

“DON’T MESS WITH BALD PROPHETS!”

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2 Kings 2:23-25

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Really!?! ‘That’s in the Bible?’ you might be thinking, or rather, ‘what’s that doing in the Bible?’ may be the thought that’s running through your mind after hearing that passage.

Elisha the prophet **calling down curses in the name of the Lord** on small boys, then two bears, and not just any bears, but two she bears, maybe angry, over-protective, momma bears, coming out of the woods and mauling 42 of those small boys? Then, Elisha, nonchalantly, going on his merry way, to Mount Carmel, then home to Samaria.

When we read this passage, it’s a bit flabbergasting. How do we make sense of the senseless violence, especially to the small boys in this passage given our instinctive gut conviction that violence against children, against those who are the most vulnerable in our society, is just unacceptable? We are a culture still in shock around the discovery of the unmarked graves on the sites of some of the former Indian Residential Schools. We know that “Every Child Matters,” so what do we do with a text like this one? And anyways, what did the small boys do to deserve their fate? Well, they made fun of Elisha’s baldness. Really? That just seems to be a bit of an overreaction, doesn’t it? And who doesn’t know that out of the mouths of babes comes some of the most honest words!

I remember the last time I was in Korea, my family went to spend some time with some of Sophie’s friends and their families in a resort in the countryside. There was a swimming pool there and I was playing with some of the younger children of Sophie’s friends. One of them, a young girl, came up to me and wanted to say something in my ear. I listened carefully because she spoke in Korean and she was a bit shy. She asked me if I knew Winnie the Pooh. Sure, I said, I know Winnie, why do you ask? She said very quietly, because you look like him, then she went away giggling. **I didn’t know exactly what to think, but the thought of calling down bears, or sharks, never entered my mind!**

We live in a time when the abuse of children is among the most reprehensible of crimes. In the PCC, the Leading with Care policy explicitly states **that ensuring a climate of safety for children, youth and vulnerable adults is vital to how we express our faith in God.** So, when a text like this comes along, we wince, or worse, we walk away. You should read some of the comments on the internet about this passage. What kind of morbid God do you Christians believe in? This is just the kind of lunacy that would make anyone stay away from religion, and on it goes. I suppose I understand why people respond the way they do to texts like this, **but I also know that proper context goes a long way in putting any text into the right perspective** and what I usually find is that those who make such negative condemning comments aren’t so much as interested in understanding the context as much as they are interested in pushing

their pretexts, points of view that are predisposed to a negative view of Christianity or religious faith of any kind. **So, let's look at the text in context.** What's happening in Israel at the time of this text? The kingdom of Israel had been divided into two, Israel in the north and Judah in the south. North Israel had been ruled for nearly 20 years by a king named Ahab. Ahab, along his wife Jezebel, had continued the practice of idol worship that had been instituted by his predecessors. When Ahab died, his son Ahaziah became king. The last verses of the book of 1 Kings notes that Ahaziah did evil in the sight of the Lord, following in the way of his father and mother, worshipping Baal and provoking the Lord to anger. So, what we have is a nation that had fallen away from worshipping the Lord, and had instead turned to idols. **We have a nation whose leadership had forgotten the might acts of God in their history and had rejected the commands of God and fashioned a culture that couldn't even pass on knowledge or respect of the Lord to their children.** And so, you have a society where small children can show disrespect to the prophet of God, without having any idea of what they were doing.

If you read the entirety of 2 Kings chapter 2, what you find is that it's an excursion, a departure, from the flow of the narrative. 1 and 2 Kings is, more or less, a historical account of the two kingdoms, Israel and Judah, and their successive rulers, albeit viewed through the lens of theology, but every so often there's a chapter that serves a different purpose than merely the historical narrative. 2 Kings 2 is such a chapter. This chapter is entirely about the end of Elijah's prophetic career and Elisha's succession as the next prophet of the Lord in Israel. There's no reference to the political climate, in fact no mention of any kings at all. It's also a chapter that's full of imagery, some of it so amazing and fantastical, that it's clear that we are no longer in the same place as the rest of the narrative in Kings. There's the scene of Elijah being taken into heaven in a chariot of fire. There the account of Elisha picking up the cloak or mantle of Elijah and touching the waters of the Jordan causing them to divide. Then we come to the end of the chapter where the authority of Elisha as the new prophet of the Lord is established by two acts of power. The first is the purifying of the water in Jericho by Elisha throwing salt into the spring and the second is the account of Elisha calling the curse on the boys. These stories, and this entire chapter, is a validation of the new prophet's authority and power. **The details are rather amazing, perhaps we might even call them mythical, but they serve a purpose and the original listeners and readers of the text would have found the accounts in the chapter, including the story about the bears mauling small boys, understandable and entirely acceptable.**

Now, we might also be more satisfied in seeing the text in its proper, original, context. We might understand that the focus of the story isn't really about bears mauling boys, but about the power of the prophet being established. But we may still find ourselves struggling with why **this particular example** would be recorded in scripture to validate the prophet's power.

And I think that those concerns would be valid ones. I'm not so sure that we can merely gloss over the account of the mauling by merely putting it into its proper context. The fact remains that **scripture seems to tell us** that somehow this was an **appropriate response** to the taunting of Elisha by the boys. **Don't mess with bald prophets if you know what's good for you!**

Here, I think that we need to again remind ourselves of the time of Elisha and what's happening in that time. Remember, there are kings in Israel who have abandoned the worship of the Lord for idols, for the worship of Baal. The kingdom they represent is a kingdom that has lost its way. In that kingdom children have no standing or status because they have no value at that age. Only boys, and only after they have reached the age of maturity, have standing or status within the Israelite society of Elisha's time. Women and girls only have status as they are connected to the male figures in their lives. **It was a time of godlessness in Israel, when their kings followed idols and the inherent value of people, all people, was not understood or respected.**

If we are disturbed by the account of the mauling of the boys, as well we should be, **it is because the framework of ancient Israel isn't our framework.** Our framework has been shaped by different contexts, newer developments. **Our framework is shaped by the entirety of the scriptural witness, by the intervention of Jesus Christ into the human narrative and his vision of the kingdom of God, a kingdom whose values are radically different from any earthly kingdom.**

We see children and their care in the context of Jesus and how Jesus treated children. If the time of Ahaziah and 2 Kings is a period of godlessness, **the life and witness of Jesus is the very depiction of what a God centred kingdom is to be like.** In the kingdom Jesus speaks of all people have status and standing, male, female, slave, free, from the east, from the west, Jew, Gentile, healthy, diseased, friend, enemy. **All have standing because their value is not determined by their utility, but by God's love.**

In that kingdom Jesus shows that children have value and place. Jesus loves children, he cherishes them, welcomes them, blesses them. During his ministry, among many things, Jesus heals a 12 year old girl, the daughter of Jairus, who was thought to be dead. Jesus heals the daughter of a Gentile woman who argues that even the scraps that fall from the table are enough. Jesus drives out demons from a young boy and uses the offering of another boy, 5 loaves and 2 fish, to feed the multitudes. Jesus said to those who would have hindered them, to let the children come to him and do not stop them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these, and he laid hands on the children and blessed them. He took a child and holding the child in his arms, said to his followers, whoever welcomes one such child in my

name welcomes me... and if you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if you took a giant rock and tied it to your neck and were thrown into the ocean. **What does Jesus think of children? What place do children have in the kingdom of God? It's so clear, isn't it?**

Which then brings us back to the text before us. Yes, the text functions as part of a story that helps us to understand the transition from Elijah to Elisha. Yes, the text is a fantastic account of that succession and would have been entirely acceptable in the time and by the people for whom it was intended. But even more than reading the text in context so that we understand the strange imagery, the text can serve as a **point of contrast, between a time when godlessness ruled the kingdom and a kingdom where God is Lord and love rules over all things.**

Our hope comes in knowing that **we don't have to be stuck in old contexts** and that God continues to help us move, **from old ways to new ways, from ancient understandings to new visions, from legalism to grace, from fear to love.** Even in this time and age Jesus still challenges our culture about our practices regarding who is expendable, who doesn't have status, who isn't seen as valuable.

With the exit of western nations from Afghanistan, the Taliban have now reclaimed power in that country. One of the most concerning issues regarding this development is the fate of women and girls under a Taliban government. Women and girls will be restricted in their freedoms, in their ability to be educated, go to school, hold jobs, to work and participate in society in a meaningful way, **to speak out, to serve their society, to lead. We recoil from such restrictions because we know it's not right.** We know that whenever any person or group of people are denied their full humanity, their full participation in the gift of life merely on the basis of their gender, or sex, or their race, or their age, or any of a host of other categories, **it is not what God intends in creating us as God has, in God's image, in God's likeness, and calling what God has created good.** We are repulsed by any authority that attempts to restrict the full expression of human life in any person or any people, not because we agree or disagree with their politics, **but because as creations of God, as followers of Jesus, we know what the kingdom Jesus speaks of is truly about and what Jesus intends life to look like in its abundance.**

Sometimes a story in scripture serves to contrast the **old ways to the new way of Jesus** and to remind us of how **radically inclusive** the kingdom of heaven in its full realization will appear to a people who still live in a world mired in sin, **but a world which, thankfully, God continues to redeem and transform.** And we, the people of God, we are called and invited to be part of that transformation.

Whether it be the poor, the disabled, the displaced, the disgraced, whether it be those whom we have determined to be unacceptable in any way, those in whom we see little value, **Jesus challenges our assumptions and points us to live into the irresistible vision of his kingdom, where curses are never called down in the name of the Lord, where the name of the Lord only brings hope, healing and peace.**

So, may we live as people whose hearts find our home in that kingdom and whose lives will live out our hope.

Thanks be to God, Amen.