

2 Kings 2:19-24
“Bears, Baldness, and Blessing”
Series: Bizarre Bible
August 22, 2010
First UMC-Jefferson City
Daniel Hilty

Media Event

(Please display graphic file, “Bizarre Bible”)



So, how many of you heard the news story about a month ago concerning a bear who took a car for a joy ride in Colorado? It's true: a bear took a car for a ride by himself. Apparently a teenager left a sandwich in the back of his unlocked Corolla, and in the middle of the night this bear opened up the door, climbed in, and ate the sandwich.

But the bear didn't stop there! When she was done eating, she also honked the horn, shifted the car into neutral, and took a ride in it for 125 feet as it cascaded to the bottom of the hill. Unfortunately no one was able to get a photograph of the bear actually driving the car, but we found this picture that we thought came close.

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(Please display graphic file, “Bear in Parade”)



You get the idea.

Well, as you might imagine, the poor bear was not too happy about her unexpected trip, so when she got to the bottom of the hill, she started ripping up the car from the inside out. Cushions were slashed. Stuffing was pulled out. Metal was bent.

By the time the teenager and his family got down the hill to see what it had happened, it was almost too much for them to...BEAR. By all reports it was a pretty...

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(Please display graphic file, "Grizzly")



GRIZZLY sight! Some might even say it was...

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(Please display graphic file, "Panda")



PANDA-monium. I actually thought about putting a real photograph of the wrecked car up on the screen, but it was hard to enlarge the picture, because the photographer had just used a...

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(Please display graphic file, "Polar Bear")



POLAR-oid camera. Not that Polaroids are bad, mind you—a Polaroid camera is probably just as good as a...

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(Please display graphic file, "Kodiak")



KODIAK.

OK, OK. Enough bear puns. Enough silliness. Time to take a "paws."

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(Please display graphic file, "Paw")



Now, Denver police say that this was not the first time that a bear had let itself into a car. They say that it actually happens quite often. Throughout history, bears have had contact with the human world in ways that can leave us scratching our heads, and asking ourselves how it happened, and why it happened.

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(Please display graphic file, "Bizarre Bible")



Our Bible reading today is another example. You know, in my opinion, our Scripture reading today is quite possibly the weirdest story in the whole Bible. It

is the third in our series of five strange passages we are looking at in our current worship series titled “Bizarre Bible.” And as odd as the other four Bible passages in this series are, I think this one may trump them all—at least, the second half of our Scripture reading.

The second half of our Scripture reading goes like this...as if you need my help to remember:

One day the prophet Elisha was walking up to the town of Bethel, just north of Jerusalem, when some youth—some boys—come running out of the village and make fun of him because of his bald head. Believe it or not, back then, being bald or having thinning hair was actually not considered a sign of being totally cool like it is today. (If I keep saying it, maybe it will come true.)

So there they were, calling Elisha things like “baldy” and “chrome-dome,” and it makes Elisha mad—so mad, in fact, that Elisha turns to these boys and he curses them. And right away two bears coming charging out of the woods, and Scripture tells us that these two bears “maul” 42 of the boys. Now, what exactly “maul” means, we don’t know—it could mean “rough them up,” or it could mean worse. We’re not sure.

But that’s where the story ends. Some boys make fun of Elisha’s bald head; he curses them; and two bears come out of the woods and rough them up. My friends, it doesn’t matter what church you belong to, or what your view of the Bible is, that is a weird, weird story. It may not be as strange as a bear driving a car, but it comes close.

As weird as a Bible story about bears may be, however, the bears aren't the real stars of the story, are they? No, the really interesting character is that balding prophet Elisha.

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(Please display graphic file, "Rembrandt Elisha 2")



Because Elisha, during the course of the six verses that make up our Scripture reading today, undergoes one of the quickest transformations of any character in the Bible. In the last few verses, the ones we've talked about already, he seems very vindictive and harsh, doesn't he? After all, he summons two bears to rough up 42 boys just for making fun of his bald head.

But at the beginning of our Bible reading today—at the beginning—Elisha seems almost like a completely different person! At the start of our Scripture reading, as you may recall, the residents of another city—Jericho—come out to Elisha and tell them that their water supply is bad. People were getting sick and dying from drinking it.

And right away Elisha springs into action to try to make the water better. The Bible tells us that he takes a bowl of salt, and that he throws the salt onto the spring of water, and that God uses that act to make the water clean. And verse 22 tells us that the water has been wholesome and clean to this very day.

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(Please display graphic file, "Two Elishas")



It's almost as if we have these two Elishas in just six short verses. In verses 19 through 22, there is the Elisha who is this great force for healing in the name of the Lord; and then, in verses 23 through 24, there is the Elisha who summons the bears and brings about all this mayhem and hurt. And the question is:

"Which is the real Elisha? Will the real Elisha please stand up?"

It's almost as if Elisha is trying to figure out who he is in this passage and what kind of spirit is living in him: is it the Spirit *of* God, or is it a spirit that he projects *on* God? In a way, that's the real dilemma of our Scripture reading today: what manner of spirit is at work in Elisha?

It's the same kind of dilemma that Jesus' own disciples faced one day, about 900 years after Elisha.

Media Event

(Please display the following text:)

Luke 9:51-55

It's a story that comes to us from the ninth chapter of Luke, in the New Testament.

This story from Luke actually has a lot of similarities to today's Scripture reading about Elisha and the bears, except this second passage has a very different kind of ending: the story in Luke begins as Jesus and his disciples

approach a village of the Samaritans. And just like the residents of Bethel rejected Elisha in today's reading, the residents of this Samaritan village reject Jesus too. They make it perfectly clear that Jesus was not welcome there.

Well, this makes two of Jesus' disciples—James and John—really mad, so they decide that they are going to make the residents of this Samaritan village pay for being so unwelcoming. They're going to teach them a lesson, just like Elisha did. Only...instead of summoning bears...the disciples want to call down fire from heaven to burn the whole village up. It's actually an idea they got from the Bible: back in the first chapter of 2 Kings, another prophet—Elijah (not Elisha)—did precisely that: he summoned fire from heaven to burn up his enemies. And it happened!

So the disciples just want to be like Elijah when they come up to Jesus and ask him, "Hey Jesus! May we please summon fire from heaven to burn this village up, since they were so mean to us...just like Elijah did? Can we, Jesus, please?" Again, it's very similar to the Elisha story up to this point: there is this desire to punish those who have treated them wrongly.

But the similarities between the stories end there. Because when the disciples ask Jesus if they can summon fire to burn down the village and teach these rude people a lesson, Jesus says, "no." "No," Jesus tells them, and then he adds—in some translations of the Bible—"you do not know what manner of Spirit you are of." "No, Jesus says, "you do not know what manner of Spirit you are of."

In other words, when Jesus' own disciples had to face the same dilemma that Elisha had to face—when they had to decide between a spirit of healing and a spirit of hurt—Jesus was there to tell them in no uncertain terms that a spirit of hurt and vengeance and hate is not the spirit that comes from God. Despite what the story of Elijah summoning fire to burn up his enemies may seem to imply, Jesus says—in not so many words—that the Spirit of God heals and builds up; the Spirit does not destroy and tear down.

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(Please display graphic file, "Bizarre Bible")



And, of course, we still face the same dilemma between building up or tearing down today. That became really apparent in preparing for this sermon as I read what different people had to say about this story of Elisha and the bears. I actually found very few scholarly books written about our story today ...but all sorts of people on the Internet just love to talk about this passage.

On the one hand, there were some people who used it as an argument against faith. They said that a loving God would never send bears to attack children, and therefore this story is a lie, and the Bible is a lie, and God is a lie.

And then, on the other hand, there were different people who used this story to vigorously defend their faith. That said that the 42 youth must have deserved it somehow—that they must have been thugs who were terrorizing the village. And we just need to trust God to believe it.

And frankly, the more I read people's reactions to this story about Elisha and the bears—from both sides of the debate—the more I just became depressed. Because truthfully, I really don't buy either argument. On the one hand, I have a hard time believing that the loving God I know in Jesus Christ would really send out two bears to rough up 42 kids for making fun of a bald guy—and I say that as a bald guy in training. I suspect all of us would have questions and concerns about a story like that.

And yet, I also don't really feel like it's unfaithful to God to say that we have those questions, since Jesus himself says as much in that passage from the 9th Chapter of Luke—when he reinterprets and reframes the story of Elijah calling down fire from heaven. “The Spirit of God is not about destruction,” Jesus essentially tells his disciples—and us. “The Spirit of God is about healing.”

You see, it is precisely because of other passages in the Bible like that 9th Chapter of Luke that we do not have to throw out our faith in God, even if we have questions or concerns about some of the more bizarre stories of the Bible. Because if even Jesus could raise questions about our stories of faith, and still not lose his belief and trust in God, then we can too. And...we can still hold onto our belief and trust in God without having to tear down or disparage other people who have questions about passages like the one before us today.

In other words, it is OK to have questions and struggles about faith, and about the Bible, and about God. And we can have those questions and struggles without having to give up our trust in God, or our love for the Bible. Jesus himself

proved that: nobody trusted God more or loved Scripture more than Jesus, and yet...when his disciples thought it was OK to take out their revenge on their enemies because someone else in the Bible did so...Jesus stopped them and said no. "No," Jesus said, "it is not OK.

The danger comes when get caught in that dualistic-kind of thinking where we feel like we have always have to prove that one side is right, and the one side is wrong. The danger comes when we believe that we cannot have questions and faith in God at the same time. Because it is when we get caught up in the spirit of defending ourselves, and tearing down the other, that we become distracted from our real work as Christians, which is always to bear God's Spirit of healing and hope to a hurting world.

Media Event

(Please display graphic file, "Vehicle Collage")



Which is brings us to our special offering for today. You know, this vehicle may look like the one that was beat up by the bear at the beginning of the sermon, but it's not. No, this is Ezequiel Nhantumbo's company car. Ezequiel is well known to Pastor Mark and Pastor Chris, and many others in the church who have been in mission in Mozambique. Ezequiel is the representative of all of us Missouri United Methodists for the whole country of Mozambique. And in a nation where electricity is very limited, and there is no telephone or email in many

areas, this vehicle was the only way that Ezequiel could communicate with many of our United Methodist brothers and sisters in Christ throughout his country.

But as of last week, as you could probably guess from these photos, the vehicle is dead. And consequently, Ezequiel has to sit in his office every day with no way of doing his job—with no way of reaching out in the love of Jesus Christ, and letting folks in Mozambique know that there are people like you on the other side of the world who care about them and love them.

And so, we have this special offering today—in addition to our regular offering. We have the opportunity to donate some money to help Ezequiel purchase a used vehicle on behalf of all of us Missouri United Methodists for the work of Jesus Christ in Mozambique. If you feel so moved to give, please know that it will be a gift that makes a great difference, because it enables us Methodists here in Missouri to be united in ministry with our brothers and sisters in Mozambique, and it serves as a reminder to all of us that the Spirit of God is always a Spirit of healing, and grace, and building each other up in faith and hope and love.

Thanks be to God, Amen.