

Numbers.

(Don't worry, we'll get through the math together.)

/ Week 3 – Asymptote /

Check-in

How are you? Where have you seen Christ working in your life in the last week? And... today's Scripture involves a donkey who takes on a rather human characteristic. Do you anthropomorphize your pets? (Yup, anthropomorphize... look it up.) Do you put your cat in a bonnet and talk for her in a baby voice (you know the one)? Do you strap your dog into the baby carriage and push him through Wal-Mart? How human do you make your pets?

Opening Prayer

God of Protection, as we make our way out of the wilderness times in our lives, thank you for fighting battles for us we don't even know we're in, and help us to follow the guides you've placed in our lives.

Introduction

Today, we wrap up our series on Numbers and numbers, (moment of silence... it's sad, we know...) where we have been following the story of the Israelites wandering through the wilderness, and how that, paired with a little help from "the maths," we've learned a bit on how to get through our own wilderness times in life. Final recap of the story side of the equation: the Book of Numbers in the Bible takes place about 3500 years ago, after the Israelites have escaped their captivity in Egypt, but before they reach the Promised Land, (modern day Israel.) For 40 years, they wander through the wilderness. And yes, it is full of boring census data, laws, and rules for organizing their society. But in amongst the tedium are powerful stories that, as they were trudging through their wilderness, can help us get through the wilderness times in our lives. But first...

Recap Question: Last week, we looked at how to draw a "parabola" for our lives, turning our paths around, letting the past go, and looking for God's provision in unexpected places. Think about your past week. Have you found help in an unexpected place?

Scripture

Today, we'll look at one final piece of the formula for getting through our wilderness times in life. And for that, we move away from Moses and the Israelites to a story that happens indirectly to them. Here's your set up: as the Israelites were making their way through their

wilderness, toward what is modern day Israel, they began encroaching on territory that was already occupied. They hadn't lived there in 400 years, so other people had moved in. They're so close to the land of their ancestors... and yet, there are a few nations still in the way... one of which was Moab. The Israelites' numbers have grown, (probably in the hundreds of thousands at this point,) and the Moab king, Balak, has seen their encampment moving across the land toward his borders. He knows they're powerful. He knows they're organized. And he knows his kingdom doesn't stand a chance if they attack. And so, he comes up with a slightly unconventional strategy: He sends messengers to a pagan priest named Balaam. The request? He wants Balaam to curse the Israelites, so that once they are weakened by the curse, Moab has a chance to defeat them in battle. (Crazy? Sure. But he's desperate.) The night Balak's messengers arrive, God speaks to Balaam and says, "don't go back with these messengers. Don't curse the Israelites. In fact, they're blessed." And so, Balaam tells the messengers, "sorry, can't do it... go home." The Moab king is undeterred and sends an even more distinguished party to persuade Balaam, offering him gold and riches if he'll curse the Israelites. But again, he says, "can't do it. Even if he gave me his own palace full of gold, I can't go against what God has told me." But that night God says to Balaam, "meh, maybe we can teach them something, go ahead and go with them tomorrow." Which is where our story picks up...

Read Numbers, chapter 22, verses 21 to 35.

Okay, yes, there's a talking donkey, (and it is perfectly okay to imagine this story in the voices of Donkey and Shrek.) Did Balaam's donkey really talk? Who knows? But this is how the story was passed from generation to generation until it was written down, and was intended to teach the reader something, something we'll look at in a moment. First...

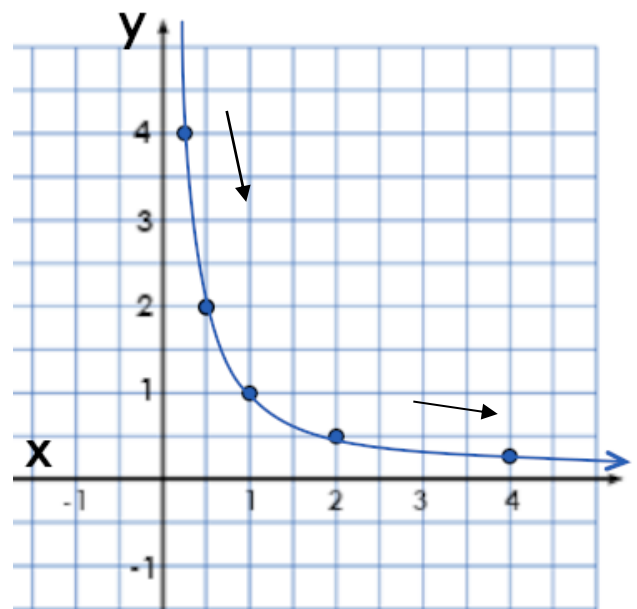
Question 1: This is a fun one. Talk about the story. What catches your attention, other than the talking donkey? Why do you think this story needed a talking donkey?

Reflection

Four times the Moab king asks Balaam to curse the Israelites, and four times Balaam says, "no." In fact, he blessed them instead. So, today's story is not about a talking donkey, but rather about what God and Balaam do for the Israelites as they're almost out of their wilderness... without them even knowing it. To explain that... we go to the maths. Last week, we graphed an equation. You did so well with that one, today we'll do another one.

$$y = 1/x$$

If we put in numbers for x , we get numbers for y , and can put them onto our graph. For example, if we put 4 into our equation for x , we



get the fraction $1/4$, giving us the point, $(4, 1/4)$. So, on our graph, we go right 4 from the center, and up $1/4$. If we keep putting in numbers for x , we get points at $(1/4, 4)$, $(1/2, 2)$, $(1, 1)$, and $(2, 1/2)$, and so on, as you can see on the graph... and another pattern starts to take shape. We then draw a line to connect them.

The cool thing about this equation is, if we keep putting in bigger and bigger numbers for x , our line will get closer and closer to zero, but it will *never* cross it. We could put in 1,000,000 for x , and our line would be roughly 5 miles off the page (Pastor Mike did the math, it's 4.9 miles to be exact), but it still wouldn't hit zero. A line that an equation gets close to, but never crosses, is called an...

/ Asymptote /

Here's why graphing this equation is important to our Bible story. Look at the arrows. Initially, the line is headed downward, toward zero hard. But the line levels out, and never hits zero. In our story today, God, through Balaam, is drawing an asymptote for the Israelites. They've had it rough. They were headed straight for zero. But now that they're so close to coming out of their wilderness, they're starting to see the future and its possibilities. They're regaining hope... but it's a precarious hope, and God knows another defeat might break them completely. And so, God draws an asymptote, keeping them from complete defeat, from hitting a rock-bottom, a point of no return. God draws a line, and like our equation, keeps them moving forward. God never lets them hit zero.

Question 2: Has there been a time in your life when you thought you were about to hit zero? Have you had a “rock-bottom”? This can be a very difficult and personal question to answer, so share as much or as little as you’d like. You’re in positive company, so be sensitive and offer prayers for each other if necessary.

God does the same for us. Now, we occasionally draw our own line and plow right to zero anyway. But we see through our story today, that God draws an asymptote to help us in two ways. First, Balaam cannot see the angel standing in the way. Yes, God speaks to him at other times, but as he’s making this journey, there are roadblocks he can’t see that he is mowing through. Balaam is not paying attention to his *guide*. The donkey can see what Balaam can’t and is trying to protect him, to keep him from harm. In last week’s story, we saw how God offered a *solution* for the Israelites from a very unlikely place. This week...

/ God offers us guidance from unlikely sources /

How often do we ignore the people who are trying to guide us away from harm? We ignore the signs. We ignore the obvious help. We ignore the people who are blatantly telling us that this is the wrong direction, and we plow right into the thing that hurts us, keeping us headed for zero and stuck in our wilderness. We beat the donkey and run headlong into the angel with the sword. Just as God did for

Balaam, God has put donkeys, (that is, people and signs and warnings,) in our lives to keep us from hitting zero. Ask God to open your eyes to them and then don't ignore them! They care about you and getting you out of the wilderness.

Question 3: Who's your donkey? (Yes, we need that on a t-shirt.) Who helps to guide you through the wilderness times in your life? Who will point out the dangers to you and help you see when you're headed for zero, even when it's difficult to hear? Share a time when someone helped guide you through a difficult time in your life.

Closing

The second way God draws an asymptote in our lives, helping us to not hit zero is... we see that the story of Balaam and his donkey happens without the Israelites knowledge. They learn of it somehow... (maybe the donkey tells them the harrowing tale later? "Guys, you'll never believe what happened!" "Holy crap, a talking donkey!") But while it's happening, they have no idea. This tells us that, as you are getting through your wilderness times in life, in order to draw that asymptote and not let you hit zero...

**/ God is fighting battles
you don't even know you're in /**

Often, especially when we are in our wilderness times in life, it can feel like we're getting hit from all sides, as if there are no punches being pulled and we can't catch a break. When Balaam can't see the angel and he doesn't know what the donkey is doing for him, he's angry. He's violent. He fights it every step of the way. But when God opens Balaam's eyes, he sees the angel and understands. (Hopefully he got that donkey a nice big bale of hay to eat afterward.) When he sees, he's thankful. It's easy to be thankful for things we can see. But we should be equally as thankful for the battles God is fighting that we don't know about. God works through Balaam to keep the Israelites from being cursed *without them knowing*. God works through Balaam's donkey to keep him from being smote by the angel *without him knowing*. God is fighting battles for us we don't even know we're in. Be thankful for that. God draws an asymptote for our lives to help get us out of the wilderness... never letting us get to zero. First, by putting "donkeys" in our lives who can see the pitfalls we can't, and second, through fighting battles we don't even know we are in. So, though it might feel like we're at the bottom of the graph, with God's help, just as Balaam found out, we can make a turn and find a way forward out of our wilderness.

Series Conclusion

We all have wilderness times in our lives. We've either been in them, are in them, or will be. God offers us a way through. We start with the *absolute value* operation, dropping the negative around us, and keeping the positive through going to God and asking for help. Then we make the turn and start heading the right direction, drawing a

parabola for our lives, through looking for God to provide what we need, maybe in unlikely places. And finally, as we're on that journey out of the wilderness, we can be thankful that God fights battles we don't even know we're in, and puts donkeys in our lives to guide us, drawing an *asymptote* so that we won't hit zero. And with these numbers and the story of the Israelites in the book of Numbers... we can get through the wilderness, too. See, math isn't so bad.

Take some time to share prayer requests or celebrations.

Close in prayer.