

## “Bear Attack”

### 2 Kings 2: 19-25

Now the people of the city said to Elisha, “The location of this city is good, as my lord sees; but the water is bad, and the land is unfruitful.” <sup>20</sup> He said, “Bring me a new bowl, and put salt in it.” So they brought it to him. <sup>21</sup> Then he went to the spring of water and threw the salt into it, and said, “Thus says the LORD, I have made this water wholesome; from now on neither death nor miscarriage shall come from it.” <sup>22</sup> So the water has been wholesome to this day, according to the word that Elisha spoke.

<sup>23</sup> He went up from there to Bethel; and while he was going up on the way, some small boys came out of the city and jeered at him, saying, “Go away, baldhead! Go away, baldhead!” <sup>24</sup> When he turned around and saw them, he cursed them in the name of the LORD. Then two she-bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the boys. <sup>25</sup> From there he went on to Mount Carmel, and then returned to Samaria.

As I shared earlier this week, this is the text which I have been dreading in this series. All week, I have wondered “Where exactly is the good news in this weird text? What are we supposed to do with this text as people of faith?” Once more, I am discovering the perfection of timing when it comes to the Spirit of God because again, this week, I realized that in this weirdest of weird texts found in our bible, we have an opportunity to gain some perspective in the face of violence. We have an opportunity to reframe the narrative, no longer blaming the victim but rather owning our complicity in the damage which often remains after we justify the hurt and hate which fills our world right now. This morning, the Spirit of God

is inviting us to see the consequences of our words and our actions when we speak in anger, when we seek revenge, when we use our power to hurt others.

I have to tell you that I started out on Monday morning reading this text and immediately turning to the commentators, hoping to find a logical explanation for such a weird text, for such a violent text. Unfortunately, most commentators avoided addressing this text. They skipped right over it, going from verse 18 right into Chapter 3. I did find a few commentators who would mention it, but their explanations were more about God and how this text showed how God had the power to bless or curse. I could not find any explanation for why Elisha did what he did or why he felt he needed to punish the children in such a way by calling a bear to attack them simply because they called him a bald head.

Of course, I did find a few commentators who tried to change the narrative, who said, “Elisha shouldn’t have done what he did. These were just kids”, but these comments were quickly shut down with a “Well, the Hebrew really says, young men. So, we are not dealing with children. We were dealing with people who should have known better.”

Feverishly, I kept looking for a logical explanation, something which would explain away this act of violence, something which would make it okay, something which would allow me to say, “Well, if that happened, then that makes it alright.”

No such thing ever appeared. Let me say that again...No such thing ever appeared. As I sat grasping for straws, grasping for anything to make this story not so weird, not so violent, I realized that I had fallen into the trap of illusion, into the trap of power structures, into the trap of...dare I say it...victim blaming. “The kids should have known better than to tease Elisha. They were disrespecting their elders. They needed to be taught a lesson. Those kids were asking for it.”

I was amazed at how quickly I began to use these excuses to justify the violence in this story, allowing Elisha to escape the consequences of his actions while the victims shouldered all the blame. Yet as the week continued, I heard these excuses used to not only justify the violence in our story but the violence with fills our world as well. “She was asking for it by wearing those clothes. He was where he was not supposed to be. If he had just followed the rules and done what was asked of him, he would not have been shot. Her ex-boyfriend was a drug dealer. What did she expect?”

In our culture, in our society, and yes, even in our faith, we want, we need something to explain away the violence in our world, something that is logical, something which makes the victim “deserving” of such a violent act when it is committed against him or her. Otherwise, we might have to admit that the system is broken. We might have to admit that justice is not blind. We might have to admit

that the very structures of our society are meant to built up a select few while oppressing those we deem as “other”. And that is not something we are ready to admit because if we did, then we would have to do the hard work of reconciliation. We would have to do the hard work of relationship-building. We would have to do the hard work of justice making, not only for those who look like us and think like us but we would have to do the hard work of justice making for all of God’s people and then where would we be? How would we know who is in and who is out? How would we know who is in power and who is not? How would we live in a society where all are seen as equals?

As a culture, as a society, and yes even as people of faith, it is just easier for us to offer our thoughts and prayers, to blame the victim, to explain away the act rather than admit that we have acted in ways which support a system built on the complete opposite values than those of the Kingdom of God.

Because you see, as we look at this story about a bear attack and children being mauled, the thing we realize is that this story is not just about an act of violence. This story is about one who is called to bring healing and wholeness but does not. This story is about one who uses and abuses the name of the Lord to curse others and justify his actions. This story is about one who leaves lasting damage to a community for generations to come simply because he speaks in

anger, because he speaks in revenge, because he uses his power to hurt others rather than to bring forth new life.

Again, this week, I find myself in a very different place than when I first started engaging this text. It is an uncomfortable place to be in to realize how many times over the years, I have jumped to conclusions when I have heard stories of violence in our community, in our nation and in our world. It is an uncomfortable place to be in to realize how quickly I have looked for logical explanations to make it okay that such horrible thing happened. It is an uncomfortable place to be in to realize how many times, I have fallen into the trap of victim blaming while ignoring how the system has failed all of us time and time again.

I have no answers this morning because I really do think the Spirit is inviting me, inviting all of us to be in this uncomfortable place for a while so I will simply leave us all with this...Being a person of faith is not easy. We have picked up the mantle of prophetic leadership. In doing so, we are called to continue the work of the Kingdom of God so that one day it will be here on Earth just as it is in Heaven. It is often difficult work. It is often messy work. It is often heart-breaking work, yet it is the work we are called to do so that healing and wholeness comes for all of God's people. As people of faith, we are called to act in ways which recognize the fact that everyone is created in the image of God. As people of faith, we are called

to act in ways which sow seeds of justice and mercy. As people of faith, we are called to act in ways so that violence will be no more.

This morning, this is what I know to be true...that for generations people have claimed to be working in the name of the Lord only to use and abuse that name, creating more harm than bringing forth new life. What I do know to be true is this that as a people of faith, when we speak in God's name, we represent God and the God I know and have experienced in my own life is one of love and grace, not one who would call on bears to attack children simply because they called a prophet a bald head.

Again, this morning, I do not pretend to have all the answers, but I do know this to be true.... that in times like these, we are being confronted with the consequences of our choices, both good and bad. And if we truly want the Kingdom of God to come here on Earth as it is in heaven, now is the time to put aside our illusions of security and begin the hard work of justice making not only for those who think like us or look like us but to begin the hard work of justice making for all of God's people. May it be so. Amen.