

March 3, 2021
Homily Manuscript

2 Kings 2:1-2,7-15,19-25

New International Version

¹ When the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. ² Elijah said to Elisha, “Stay here; the Lord has sent me to Bethel.”

But Elisha said, “As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you.” So they went down to Bethel...

⁷ Fifty men from the company of the prophets went and stood at a distance, facing the place where Elijah and Elisha had stopped at the Jordan. ⁸ Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water with it. The water divided to the right and to the left, and the two of them crossed over on dry ground.

⁹ When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, “Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?”

“Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit,” Elisha replied.

¹⁰ “You have asked a difficult thing,” Elijah said, “yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours—otherwise, it will not.”

¹¹ As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. ¹² Elisha saw this and cried out, “My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!” And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his garment and tore it in two.

¹³ Elisha then picked up Elijah’s cloak that had fallen from him and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. ¹⁴ He took the cloak that had fallen from Elijah

and struck the water with it. “Where now is the Lord, the God of Elijah?” he asked. When he struck the water, it divided to the right and to the left, and he crossed over.

¹⁵ The company of the prophets from Jericho, who were watching, said, “The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha.” And they went to meet him and bowed to the ground before him...

¹⁹ The people of the city said to Elisha, “Look, our lord, this town is well situated, as you can see, but the water is bad and the land is unproductive.”

²⁰ “Bring me a new bowl,” he said, “and put salt in it.” So they brought it to him.

²¹ Then he went out to the spring and threw the salt into it, saying, “This is what the Lord says: ‘I have healed this water. Never again will it cause death or make the land unproductive.’” ²² And the water has remained pure to this day, according to the word Elisha had spoken.

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.

Elijah and the Cursed Lads

Tonight, we continue our series of crowd-sourced homily topics by going in a very different direction from last week. It concerns a few verses from the Old Testament found at the end of our reading from Second Kings when the prophet Elisha is walking along the road toward Bethel when a crowd of boys came out of the town and teased him, making fun of Elisha’s baldness. But then Elisha responds by calling a curse down on them in the name of the Lord and two bears immediately came out of the woods and *mauled* forty-two of the boys to death! And I can only surmise that this brief episode was suggested because of the way it shocks the conscience. There is a reason it was featured in the satirical book “Awkward Bible Stories”, which goes by the tagline, “Don’t blame me, it’s in the Bible.” But in all seriousness, it does seem like a bit of an overreaction for Elisha to use his authority to precipitate the massacre of these boys simply for teasing him about his bald head, or for any reason. It doesn’t quite feel like the punishment fits the crime, as it were.

So what is going on here? And is it possible to glean anything good or helpful for our own lives from this bizarre and violent story? Well, let’s begin with what’s going on. I had Barbara begin our lesson at the start of chapter 2 to give us some important context, because what is most significant about this chapter - chapter 2 of Second Kings - is it is when the Prophet Elijah passes his mantle on to the prophet Elisha in dramatic fashion.

Now, I will try my best to enunciate clearly so you can differentiate between when I'm saying "Elijah" and "Elisha". But as many of you remember from when we last looked at Elijah just three Sundays ago, Elijah was the first of a long line of prophets God began to send about a thousand years before Christ and he was in many ways he was the greatest in terms of the miraculous signs he performed. Although, when we caught up with him three weeks ago in 1 Kings 19, you'll remember that we found Elijah Hungry, Angry, Lonely, & Tired - H.A.L.T. And we saw God get Elijah fed and some rest, he listened to Elijah's complaint and gave Elijah 3 things to do. He told Elijah to go and anoint two kings - one over Syria and Israel - and *also* to anoint Elisha as the prophet to succeed him.

So Elijah did. In fact, we're told that the way he signified Elisha would succeed him is by casting the cloak around him.¹ This cloak, or mantle, as its traditionally been translated was apparently what marked him as a prophet.

But having made Elisha his successor, when our passage tonight opens it's time for Elijah to go, and his departure would happen in dramatic fashion. Verse 1 informs us that "the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind" (v1). So, in verse 7 Elijah heads across the Jordan River with Elisha in tow; he parts the waters like Moses, so they can cross on dry ground; and after Elisha asks for a double portion of God's Spirit,² "suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire" appear in verse 11 and "separate the two of them". Now, seemingly without fail, this episode is depicted in art and icons as Elijah riding on the chariot into heaven - looking like Santa Claus with reindeer pulling his sleigh - but Walter Brueggemann notes that this is not what the text actually says. Rather, it describes the chariot as a sort of angelic means of separating³ Elijah from Elisha as he is taken up into heaven in a whirlwind.

But a connection you may or may not have made is that this Ascension of Elijah into heaven prefigures our Lord Jesus' ascension into heaven forty days after *he* rose from the dead. This connection was notably made among the Church Fathers by Venerable Bede, an 8th century monk from England, who notes that just as when Elijah and Elisha are conversing, Elijah is suddenly snatched into heaven, "the Lord (Jesus) too was suddenly taken up as he was speaking with his apostles and as they were looking on." At the end of his gospel, Luke describes Jesus' ascension like this,

50 And Jesus led them (his apostles) out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. 51 While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven.

Then, in the book of Acts, Luke provides more detail: that Jesus was "lifted up" as a cloud took him from their sight (v9). And so, what I want you to see is how Elijah's passing of his mantle onto Elisha prefigures Jesus' passing of his mantle onto upon us - his Church - as He commissioned us through His apostles to extend the ministry of his salvation to others and He gave us the gift of His Spirit to carry that out.

Before Jesus ascends He promises His apostles that God would send His Holy spirit upon them (v8). And, of course, this happens ten days later at the Feast of Pentecost and is signified by tongues of fire alighting above the heads of the Apostles and the capacity to speak in foreign tongues. And this parallels the request Elisha made before Elijah ascended for a double portion of his Spirit.

So once Elijah is gone, Elisha's first order of business is to verify for himself that he received God's Spirit from Elijah and to demonstrate his legitimacy as Elijah's successor. So in verse 13, he picks up Elijah's cloak - his mantle symbolizing the spirit of prophecy and power - and returns immediately to the bank of the Jordan River, strikes the water with his cloak just as Elijah had, and the water divided to the right and to the left so he could cross back over, just like it had for Elijah. And this causes the company of prophets who were watching to affirm that the spirit of Elijah was indeed upon him (15). #

So this company of fifty prophets knows Elisha is legit. But Elisha needs to establish credibility with the people of Israel that he is God's prophet. Remember, Elijah had been the first prophet, the only one they'd ever know. But upon returning to Jericho in verse 19 Elijah is given an opportunity to prove himself. Apparently, in Jericho they had a water problem. The people of the city say to Elisha, "Look, our lord, this town is well situated, as you can see, but the water is bad and the land is unproductive." And so Elisha goes out to the spring - the city's water source - and throws salt in it. This use of salt implies a belief that the water had been cursed. And speaking on behalf of the Lord, Elisha says, "I have healed this water. Never again will it cause death or make the land unproductive." And what he said came true. I think Flint, Michigan could use an Elisha right about now. :)

¹ 1 Kg 19:19 So Elijah went from there and found Elisha son of Shaphat. He was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen, and he himself was driving the twelfth pair. Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him.

² meaning twice as much as any other prophet would receive, like the inheritance of a firstborn son

³ One upon earth, one in heaven

So Elisha has demonstrated his authority as a prophet in a positive way - that he has the power to bless and to reverse curses - but the role of a prophet was not only to bless, but to be an instrument of God's judgment. And this brings us - finally - to our incident with the bears. You see, while Elisha might've convinced those in the city of Jericho that he was the real deal, apparently these boys from Bethel hadn't gotten the memo. Now, to us their taunt of Elisha for being bald may seem like merely superficial teasing, but it takes on more significance when we know that Elijah - his predecessor - was known for being quite hairy.⁴ So really, what seems merely like an immature taunt was really these boys' way of saying Elisha could not *possibly* be as great & powerful prophet as Elijah was. But, needless to say, these boys are quickly disabused of their belief that it takes a full head of hair to be the Lord's prophet, after Elisha turns around and calls a curse down on them in the name of the Lord. And no sooner than Elisha calls down this curse do two bears race out and maul 42 of the boys! Now, today there are no longer bears in Israel, but in those days, the species known as the Syrian brown bear was still present there.⁵ But as gruesome and awful a scene as this must've been, I'm guessing that *after this incident* word spread pretty quickly that Elisha wasn't to be trifled with.

What Elisha does here actually reminds me of something I used to do when I was a High School math teacher. If the kids failed a test, I'd sick the bears on them - No! :) No, but my first two years at the beginning of the school year I would pick what I called my sacrificial lamb. Because I didn't want to have to deal with behavior problems, so the first day or two of the year the first student to do something a little bit out of line, I would immediately give them a detention - punishment a lot greater than the crime. And all the other students took note - don't mess with Roberts - and then i would loosen up as the year went along rather than waiting for things to get out of control and then having to tighten down.

So Elisha's miraculous works gave him credibility as a legitimate prophet. Although he would never be as great Elijah, Elisha demonstrates that he has the same spirit (of God) and people subsequently receive him as God's prophet. That is what's going on in this passage, and what purpose the bear massacre serves.

And yet, if this explanation isn't entirely satisfying - if it still seems to you like an awful story - I think that's good. Because while Elijah's passing of his mantle onto Elisha prefigures Jesus' passing of his mantle onto us, there are some significant ways that the life and teaching and death and resurrection of Jesus moved us *beyond* the way those Old Testament prophets operated.

So even though God proved that Elisha had the Spirit of Elijah by healing the water of Jericho, Jesus taught us not to seek signs. For example, in Matthew 12 some Pharisees tell Jesus they want to see a sign from him, but he says he will only give them the sign of Jonah - referring to his death and resurrection.⁶ And while God executed judgement upon Elisha's teenage detractors through bears, Jesus taught, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me" (Mt 5:11). And St. Paul taught that we should "14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse." #

So while Elijah and Elisha may have gained credibility as representatives of God by miraculous signs of blessing or judgment that caused people be either in awe or terrified, in Jesus' teaching and ultimately His sacrifice, we find him moving us beyond seeking to impact people through impressing them or coercing them - through exercises of power. As the Apostle Paul famously summarized,

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing... (But) 4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is

⁴ The reference to Elijah's hairiness is 2 Kg 1:8. While some translations infer this verse to mean that Elijah's cloak/mantle was made of hair (NIV, ESV), the Herew makes no mention of his cloak. Therefore, translations like the NLT, NASB, & KJV are likely correct that 1:8 is communicating that Elijah was hairy (The Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament).

⁵ Now the Syrian bear is only in Iraq, Iran, and Turkey.

⁶ ³⁸ Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from you."

³⁹ He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰ For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. ⁴¹ The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here."

not proud. 5 It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

8 Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away...

13 And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.⁷

“Love never fails.” The challenge for us is to really believe that. Rather than choosing power moves in our relationships and challenges, which is the way of the world around us and which I certainly did as a math teacher, to choose instead to follow Jesus in the path of love - not passivity or without boundaries - but love, and to really believe it is the better path.

So thanks be to God our exemplar is not Elisha, it is Christ. While Elisha recognized that his miraculous works were what would legitimize him as God’s representative in the eyes of people, under the New Covenant in Jesus we’re taught that it is the fruit of the spirit that legitimizes *us* as representatives of God. And “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control.⁸ And this fruit is borne in our lives through practicing repentance and learning to surrender to God’s spirit in us - to daily throw off our sinful, false selves that are all about power moves and manipulations. It is the bearing of these fruits of love, that will determine the quality and impact of our witness and the extent that our lives are a glory to God.

Amen.

⁷ 1 Corinthians 13

⁸ Galatians 5: 22 *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. 24 Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25 Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*