

September 15, 2013
Weird Stories in the Bible

Boys, Bears and Baldness
2 Kings 2:23-25

Opening words: Today, I begin a new six part sermon series, *Weird Stories in the Bible*. Before I begin, I will admit two things. First, I will admit I have not selected these pieces of scripture. They were selected by the high school class, who assigned the job to one question-filled young man. Second, I will admit he did a wonderful job of selecting some weird pieces of scripture. In the next few weeks, we will look at these odd stories:

1. Noah's nudity
2. Enoch's eternity
3. Lot's incest
4. Ezekiel's bones
5. Hosea's wife

Today, we begin by looking at Elisha's curse. This story has been circulating around our young for some time now. It is a weird story that leads us to an excellent question. Would God send two bears out of the woods to maul forty-two teenagers? Perhaps this is a better question: What is the story of the teenager mauling bears trying to teach us? May God give you ears to hear this morning's scripture lesson, 2 Kings 2:23-25. I have called this message *Boys, Bears and Baldness*.

2 Kings 2:23-25 ²³ 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. "Get out of here, baldy!" they said. "Get out of here, baldy!" ²⁴ 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. ²⁵ And he went on to Mount Carmel and from there returned to Samaria.

Albert Einstein once said, "*Let everyone be respected as an individual and no man idolized.*" If you think you can remember that quote, say, "**Amen!**"

Several years ago, I found myself ninety miles northeast of Moscow. I was in the Russian city of Dmitrov. It is the home of the Renewal Orphanage, which is the home of approximately 120 handicapped orphans. We were there to offer them hope and remind them that they were loved by God. The days were filled with a variety of activities, but the evenings were the same. Every night as the children were going to bed, our little mission team would gather for devotions. Everyone was required to take a turn leading devotions. The professionals went first. The most uncomfortable went last. The very last person was a high school student from this church. I offered to help him and he agreed. I asked if he knew any scripture. He gave me an uncomfortable look and said, "Well, I know one piece of scripture but I don't think it applies." I asked, "What is the scripture?" He replied, "It comes from Second Kings and it talks about 42 teenagers being eaten by bears." I said, "That sounds perfect. Let's do it."

Can I be honest with you? His devotion was the best devotion on the trip. I don't remember anyone else's devotion on that trip, but I do remember his. That weird piece of scripture challenged me and jolted me out of a spiritual funk. I figured, if I could preach on that scripture, then I could preach on any scripture. We are looking at that weird story today.

The main character in this weird story is Elisha. Our New Testament minds know very little about Old Testament characters. We have to ask the question: Who is Elisha? He was a prophet of God to the northern kingdom of Israel for sixty years. (892-832 BC) He was respected by many people in his world. His name can even be found in both the Quran and the sacred writings of the Baha'i faith. Yet, he was not respected by everyone. According to the text, he is traveling to Bethel, the royal cult center of the northern kings. Word spread of his journey and a group of youth come out to meet him. Their goal is not to welcome him; their goal is to disrespect him. Listen to what I am about to say. Disrespect in the Bible will not be tolerated. I have said it a million times. Everyone deserves to be treated with dignity and respect, even you. For their disrespect, they youth receive the ultimate punishment, death. Verse 24 says, "*Then two bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the youth.*" I asked myself two questions about this text from the very beginning. First, if you saw forty-one of your friends being mauled by two bears, why would you stay to be number forty-two? Second, why is this story in the Bible? What is it trying to teach us? I can't answer the first question, but I can the second. The issue at the very bottom of this story is authority. This story has nothing to do with juvenile delinquency. The story has nothing to do respecting wildlife. This story has nothing to do baldness. (However, 85% of all American men have some signs of baldness by the time they 50 years old.) This weird story has everything to do with respecting authority. How much respect do you offer the authority figures in your life? Everyone deserves to be treated with dignity and respect.

Today, we are going to look at the four different kinds of authority you find in your life. In America, we celebrate our freedom, but that does not mean authority does not exist. Think of the four different kinds of authority groups you must submit to everyday. First, there is **civil authority**. Second, there is **professional authority**. Third, there is **personal authority**. Fourth and finally, there is **divine authority**. You may not agree with all four of these all the time, but each one deserves to be treated with respect all the time. How much respect do you offer these authority figures? If you are ready to begin, say, "**Amen!**"

Civil Authority

Unless, you have been living in a cave the past few days, you know President Obama addressed the nation the other night. The issue was the chemical weapons in Syria. Chemical weapons were used freely during the Great War, but the international community banned them years ago. The reason is simple. They can't be controlled. Innocent people are killed. According to the President, there is proof the Syria government gassed their own people. He wants permission to use military force to punish the use of such weapons. Everyone is hoping and praying that a diplomatic

solution can be found. It appears a peaceful solution has been found. No one wants use military force. How do you feel about a military strike in Syria? The country is debating this issue. One of the things that make America great is our ability to debate such topics. We can disagree with our government, and yet still respect our government. Romans 13:1 says, *"Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God."*

The first kind of authority is civil authority. What is civil authority? It is the apparatus of the state that enforces law. You can't just do what you want in America. Without laws, there would be anarchy. The federal, state and local authorities make you accountable. You condo association makes you accountable, so don't try to paint your front door purple. Answer these next two questions: Do you trust your elected officials? Do you think you could do a better job than our elected officials? This is America! Maybe you should run for office? How much respect do you give your civil authority? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Professional Authority

Several years ago, I preached a sermon series called *Christianity and World Religions*. The core of the sermon series came from Church of the Resurrection's Adam Hamilton. The goal was not to demote other world religions. The goal was to understand and appreciate other world religions. However, I began that sermon series by taking a strong stand for Christianity. You are in a Christian church, so you should expect some basic Christian theology. On that week, I told everyone we are saved by grace and by grace alone. I told everyone Jesus was our only hope of salvation. I am a Christian preacher, so I said it clearly: the other world religions are interesting, but they are not going to save your soul. The final destination of all other world religions is hell. Most of the people accepted that fact. One fellow disagreed and wrote me an ugly email. He said in some colorful language that I am one of the reasons are world is so fractured. According to him, my kind of thinking is creating religious tension in the world today.

The second kind of authority is professional authority. What is professional authority? It is the kind of authority that comes from being an expert. This kind of authority comes from a certain expertise. How many experts have you worked with in your life? How many people have you paid to do something you can't do? Has anyone here ever hired a lawyer? Has anyone here visited a doctor? Has anyone one here ever gone to a dentist or sent their children to school? Have you ever hired someone to remodel your kitchen or your bathroom? I get paid twice a month by the church because I know something about the divine truth. Do you trust the professionals in your life? Do you think you could do a better job? This is America! Maybe you should go back to school or learn a trade? How much do you respect your professionals? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Personal Authority

In Ephesians 5:21-25, Paul says these words:

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her

That is a great piece of scripture because it is written with such balance. The yoke is equally burdened. Paul does not expect the husband to do more than the wife. He does not expect the wife to do more than the husband. The unwritten word in this passage is respect.

The third kind of authority is personal authority. What is personal authority? It is the kind of authority you give to the individuals that are closest to you. Do you respect everyone who sits around your dinner table? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"** The fourth and final authority is divine authority.

Divine Authority

Let's look at the scripture one more time. If you have forgotten, we are in the second chapter of Second Kings. Elisha is traveling along the road when a large group of boys come out of town to harass him. This passage sounds simple, but it is hard to explain in a few seconds. So let me just say four things. First, the Hebrew word for 'boys' is hard to translate. The boys are not children. They more like young men. That correction turns the happy-go-lucky boys into an ugly gang. Second, the office of prophet was highly respected. He was actually God's representative and not just another preacher. Third, their words are more menacing than juvenile. The boys say twice, *get out of here, baldy*. The Revised Standard Version says it more clearly. It says, "Get up, you baldhead!" They are mocking God's representative's appearance and message. Elisha was the one who promoted Elijah's resurrection. The story takes on a sinister tone if you put these pieces together. The story is not about happy-go-lucky boys who are having fun at an old man's expense. The story is about a complete disrespect of divine authority. The point is made when forty-two of the young men are mauled by the bear. Disrespect of divine authority will not be tolerated. This is my question for you today. Do you have respect for divine authority? Do you think you could do a better job at being God?

On May 20, 1987, a sad story came out of the Prospect Park Zoo in Brooklyn, New York City. Hours after the zoo had closed, three boys broke in and decided to climb a fence that housed the polar bears. Their adventure ended when one of the boys was caught by one the bears. The boy was eleven years old. It took the police twenty shots to kill the bears so the boy's lifeless body could be liberated. I hate to say this, but there is no happy ending to this story. The only thing left is the questions. Why would young boys do such a foolish thing? Why would young boys not respect such a powerful animal? Perhaps, it is for the same reason we don't respect God? Do you respect divine authority?

Will you pray with me?