Cindy Bassett

The Bible Corner

Balaam, the forgotten prophet Part I

King Balak surveyed the audience, which included some of the most prominent officials and leaders of Moab and Midian. Together, they would eliminate the problem that threatened his nation; of that he was certain.

Rising, King Balak came forth. "I was out walking early this morning, as I am in the habit of doing," he began. "It clears my head nicely to look out over the vast plains of Moab and see my kingdom stretching out in all directions, farther than the eye can see." He paused and smiled for a moment, relishing the picture he had painted.

"This particular morning, my view of my world was spoiled," he continued, frowning. "Looking down, I was startled to see a mob of people boldly camped on our land for all to see. I rushed back and consulted with my advisors immediately. These invaders are the Israelites who first left Egypt. As they travel, they seem to have the power to defeat everything in their path. They come here now to take over our land!"

A great commotion could be heard among the audience. One of the leaders stood up and said, "Your highness, just give the word. We will gather all of our armies together and crush these Israelites!"

"Yes," another agreed. "What gives them the right to simply take over?"

Others quickly joined in the heated debate. King Balak waited for the emotions to subside. Then he stated, "I do admire your great courage and loyalty. But I fear we need something more to defeat these people. There are far too many of them — like a city, they have sprung up overnight in our midst."

"Well, I have an idea," someone in the back of the room offered. "There is a wise man named Balaam living in our land, and he is known to have special powers. Let us bring this prophet here and pay him to curse the Hebrews. Once he has done so, their lives will be doomed!"

"Excellent idea!"the king agreed. "Dispatch messengers to Balaam at once!"

Balaam was stunned for a moment, after the two men before him explained their purpose in coming. "Let me be sure that I have understood your offer," he said, his eyes fixed on the sack of money that one of them held. "If I go and merely utter a curse on these people who have arrived in Midian, then King Balak will reward me with all of that money," he replied, pointing at the sack.

"That is correct," one of the messengers confirmed.

"Sounds too good to be true," Balaam said to himself. Then, smiling at the two men, he replied, "Stay here tonight, as my guests. I'll give you my anwer in the morning."

Balaam didn't sleep for even a second that night. Instead, he prayed to God and asked him exactly what to do. And the Lord advised, "You are not to curse the Hebrews, Balaam. For they are my own special people, and I myself have blessed them."

So the next morning, Balaam sent the two messengers away and told them that he could not accept their offer. He watched them sadly until they were out of sight.

(To be continued next week.)

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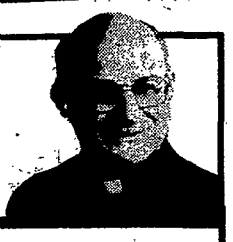
Meditation for Lent:

Dear Jesus, transform my stumbling block of selfishness into a steppingstone of generosity so I can use the gifts You have given me to serve others.

Father Albert Shamon



A Word for Sunday

Sunday's Readings: (R3) John 4:4-42; (R1) Exodus 17:3-7; (R2) Romans 5:1-2, 5-8.

Almost every nation has a sport that reveals its national character. Italy has the opera; Russia, the ballet; England, Rugby; and the United States, baseball.

Legend has it that 150 years ago in Cooperstown, Abner Doubleday invented baseball, laying out a space in the geometric form of a diamond. Within that space, he supposedly worked out certain ratios of time, distance, and speed.

Perhaps baseball appeals so much to the American psyche as a symbol of the competitive life. Much depends on how fast a player can run, the speed of the ball and how far each player can hit it. Opportunities are everywhere on the field, waiting to be seized.

And then there is the area in which baseball is very much a parable of life: errors. Baseball creates conditions that enable people to do the best they can. But this is a flawed world, and the best is really never all that good. The finest hitters in the game succeed only one time in three, the best infielders make one error in every four games, the pitcher who wins 12 games out of 22 gets high ratings, and every game is flawed by wild pitches, dropped flies and getting caught off base.

The analogy between baseball and human error is applicable to all four of next Sunday's readings. In the first reading and the Psalm following, Moses and the people made colossal errors. Both struck out at a place called Massah.

It was at Massah that the Hebrews got angry at Moses. Why had he led them from the well-watered delta of Egypt into the desert, where there was hardly a drop of water? Moses turned to God, who instructed him to strike a rock and water would be provided. Moses struck the rock and, indeed, water gushed out. But, because of his attitude, we are told in the Book of Numbers, Moses was later denied entrance into the promised land. Box score on Moses: one hit, one error — and he died on third.

Moses was not the only one guilty of error. In the last verse of the Responsorial Psalm 95 (not in the reading), God said, "They are a people of erring heart ..." And because of their erring heart, those people, too, were left on base. They never reached home plate, for, as God said, "I swore in my anger: they shall not enter into my rest" (verse 11).

The gospel continues the analogy: the woman Jesus meets at Jacob's well was certainly error-prone. She had had five husbands, had struck out five times and was working on number six.

But Jesus introduced her to a whole new ball game, as recorded in the Book of Romans (R2). (As Casey Stengel would say, "You can look it up.") Paul says, "We have been justified by faith" — a faith in Jesus Christ. Such faith leads to hope, and hope will not disappoint. For through the living waters of the sacrament of faith, which is baptism, the Holy Spirit is given us, and He pours out into our hearts the love of God, which erases errors, forgiving even 70 times seven times.

The moral of the long gospel was to teach the apostles the new ball game. After the woman had found the living water, she ran the half-mile to Sychar and evangelized the entire town. As the apostles' "coach," the woman brought them to the Word.

"Open your eyes and see!" Jesus counseled. What she has done, the apostles had to do on a grander scale. The fields are shining for harvest.

As Jesus had to pass through Samaria, so the apostles have to pass through the world, proclaiming to all who wish to worship God in spirit and in truth that the meeting-place between God and man is Jesus, who gives the living water of the Holy Spirit.

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Albany

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The united front presented by that gathering did not fail to impress legislators. When Assembly Speaker Mel Miller's adminstrative assistant, Norm Adler, welcomed delegates to Albany, he referred to the gathering as "this staggering array of activists." Adler assured forum participants that their presence, numbers and leadership had been duly noted by all at the capitol.

That's just what the bishops of New York state had in mind when they scheduled the forum. "We are trying to articulate a broad range of issues with which we are concerned," said Albany's Bishop Howard Hubbard, chairman of the conference's Public Policy Committee. "We have been doing this for years, but perhaps we have not been getting that (fact) across."

The bishops proclaimed the event an historic occasion, and used the media attention it drew to put the spotlight on the conference's legislative agenda. The agenda, a 54-item policy platform, proposes state policies that would protect human life, provide economic security to state residents, ensure access to medical care, foster educational choice, enrich youth services and reform the state's income-tax system.

"We of the Church are always looking for a way that we can legitimately ... assist the state in carrying out its responsibilities and to breath moral understanding into what could be a purely secular understanding," said Cardinal John O'Connor, bishop of the Archdiocese of New York and president of the Catholic conference.

The cardinal used the speaker's podium to send legislators a strong message on a court-mandated change in the regulations governing New York City's contracts with private agencies that provide foster-care services.

The new regulations, which will go into effect on July 1, forbid contracting agencies — many of which are run by the archdiocese — from using "excessive religious symbols" and require the agencies to ensure that their clients have access to abortions and birth-control services.

If the government "attempts to tamper with our moral values in exchange for government funds, we will simply have to close the doors of our hospitals and our child-care centers," the cardinal warned during his luncheon address to forum delegates.

Bishop Stanislaus J. Brzana of the Diocese of Ogdensburg used the occasion to make a case for state attention to the needs of rural residents. "It is often difficult to remind the governor that he is the governor of the entire state, not just of the people in the cities," the bishop said.

Although forum planners designed the day's events to promote the bishops' agenda, reporters were also interested in other matters — specifically sexuality, AIDS and women's issues.

Asked whether — in light of society's apparent rejection of Church teaching on homosexual and extra-marital sexual relations — the Church should take the "realistic" approach of advocating condom use to minimize the spread of AIDS, Bishop Brzana offered the following response: "Our plan is the plan of God, and nobody can be more realistic than God ... The plan we propose is undoubtedly idealistic, but it is the plan of God."

During a discussion of the conference's policy suggestions on women's rights, Cardinal O'Connor seemed annoyed by a reporter's insinuation that the Church has a credibilty problem with regard to equality for women. He asked the reporter for an example of Church discrimination against women, and was reminded that no women were sitting at the speakers' table.

"Women could not be here as bishops," he retorted. "I could not be here as a mother." The cardinal noted that the Church has offered to support an equal rights amendment that specifically excludes abortion rights. Yet women's groups have rejected this support. "Many, many proponents of ERA argue that it has nothing to do with abortion," he said, but the same proponents prefer to have no ERA to having one that excludes abortion rights.