

**The Bible – Strange but True:
“Baldy, Bears and Bethel”
2 Kings 2:23 – 25**

“From there Elisha went up to Bethel.
As he was walking along the road, some boys came out of the town and jeered at him. “Go up, baldy!” they said. “Go up, baldy!”
He turned around, looked at them and called down a curse on them in the name of the Lord. Then two bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the boys.
And he went on to Mount Carmel and from there returned to Samaria.”

Last week we talked about when it comes to the Bible, to Scripture, we do have a times, a book that’s a bit strange. Accounts that are bizarre and unusual and odd... but true.

And when it comes to our reading this morning...

What’s your response?

If you’re artist, you may have wanted to recreate the event:





(Both of these pieces come from the 1400's – I don't know what was going on back then but it had resonance...)

If you're younger in years you might be thinking, "Awesome! Killer bears!"

If you're balding you may be thinking, "Finally, some justice".

Or if you are a normal person you may be thinking, "Seriously??? Bears... eating children, boys!?! For a bald joke??? That's sick!"

As I mentioned, we saw even last week, some parts of Scripture are bizarre and unusual... and in this case slightly horrifying.

So...

"How would you explain what's going on here?"

You know what I'm going to say next - tell the person next to you.

- You could say that Elisha was just having a bad day and overreacted. Even so that doesn't explain the emergence of the bears from the forest and the mauling the boys endured.
- Others say, it was a misuse of divine power. In other words, whenever God gives someone divine power, he genuinely transfers it to them. To some degree, God places his divine power under the control of their own power. The agent can use it well or

abuse it.

For good or for bad, power conferred by God is real power.

In the book of Judges one character stands out as some imbued with divine power but acts recklessly – Samson.

Samson was anointed by God's Spirit. The empowerment finally left him but not before he did many things that clearly God didn't endorse.

Here Elisha is using the divine power given to him in a terrible way.

It's a possibility but I think something else is going on here.

So let's go a bit deeper.

Little boys or tough youths?

In the time of Elisha and 2nd Kings, and in many cultures of the world even today, boys entered manhood at 13 with adult responsibilities and expectations.

So in this passage "boys" would be better translated as boys between 13 and 30. Elisha himself is probably in his early to mid-20's.

And they are gathered in no small number. There were at least 42 of them, probably actually somewhere in the ballpark of 100.

Such large groups of people rarely form accidentally.

In my later teen years I went to quite a few parties. One time an acquaintance from school held party when her parents were away for the weekend. I still can picture her standing on her doorstep bewildered by the hundreds of young people crammed onto her front lawn and throughout the house. Word had got out.

From the numbers involved here in 2 Kings, word had got out.

The Lord's prophet is on the road.

The implication is that this is an organized public demonstration against Elisha and his God. This is not spur of the moment.

So a large group, probably 100, made up of teens and young men encircled Elisha.

This would have been a deeply frightening experience.

It's not unknown for large groups with a mob mentality to get out of control.

The mockery was probably a prelude to doing him actual harm.

But why?

Location, location, location.

In stories like these in Scripture geography is often important.

Elisha is travelling to Bethel.

By the time of Elisha Israel had broken up into two rival kingdoms – Israel in the north and Judah in the south.

What we know is that true worship of the Lord – Yahweh – was meant to take place in the temple in Jerusalem which was in Judah.

Bethel though was on the border of the two kingdoms.

By the time of 2 Kings Bethel was *deliberately* established as one of the main centres of idolatry in Israel as rival to Jerusalem.

The main object of worship there was a golden calf and other gods were worshipped as well.¹

This is in clear disobedience to the first of the ten commandments:

In Exodus chapter 20 verses 2 – 5 we hear:

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

³ “You shall have no other gods besides me.

⁴ “You shall not make for yourself an *image* in the form of *anything* in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.

⁵ You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God...””

These weren't simply a set of rules laid out to blindly follow but to show what it means to belong to and to live and serve the only True God.

You see Israel made an agreement to be joined to God much like a... marriage, to have this union with God, to be his loved people and to be loved by their only God and to love Him supremely.

So here the people of Israel had become so disloyal, so unfaithful to their God. They're cheating on Him with these other gods, and that has consequences. So when you put it all together you have Elisha – God's mouthpiece - heading to Bethel.

¹ 1 Kings 12:25 – 33.

As he approaches this large group of younger people they don't receive the Lord's – Yahweh's – prophet.

Because they support the idolatry in Bethel they are hostile toward Elisha as he may cause trouble.

The gang insults him, focusing on his bald head.

- As a young man it may be that Elisha was suffering from premature balding.

It was seen as a physical defect that a true man of God shouldn't suffer from.

OR

- it may be that Elisha shaved his head as a sign that he mourning the loss of Elijah, his spiritual father and predecessor.

If that was the case then the mockery was extremely offensive, like making fun of someone crying at a funeral.

However the key phrase was their telling him "go up, go up" in reference to Elijah's recent "going up" to heaven in a chariot.

In other words, get out of here – go and meet your maker!

And we might help you!

These taunts were more than a simple act of name-calling, but an expression of hostility, spiritual warfare, and a present threat to Elisha's person.

Mobs like this still occur in parts of our world today.

In March 2021 two nuns and with two trainee nuns were travelling on train home in India. As they travelled a group of radical Hindu male co-passengers accosted the nuns, accusing them of promoting religious conversion.

When it reached its destination, the police were already waiting. But instead of stopping the mob, they forced the four women from the train and took them in for questioning. They were soon joined by a group of 150 slogan-shouting Hindu radicals. The terrified nuns were later released, but only after senior officials had confirmed that the trainee nuns were Christians by birth, and had not converted from Hinduism.

In the face of hostility and rejection of God, Elisha "calls down a *curse* in the name of the Lord".

The bears appear and forty-two mangled and grievously injured if not killed.

The thing is,

“How do you explain this cursing and consequence?”

Well Elisha certainly didn't utter profanities at them or make up a curse of his own.

It has to do with this covenant Israel had with God.

This union with God was an agreement, a covenant with promises.

Promises were made – blessings that God promises for His people.

What is forgotten is the other side of the equation – disobedience and unfaithfulness calls forth awful curses.²

One of the curses is found in Leviticus 26:21 – 22:

“If you remain hostile toward me and refuse to listen to me... I will send wild animals against you, and they will rob you of your children, destroy your cattle and make you so few in number that your roads will be deserted.”

The swift response shows that Elisha speaks with the authority of a prophet and reminds Israel they are breaking faith with their true God.

Does that solve all our questions and reservations?

Maybe not but there are times when we need to allow Scripture to be strange and alien.

So what's our takeaway from this?

The next time you're mocked or bullied should you ask God send bears to sort things out?

(The appearance of one bear let alone two would be surprising in New Zealand 😊).

I've got two.

You know, we have a saying for this in New Zealand, don't we?

“She'll be right”.

We have followers of Jesus who say the same.

² See Deuteronomy 28:1 – 14 (Blessings) and Deuteronomy 28:15 – 68 (Curses)

When it comes to walking with God they are so slapdash, so relaxed, so slipshod and sloppy.

They say, "Me and Jesus, we're all good! And Jesus, he'll forgive anything I do if I ask him to."

"I can watch what I like, do what I like with whoever I like, whenever and wherever I like."

It's like God is a big buddy who affirms and celebrates every decision they ever make.

When you think about it has to do with our conception of God.

He is love.

Love is welcome. Love is acceptance. Love is His embrace.

Love took Jesus to the cross.

Love though isn't permissiveness.

The people of Bethel had confused the Lord with the gods of the nations and all kinds of sordid, immoral activities arose in Israel.

And they thought to themselves, it will all be okay.

They treated Elisha and God with contempt and there are consequences.

And so for us, the people of Cromwell Presbyterian, it's a reminder.

Don't live casually with God – I don't think most of us do, so it's reminder.

The other takeaway is that Jesus has bound himself to us as much as we have bound ourselves to him.

To put it another way, where we walk he walks.

Where we go, Jesus goes.

In the triumphs, he is there.

In the temptations, he is also there.

And does Jesus do in our times of temptation?

Does he close his eyes and hope for the best?

What Jesus does is he warns us.

Some years ago I read the story of infamous Mongrel Mob member and his coming to know and follow Jesus.

This gang member lived by his own admission, a sordid, depraved, cruel, debased and nasty life.

But through a series of events and people he gave his life over to Christ. And things were going well, but he backslid into old habits of easy sex and hard drinking and violence.

He thought he had left this behind but then here he was back into what he used to be into.

Then one day he was having a shower and he heard a voice, and the voice said, "You'll never get clean like that my son. Only my love and my word will clean, direct you and save you."

And then the voice said, "Return to me or return to prison."

He knew straight away who was talking to him.

So for us the warning may come through a dream.

It may come through a vision.

It could be a thought that drops into your head out of nowhere that says, "Watch out!"

It could be in the reading of Scripture.

It could be a person.

Elisha and the prophets were those people for Israel.

They often would say, "Watch out! Slow down. Stop!"

You're on the tipping point of temptation and sin and with sin there are consequences.

And that was act of love from God.

For you it could be a close friend.

It could be your significant other.

It could be a sermon...

So to finish, are you treating your relationship with God a bit lightly, a bit casually this morning?

Let this table be place where you renew your covenant, your friendship, your loyalty with Jesus this morning.

Or is there a warning you need to heed?

Let this table be where you are strengthened by Jesus to heed that warning this morning.