

September 17, 2019

Morning Prayers, Memorial Church of Harvard University

Title: *Elisha and the She-Bears*

A reading from Second Kings 2: 15, 23-25.

When the company of prophets who were at Jericho saw him at a distance, they declared, 'The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha.' They came to meet him and bowed to the ground before him.

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!' When he turned round 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. From there he went on to Mount Carmel, and then returned to Samaria.

Any Bible trivia game worth playing includes a question about Elisha siccing two mother bears on a group of children for teasing him about his baldness. And, any children's picture Bible worth buying for your niece or nephew will exclude this bit about Elisha summoning bears to maul children.

Medieval artists didn't shy away from illustrating this horrifying tale from scripture. A quick image search on Google will yield snapshots of ancient tapestries and other artworks, like the Nuremberg Bible, depicting the gruesome scene complete with a bald Elisha waving forth bear-like figures that closely resemble demodogs from the Netflix series, *Stranger Things*.

One of the challenges for me as a Christian is confronting these often ignored, un-preached-upon biblical stories. It's easy to focus on familiar stories that give us clear moral lessons or that neatly convey God's love. But if my faith calls me to take the Bible seriously, then I must also acknowledge the parts of the Bible that are offensive, violent, and scary.

This story of Elisha and the she bears, which in some Bibles falls under the subheading "Elisha Performs Miracles," occurs just after the prophet Elijah ascends on a fiery chariot into heaven, leaving his student, Elisha, to take on his role as prophet to Israel. Elijah trained Elisha in the way of prophesying; he literally passed on his mantle, having taught Elisha all he knew about speaking on behalf of God.

By way of Elijah, God made Elisha a prophet, full of the power and wisdom needed to proclaim God's word. Elisha was taught how to part rivers and cleanse waters. He was given power and authority.

We can relate to Elisha, in that many of us sitting in this university chapel and listening online are students. At Harvard we are given access to a breadth of knowledge; we are taught by some of the leading experts in literature, history, and science. Being a student not only means receiving education, it also entails access to power. Knowledge is a force to be reckoned with, particularly when it's associated

with institutions of immense wealth and influence, like this one. We can use knowledge to manipulate facts or tell the truth, to extract wealth or to ensure an honest wage, to sustain violence or to vision peace.

To borrow the Latin aphorism, “knowledge is power.” We are able to influence, act, and exert power simply by knowing things that others do not. Like Elisha, we, too, are accountable for using this power, and how we use it matters.

By the end of the narrative, Elisha’s deeds communicate the authority and power of a prophet. He is established as a prophetic force in Israel. When our courses are complete, when we leave the classroom, when our degrees are in hand, we will be positioned with authority. It’s unlikely that we’ll have learned how to send angry bears to attack our detractors, which is for the best. Education, a gift and a privilege, is what we will have and with it we can do many things for which we will be held accountable.

Let us pray:

O merciful Creator, you have so linked our lives one with another that all we do affects, for good or ill, all other lives. Enlighten those who teach and those who learn, that they might do it not for self alone, but for the common good. Amen.