting involved in a Bible study which led to their not drinking and sleeping around and usually produced better grades.

It is particularly interesting in our western culture, which promotes toleration as the highest virtue, the level of hostility that is expressed towards Christians and the Christian church. The university, which is supposedly the bastion of toleration for different points of view is most hostile to anyone who professes faith in Christ. The student board which is in charge of distributing the student fee monies at UW-Madison refused to give any money to the student Catholic organization on the grounds it was a religious organization while at the same time giving those funds to every other kind of student group from the Moslem to the Gay-Lesbian-Bisexual group to various student political groups. Thankfully, the courts, as they have continually done told the student board that if they were going to give money to any student group they had to give it to every student group and could not discriminate on the basis of the content of the beliefs expressed by any group. The point here isn’t the legal issue but simply to point out that there is an underlying hatred and hostility for the church built into the system and not just our system but every human culture in every country expresses this same hostility. Simply because Christians and Christian groups want to get together to worship Jesus, study the Bible and talk about their faith, which causes no harm to anyone, the world gets mad and seeks to oppose us. This fact has been expressed repeatedly throughout the last 2000 years as a variety of totalitarian regimes, from Roman to communist to fascist to Moslem to Hindu have violently opposed the church. As many of you know more Christians have been killed for being Christians in the past 100 years than in the whole history of the world up until now.

II. The world desires and prays for the destruction of the church (vv.4b-7)

Balak and his Midianite allies send a delegation to a famous pagan prophet and diviner by the name of Balaam who lived near the Euphrates River in northern, modern day Iraq. Notice that Balak is seeking divine help for his problem. He is seeking to enlist the power of the gods to give him help against the perceived threat of Israel. His aim is their destruction. He hopes, by Balaam’s bringing divine cursing upon Israel, that he and his allies will be able to attack and defeat and drive Israel away from their borders. While Balak is a religious man and is seeking divine help, yet it is clear that his religion is of the human variety. He ascribes the power of blessing and cursing to the prophet, not to the “God” upon whom the prophet calls. Every religious system apart from Christianity views divine power in this fashion. Human religion is organized on the premise that humans, by our performance or prayers or rituals or sacrifices are able to earn the favor of the gods so that they

will give us what we want. Humans are hard wired to believe that we have the power to do what is required to obtain the favor of the gods. And man-made religion presumes that certain humans are more in touch with what the gods require and thus are able to more effectively manipulate the gods to give humans what we want.

This is not the way it works in the true church. As is stated from the beginning of Genesis where the Lord blessed Adam and Eve with the power of procreation and of dominion and then where he cursed the world due to human sin; God alone has the power to bless and to curse. He determines according to his own purpose and grace whom he will bless and whom he will curse. We do not approach God with our agenda, seeking to manipulate him to do what we want. Rather we only dare to draw near to God on the basis of what Christ has done for us. We know that there is no reason God should ever pay any attention to us. We have no reason to ever expect blessing from God but only cursing based upon our own performance. We have nothing with which to bargain for God's blessing but come as weak, rebellious, helpless, spiritually impoverished people seeking forgiveness according to God's grace given us in Christ. We pray as little children, asking the help of our wise heavenly Father according to his will and his purpose. We, by his gracious work in us, seek not his gifts but him. We seek his help to endure the sufferings of this life, not deliverance from every threat.

You may have noticed when John 16 was read for us earlier that Jesus said that when the world persecutes and kills Christians they will do so presuming that they are serving God. So it has been through most of the last 2000 years. Most of the hostility and persecution that the church has experienced has come from religious people. Beginning with the Jewish people, followed by the polytheistic Romans and then the various state sanctioned in-name-only Christian churches, and then Moslem and Hindu and animistic and Buddhist people the church's primary opposition has come from within religious communities who believe they are serving God when they oppose and destroy the church. The church is being prayed for on a regular basis by Moslem and Hindu people and clergy and by the shamans of animistic religions, imploring that their gods curse the Christian Church.

During all those years I served on college campuses it was rarely the atheist student or professor who criticized and attacked and sought to stop us. At the Univ. of IL the professor who founded the religious studies department claimed to be a Lutheran believer in Jesus but he regularly attacked any Christian student who said he or she believed the Bible and he regularly declared that faith in Jesus was not necessary for salvation. He often would state that it was his intention to destroy the faith of every student in the Bible and in Jesus. He was part of a religious coalition on campus that sought to promote the acceptability of homosexuality on campus and regularly attacked anyone who disagreed.

III. The world opposes Jesus and thus opposes us (vv.8-14)

There are some who claim that Balaam is portrayed in a positive light in these three chapters in Numbers. They point to the fact that he regularly refers to the divine being to whom he appeals and whose will he must obey by the personal, covenant name of God which he revealed to Moses at the burning bush, Yahweh. You can see in vv. 8 & 13 that he refers to the divine being by this personal name of Yahweh. (In our English Bibles every time you see LORD, in all upper case letters, the Hebrew word behind it is the personal name of God, Yahweh.) Those who view Balaam in a positive light also point to his apparent submission to the Lord. He says here that he must go see what the LORD tells him. When Yahweh tells him not to go, he tells the Moabite delegation that he cannot go because the LORD refuses to let him go. However, there are many indications in these three chapters that Balaam is no friend of the true and living God but is rather a proud and greedy pagan diviner who thinks he can manipulate every god, including the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who is the only true and living God.

There are several indications in our text this morning that Balaam is not the submissive prophet he proclaims himself to be. First, that night, while the delegation from Balak sleeps, God appears to Balaam, most likely in a dream. He asks Balaam, "Who are these men with you?" God knows who these men are and what they want so why does he ask Balaam this question? If you think back through the story of the Bible up to this point you will

remember that often when God asks people a question it is not because he does not know the answer but in order to expose human sin. He asks Adam, after he eats the forbidden fruit: “Where are you? Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat from the tree which I told you not to eat?” He asks recalcitrant Moses at the burning bush, “Who made man’s mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?” The fact that God is asking this question implies that Balaam is in need of correction; that he is not heading in the right direction.

Second, Balaam admits that he knows that this nation whom Balak wants him to curse “came out of Egypt.” God told Pharaoh that the reason he was sending all the plagues on Egypt was so that “his name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” In Exodus 15 in the victory song which Moses sang after God destroyed the Egyptian army at the Red Sea, Moses declared that all the nations would tremble before them because of what the Lord had done to bring them out of Egypt. Shortly after these events, Rahab the prostitute, who lives in Jericho will tell the 2 spies that all the people’s heart melt in fear because they know what the Lord did to Egypt. Thus, it is hard to imagine that Balaam was unaware of who it was that had brought this people out of Egypt. There is an arrogance in Balaam by which he assumes that he can change the mind of Yahweh, the one who brought Israel out of Egypt.

Finally, and most importantly, notice what he does not tell Balak’s emissaries the next morning. He tells them the Lord will not let him go with them. However, he does not tell them that Israel cannot be cursed because the Lord has blessed them. His answer to the men is like the son who tells his friends his mom won’t let him go play with them. He makes it clear by his answer that he wants to come but his mean mom won’t let him. In the same way, Balaam shows that he is no respecter of the Lord, no matter what he says. He doesn’t care that the Lord has declared Israel to be blessed. He implies by his vague answer that he wants to go with them but right now he cannot, implying that a larger fee might gain his services. He is not interested in what God thinks. He loves other things. He is of the world, not of the people of God, thus he opposes God and aims to oppose God’s people. He is no different than Balak. Balak loves security and Balaam loves money and thus both oppose Yahweh and Yahweh’s people.

Jesus was crystal clear when he said that the reason the world hates the church is because it hates him. And in hating him the world also hates his Father. The two evidences that you have been taken out of the world by Jesus is that you trust and love Jesus supremely and you love Jesus’ people, the church. You know that God has determined to bless all those who trust in Christ with his salvation and thus you aim to be a blessing to Jesus’ people as you have opportunity. True Christians, unlike Balaam, make clear their loyalty to Jesus and to Jesus’ people by word and deed.

© Copyright 2011 John Swanson.

You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that:

- (1) you credit the author,
- (2) any modifications are clearly marked,
- (3) you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and
- (4) you do not make more than 1,000 copies.

If you would like to post this material to the web, or if your intended use is other than outlined above, please contact River Hills Community Church, 2843 West Court Street, Janesville, WI 53548. (608) 758-0943. mail@riverhillsonline.org