

Eastwood Christian Church  
(Disciples of Christ)  
Nashville, TN

The Rev. Jay R. Hartley  
February 15, 2015

Sermon Title: “Talking Donkeys, Chariots of Fire, Charles Darwin, & Jesus”

Message: The Bible is not a Science Book – and to treat it that way diminishes both the Bible and Science. And ... Jesus is the man – follow him.

INTRO: Thursday was 206th birthday of Charles Darwin – young man who studied for ministry at Cambridge Univ, ended up making some alarming discoveries as scientist – forcing him to re-think way he had been taught to read Bible & eventually stirring up quite bit of dialogue about relationship between religion & science

- In celebration of his b-day, we join w/ nearly 500 churches across U.S.to reflect on relationship between religion & science

- Today also happens to be known as Transfiguration Sunday – last Sunday before penitential season of Lent

- Scripture for Trans. Sun. always story of Jesus appearing on mtn. top w/ Moses & Elijah

- How do you read Bible – & how do you hear this story?

- Is it factual history?

- Is it scientifically accurate?

- Is it ridiculous nonsense from long ago?

- Is it story to stir our religious imagination?

- <<< Read Mark 9:2-9 >>>

1. I'd like to start w/ an old, old, story – older even than story of Transfiguration, about as old as story of Elijah being carried off into clouds by chariot of fire

- Story told some 2,500 years ago by man known as Aesop: “The Ass And His Masters”

- A discontented ass who felt that the gardener for whom he worked was a hard taskmaster appealed to Jupiter to give him another master.

- Annoyed by the ass's ingratitude, Jupiter bound him over to a potter who gave him even heavier burdens to bear.

•Again the ass besought Jupiter. This time it was arranged to have him sold to a tanner. Finding that he had fallen into worse hands than ever, the ass said w/ a groan:

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“Alas, wretch that I am. Would that I had remained content w/ my former masters. My new owner not only works me harder while I am alive, but will not even spare my hide when I am dead!

•Moral of story: He that finds discontentment in one place is not likely to find happiness in another

2. Not long before, another story written about talking donkey – this I found in book of Numbers, ch. 22:

•Balaam, prophet of God, riding his donkey to visit land of Moab – even though God didn’t WANT him to go to Moab

•Donkey saw angel of LORD standing in road, w/ a drawn sword in his hand; so the donkey turned off road & went into field – & Balaam struck donkey

•3 times this happened – angel of LORD stood in way of donkey, sword in hand, ready to smite Balaam for disobeying God, & donkey stopped, veered away

•Last time, angel of LORD stood in narrow place, where there was no way to turn either right or left

•When donkey saw angel of LORD, it lay down under Balaam

•Balaam’s anger was kindled & he struck donkey w/ his staff <whack!>

•Then LORD opened mouth of donkey, & donkey said to Balaam:

•“What have I done to you, that you have struck me these 3 times?”

•Balaam said to donkey: “Because you have made a fool of me! I wish I had a sword in my hand! I would kill you right now!”

•But 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?”

•& Balaam said “no”

•Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road, w/ his drawn sword in his hand; and he bowed down, falling on his face.

•The angel of the LORD said to him: “Why have you struck your donkey these 3 times? The donkey saw me & turned away from me, or surely just now I would have killed you.”

- Moral of story...

- Well, Aesop didn't write book of Numbers, so we don't have moral of story – we'll have to figure that out for ourselves

- Don't go where God doesn't want us to go?

- Don't strike your donkey, b/c it may have more faith than you do?

- If someone's been loyal to you all your life, trust that they have your best interests in mind?

3. My question for today: is it different, SHOULD it be different, to read story of talking donkey if it's 1 of Aesop's fables, or if it's in Bible?

- Do we read those stories differently?

- When your mom reads fable to you, do you simply enjoy story, hear moral of story, realize it's story told to communicate message?

- I think we get that

- We hear stories, take message.

- Winnie Pooh, Tigger too, Piglet, Owl, Rabbit – not to mention Bambi, Thumper, & Rudolph w/ your nose-so-bright – we enjoy stories w/ talking animals

- But put it in Bible, people start trying to explain it, prove it's veracity

- “It's in Bible, so it happened, it's true, you can't DOUBT Bible?”

- NEVER heard anyone say that donkey in Aesop's fables REALLY talked – that God performed miracle & opened up mouth of ass

- But go on-line, you'll find plenty of websites explaining miracle of talking donkey in Numbers 22 – how God can work miracles, make donkey talk

- Famous MT Henry Commentary: This was a great miracle wrought by the power of God. He who made man speak, could, when he pleased, make the ass to speak with man's voice.

- Couple weeks ago I read on-line supposed scientific explanation of how Jonah could survive in belly of whale for 3 days – but how acid in whale's stomach would've turned his flesh white & given him scary look, so when he started preaching in Nineveh everyone would be so scared they'd repent

- Author went so far as to claim that if we don't believe in literal truth of Jonah in belly's whale, we might as well never read Bible again

- Why?

- Why do people confuse Bible w/ science book?

- Why can we read fable for what it is – but then read similar story in Bible & feel need to twist through all kinds of contortions to “prove” scientific truth of claims?

- Why can't story just be story?

4. I guess to answer my own question – I suppose it's fear of loss

- Loss of culture, loss of security, loss of how we understand world

- Change is hard – & if we were taught that Bible literally true, taught that we had to believe every word, taught that God wrote Bible & every word in it is historically & scientifically factual – there's great fear in thinking differently

- I get that. It's hard. Change hard.

- But I also see so many people who reject Bible, who think that if you have to believe all of it scientific, then they want nothing to do w/ it

- & to me, that's great loss

- B/c Bible wild & wonderful book of stories – some of them bizarre & outlandish – but stories that teach us & nourish us & tie us together

5. 1 of things we did in youth SS last month – asked them to memorize not only names of books of Bible – but what genre they were – what type of literature

- For instance, if I called out “Luke” – they: “N.T., Gospel”

- Or: “Song of Solomon” – they: “O.T., Wisdom Literature”

- Probably time for pop quiz; youth: Jeremiah ... Acts of Apostles ..Joshua

- Point being –important to know what kind of literature reading

- Prophecies? Love Poetry? Cultural History? Theological biography? Apocalyptic vision? Protest literature?

- Bible made up of all different types of literature, written by variety of people from variety of perspectives

- Much of Bible stories of ancient Israel – stories they told each other to make sense of world, to communicate truths, to teach their faith

- Some told about God & their faith by telling story about talking donkey, man getting swallowed by whale, man getting carried off into heaven by chariot, man appearing w/ shining face & dazzlingly white clothes

- Helps to know what kind of literature you're reading – & to be able to read Bible for what it is – not confuse it w/ history or science book

6. So today's readings: 2 stories

- If we read them as stories, not get hung up trying to explain science behind chariots swooping down & carrying Elijah off, or science behind Jesus' dazzlingly white clothes & miraculous meeting w/ Moses & Elijah—what meaning do we find?

- Magic of stories – we can find all kinds of meanings

- Not just ONE “moral of story”

- Tried to show that few weeks ago w/ story of Jonah – offering multiple choice morals of story

- Same could be done w/ story of Elijah – poignant story of him leaving faithful disciple Elisha, being carried off into heavens:

- Jewish people suffering under Roman oppression imagined Elijah coming back, & thus both John Baptist & Jesus thought by some to be Elijah returned to Earth

- American slaves found hope in story of Elijah, creating spiritual based on story of Elijah's chariot, hope that Underground Railroad would provide them passage to freedom:

- Swing Low, Sweet Chariot ... coming for to carry me home

- Another musical tune might come to mind if you've seen the movie about Scottish runner Eric Liddell & 1924 Olympics: Chariots of Fire

- Doesn't that all seem more productive – & more fun – than hearing some twisted explanation of physics behind Elijah's chariot of fire?!

7. Same w/ story of Transfiguration

- Jesus greeted on mtn by Moses & Elijah – 2 great figures of Jewish history, representing, we might note: Law & Prophets

- Jesus' clothes dazzling white

- MT adds that Jesus' face "shone like the sun"
  - Again, you can go on-line & read explanations of science behind miracle
  - Or you can just try to hear what story-teller trying to say:
  - Jesus special
  - Jesus deeply connected w/ Jewish tradition – not trying to create some radical new religion, but deeply connect to Law & Prophets of old
  - Jesus not advocating throwing out old ways, but carrying on heart & essence of Jewish religion – just like Martin Luther when he nailed 95 Theses to church door in Wittenburg, just like MLK, Jr. when he penned Letter from Birmingham Jail
  - Deeply committed ministers, trying to help church be its very best
  - Jesus reformer, deeply connected to wisdom of ages – but that Jesus now offers authoritative interpretation
  - Story-teller also saying: certain people, certain moments – holiness to them
  - Jesus' face & clothes shining - not SCIENTIFIC claim, but THEOLOGICAL claim – that there's holy aura about Jesus, that Jesus holy embodiment of all that Law & Prophets mean
  - Follow Jesus, & you'll find yourself on Way to God
  - & so voice from heaven comes: This is my Son, the Beloved: listen to him!
- END: On this day known as Transfiguration Sunday, my prayer is that we can transform our approach to reading Bible
- Balaam got in trouble when he tried to go somewhere God didn't want him to go
  - And WE get in trouble when we try to make Bible into something it's not
  - Moral of story:
  - Don't confuse Bible w/ science book – b/c it cheapens both of them
  - May we repent of our habits of viewing Bible as science book...
  - May we repent of our rejection of Bible as old, antiquated book that's beneath us modern intellectuals

- & may we learn to embrace wonderful world of theological stories

- & if you don't agree w/ me ... well, just remember, this whole sermon started ... w/ talking ass