

TRINITY 4  
2 Kings 2:15-25  
God Used Who to Do What?  
*Elisha*

I think that it would be fair to say that this is one of the more unusual accounts in the Bible. Perhaps it got your attention. It's not every day we hear about little kids getting mauled by bears for calling someone bald, is it? But is that what happened. Sure it is, you might think. But is it? Let's take a look at our first lesson today, run through what actually happened and why, and see if there is any application for us in this incident that the Spirit saw fit to have included as part of the Holy Scriptures.

First, what happened? You know what context is, don't you? If I were to call on you right now and have you tell the rest of the class, I mean, congregation, how would you describe it. Context is crucial not only in the study of Scripture but in daily life. You use it all the time. Someone is driving twenty miles under the speed limit in the left lane. Do you get upset? What if they had funeral flags on their cars and were on their way to the cemetery after losing a loved one? Would that change things? Someone is rummaging through your stuff. Would you get upset? What if there had been a tornado and they were trying to help you put your life back in order? Someone runs up and tackles you. Do you get upset? What if it is your toddler greeting you at the airport after a long week away on business? So let's look at the context.

Elijah, Elisha's mentor in the ministry, had just been taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire, as we read a few weeks ago, one of only two men in the Bible to go to heaven without dying. Who was to take Elijah's place? Elisha was. And it was a big task. Elijah was one of the most important prophets in the Old Testament. Jesus compared John the Baptist to Elijah. On the cross the Jews who mocked Jesus mistakenly thought that He was calling out to Elijah when He cried out, "*Eli, Eli,*" "*My God, My God.*" Elisha was to take Elijah's place, and even the other prophets seemed skeptical. Their first reaction was to suggest they send out some men to look for Elijah in case the chariot of fire had set him down somewhere instead of taking him to heaven. They said to Elisha, "*Behold now, there are with your servants fifty strong men. Please let them go and seek your master. It may be that the Spirit of the LORD has caught him up and cast him upon some mountain or into some valley.*" Imagine a new pastor came here to replace a pastor who had died and some members suggested to him that maybe the sainted pastor wasn't actually really dead and they should check him for breath one more time.

God called Elisha to serve as Elijah had, and yet few seemed willing to accept it. Some wanted the old prophet and some hadn't liked the old prophet either and definitely didn't want a new one. And in the middle of it all was Elisha. And God is good. And so God provided Elisha with an opportunity to demonstrate His divine calling as a prophet to replace a prophet who had worked miracles like Elijah had. Through Elisha God cleansed the noxious spring in the city there, so that whatever in it had caused death or miscarriages no longer did so, and not through a daily addition of salt, but through Elisha's onetime action.

That is the context. God had confirmed Elisha's calling, for the prophets and for the people of the city. Elisha was the man called to be the LORD's spokesman to God's people in Israel. And for that reason he deserved honor and respect. In fact, honor and respect for Elisha was a sign of honor and respect for the Word God called him to proclaim. There is a connection between how people receive God's servants who rightly preach and teach His Word and how they receive Christ Himself. As Jesus would assure the Apostles later in the New Testament, *"Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and the one who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward. And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward"* (Matthew 10:40-42).

Bethel didn't have a good track record religiously. It was the city where the wicked King Jeroboam had set up one of his idolatrous calves that he urged people to worship instead of travelling to the Southern Kingdom to the temple to worship the true God. He even declared to the people, "Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt." Could anything have been a louder echo of Israel's sin in the wilderness when they worshipped their golden calf that they'd compelled Aaron to fashion for them? And yet we don't read that the people of Bethel tore down the blasphemous idol in a rage. No, such idolatry became a lasting part of the religious life in Bethel.

Where were the small children who mocked Elisha from? They were from Bethel. That we know. But were they small children. Probably not. I know what some of you might be thinking, "But, pastor, the Bible says they were small children." The English translation says that, but not the Hebrew. And that is why it is important that we pay attention to translation issues and why we train pastors in Greek and Hebrew at Martin Luther College and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. The word used could mean anything from a young child to an unmarried young adult. This was probably a gang of hoodlums. And they had surrounded Elisha. And they outnumbered him at least forty-two to one. And they told him that he should, "Go up," which almost certainly was their way of saying that he should get lost like Elijah had when he was taken to heaven. They didn't want a prophet among them. They didn't want God's Word. And these young people hadn't become like this in a vacuum. They'd been raised this way. A disrespect for God's Word led to a disrespect for other people. Can you imagine? And even more, it even led to a disrespect for a prophet who had just worked a miracle and who was succeeding a prophet who had been miraculously taken to heaven in a stunning way.

What did they call Elisha? They called him *"Baldy."* Trust me when I tell you that no man likes to have his bald spots pointed out, let alone mocked. But was Elisha merely being vain when he cursed the youths? The truth is that we don't even know that Elisha was all that bald, or bald at all. In the Old Testament and ancient times calling a man bald was a way of saying that he was cursed by God and or shameful. You shaved your head when you mourned or when you were repentant. You shaved someone else's head as a judgment upon them. That is why God warned Israel in Isaiah 3:24, *"Instead of perfume*

***there will be rottenness; and instead of a belt, a rope; and instead of well-set hair, baldness; and instead of a rich robe, a skirt of sackcloth; and branding instead of beauty.***” You could call a man with a full head of hair bald and he would have gotten the point. These youths were calling the prophet called by God cursed by God.

So Elisha got back at them, didn't he? No, he didn't. Who sent the she-bears? The Lord did. Who'd a thunk, but their sin had consequences? Perhaps sometimes when we disregard God's will or disrespect His Word by ignoring or rejecting it in our daily lives and choices, maybe sometimes, just sometimes, the Lord will refuse to bless our decisions. But no, that would have to mean that we have a jealous God, a God who wants us for His own, a God who wants what is best for us, which is His will in the end. That couldn't be, could it?

So what happened to the boys? The bears killed them, right? Not necessarily. In fact, the word used could well mean that the bears gave them a good thrashing and sent them home with plenty of scars to serve as a reminder to their fellow thugs and to the citizens of Bethel of the seriousness of God's Word and mockery of it. There is nothing in the Hebrew word that would require us to think that the bears killed the youths.

So what do we learn from this? First, we have to pay attention to context. Things in Scripture did not happen in a vacuum anymore than things in our daily lives do. Second, we have to pay attention to what Scripture actually does and doesn't say, and we have to remember that when we read the Bible in English we are reading a translation. We'll talk more about translations throughout the fall, but hopefully we see here why such a concern is important. Third, we are reminded that we should be surprised when children grow up and neglect the Word if that is what their parents have trained them to do, by their actions if not by their Words. The parent who brings their child to a couple years of Catechism instruction but rarely if ever to worship is teaching their child who and what to worship, and it is not the true God. Fourth, we are reminded that when we personally neglect the Word, or outright disobey it, it will be reflected in our behavior and decisions, and the result will not be a closer relationship with the Lord or His blessing. No, He might not send she-bears, and praise God for His mercy, because we all would have our scars, wouldn't we? But He could use some hardship to remind us of our need for a right relationship with Him and that all that we have and are is a gift of His grace alone. Such hardships should drive us, not from His presence in the Sacraments and His promises in His Word, then, but rather back to them.

God is love, and in His love you have His Word still today, and you have men called to proclaim it to you rightly and faithfully in His church. Are they perfect? No. Might they have bald spots? Sure. Might the people you gather with have scars and sins they bear with them here? You betcha. But those are the people to whom God sends His Word and those are the people who do especially well to hear and heed it. God has sent you more than Elisha. He has sent you His Son, taken not to heaven in a chariot of fire, but descended from it to take upon Himself all the fiery hatred of the devil and the thrashing your sin deserved to spare you from it and bring you with Him, perhaps through death, or perhaps without it should He return first, to the Israel and Jerusalem above, the fulfillment of His Word so often blasphemed but never proven false. Amen.