

Augustana College
Chapel of Reconciliation

The Ambiguity of Divine Power and Presence: Elisha and the Bears

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No leftover Halloween prank, the story of Elisha and the bears is one of the most disturbing stories in the Bible. It seems more like an episode of "Family Guy" rather than a story from the Bible. Consider the dynamics of the plot: In the name of the Lord, the prophet Elisha curses 42 boys who have disrespected him. The boys are then mauled by two bears. What's more, no consequences follow.

What should we should do with this story which shocks many interpreters into silence. Although shocked silence is an understandable reaction, the ethical demands of the story suggest that continuing silence is not a viable option.

It is not an option because we are taught that sinful acts, known and unknown, are followed by confession. We are taught to acknowledge the things that we have done and the things that we have failed to do. After confession, absolution is granted. Forgiveness then frees us to move on with our lives. This is what we are taught to believe. Confession and forgiveness are

routinely a part of our worship services as it just was this morning. This is what I have been calling "the story."

However, as we have noted throughout this sermon series, there are stories, and then there are stories. There are dominant stories, and there are subversive stories; there are normative stories, and there are stories with No Entry signs on them; there are authorized stories, and there are impossible stories; there are stories, and there are counter-stories. As novelist Salman Rushdie reminds us, these subversive, impossible counter-stories quarantined with No Entry signs can "change our lives and our minds as often as the authorized versions, the stories we are expected to trust, upon which we are asked, or told, to build our judgments, and our lives."

The story of Elisha, the 42 children, and the two bears is the quintessential subversive, counter-story cordoned off by a "No Entry" sign. Embedded in the larger narrative of the biblical book of II Kings, it is not just a subversive counter-story; it is a confessing, counter-story. How then can this story change our lives and our minds? Scholars have attempted to answer this question by focusing varying degrees of attention on the children, Elisha, God, and even Jesus.

Several scholars suggest that the story functions as a demonstration and legitimization of the prophet's divine power and authority through the performance of miraculous deeds.

Other scholars argue that such demonstrations of power suggest that the figure of the prophet commands, even demands, respect. One misguided scholar focuses on the disrespectful behavior of the children and goes so far as to conclude: "Those juvenile delinquents got exactly what they deserved!" Other interpreters have also focused on the children, though less stridently, suggesting that the purpose of the story is to inculcate the lesson that children should respect their elders.

By focusing on the behavior of the children, these approaches still avoid the ethical dilemma caused by Elsiha's use (or misuse) of divine power to hurt, not heal. Granted divine power is used to invoke judgment, but in this instance it is used on children and the consequences seem much greater than the crime.

Another scholar appropriately concludes that "most interpretations of this passage are primarily 'spin control'" intended to protect the reputation of God. Since Elisha's curse is not his own words but words spoken "in God's name," this scholar suggests that God "in some way, lent his approval and support to Elisha's rage, and was so angry himself that he had the offending children killed, horribly." This approach does, in fact, not protect God or even "spin" God. We are, however, left with an "abusive" or even "dangerous" God. This is, perhaps, worse than an abusive or dangerous prophet.

When all else fails, interpreters invoke Jesus. For example, an annotation to the story of the Elisha and the bears in the old Oxford Annotated Bible suggests that the stories of Jesus welcoming children "provide a better guide to biblical teaching on how to treat children." However, deflecting attention away from Elisha by jumping to Jesus as a more adequate model of adult-child interaction does not absolve the contentious prophet or explain his use of divine power.

In order to better understand Elisha's possession and use of divine power, let us backtrack to the beginning of the story. The Elisha stories properly begin with an account of the Elisha's succession to his mentor the prophet Elijah (II Kings 2:9-15). In this story Elisha requests and receives a double share of Elijah's divine spirit. This transfer of divine power is confirmed by the next two stories. In the first (II Kings 2:19-22) Elisha responds favorably to a request from the citizens of Jericho to purify their water supply. Throwing in salt, he announces, "Thus says the Lord . . . I have made this water wholesome." Thus he appears miraculously to decontaminate the water.

This story of a positive, healing use of his divine power is then paired with the story of his Bethel encounter with individuals identified by the narrator as "some small boys." The provocation of the prophet's actions is not a request for

help but an admittedly disrespectful demand to leave. These diminutive antagonists challenge him twice to "Go away." They also add the epithet "baldhead." Whether it was the demand to leave the area or the taunting, the narrator informs us that they get the prophet's attention who "when . . . he saw them, cursed them in the name of the Lord." Anger, not reason, human proclivity, not divine purpose, govern the prophet's use of his newly acquired divine power.

In both stories, the prophet invokes God's name. However, in the second, two she-bears replace salt as the miraculous implementing agent with significantly different results. Instead of a helpful blessing which restores a spring to purity, a harmful curse results in the "mauling" of forty-two boys. The episode then abruptly concludes as it began with a note about the prophet's itinerary.

These two stories suggest that divine power has indeed been transferred from Elijah to Elisha. However, Elisha's use of this divine power is not always beneficial.

What then can we learn from the confessing, counter-story of Elisha and the bears? The story implies that the release of divine power into the world yields uncertain results. When divine power is unleashed, the result can be life-giving, life-threatening, or both depending on the inclination, disposition, and even emotional stability of its possessor. As such, divine

intent does not govern and can not control its use in the world. Once God confers power to humans, God cannot take it back or even control its use. The gift is irrevocable, and hence even dangerous.

Stories illustrating the hazards of possession by the spirit of God continue in the New Testament as well. For example, at the beginning of Mark when the heavens are "being torn open" and the spirit descends "into" Jesus, New Testament scholar Don Juel argues that divine protection is gone and "now God is among us, on the loose." As such this divine intrusion into the world is "dangerous."

Later in Mark a hungry Jesus, finding "nothing but leaves" on a fig tree curses it saying: "May no one ever eat fruit from you again (Mark 11:14)." The next day Peter observes: "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered (Mark 11:20)." Prior to this revelation, the narrator reveals that Jesus curses the fig tree even though "it was not the season for figs (Mark 11:14)." The cursing of the fig tree is thus a reflection of Jesus' anger. Jesus, however, subsequently instructs his disciples on the lesson to be drawn from this incident: "Have faith in God [W]hatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." Although this moralizing deflects attention from Jesus' use of power to curse the fig tree, it also, perhaps inadvertently, confirms the

notion that how divine power is used reflects the emotional state of the person using it and that as such divine power can be invoked for a variety of purposes.

This motif is developed further in the apocryphal infancy Gospel of Thomas. There a young Jesus invokes a similar curse upon the son of Annas who the narrator tells us "scattered" with a willow branch "the waters that Jesus had collected." An "annoyed" Jesus then said to him: "You wicked, irreverent, and stupid boy! Were the pools of water hurting you?" These epithets are followed by the curse: "Now you'll be dried out like a tree and won't produce leaves, roots, or fruit!" The narrator then confirms the efficacy of the curse: "That child instantly withered up." On another occasion the young Jesus is "jostled" by a running child. An "upset" Jesus responds: "you won't finish your journey!" Again the narrator confirms the efficacy of the pronouncement: "At once the child fell down and died." Apocryphal though these stories may be, they nonetheless pick up on motifs portrayed in the story of Elisha.

These subversive, yet confessing, counter stories, these impossible stories fenced off with interpretive No Entry signs suggest that the presence of God in the world through human possession by the divine spirit does not guarantee a happy ending. Divine power loose in the world is at best ambiguous. Its use can just as easily hurt as heal. Which one appears

contingent upon an appropriate human response, a response which often reflects the emotional state of its user. Hence, the exercise of divine power is limited by its human implementation, an implementation which frequently misuses human potential and abuses divine power. Accordingly, the deity can influence but not command human actions; God may or may not punish transgressions, but God does not seem able or willing to prevent them. Whether these constraints to divine authority are inherent or self-imposed is beyond the purview of this sermon, if not the parameters of the biblical literature. What this analysis emphasizes, though, is that divine power appears to be limited in its effectiveness by actions resulting from its misappropriation by human beings. Divine presence seems only to confer potential; it does not confirm that appropriate, responsible use of this potential is an inevitable result. Thus divine power and authority may be used both to help and hurt, to heal and harm.

Elisha (and seemingly even Jesus) is not always predisposed to use his divine power in accord with divine purpose. Divine power present in the human world is raw power, and its effect depends upon the, at times, irrational or even emotional, inclinations of those who wield it. In order to accomplish the divine purpose intended through the bestowal of this power on

humans, God must role the dice and except both the use and abuse of this power.

Amen, for now. I say Amen, for now, because once again I would like to continue the discussion of confessing, counter-stories by inviting you to a community discussion on Thursday at 10 o'clock in the 3 in 1 room in the Commons Building. I would like to hear your ideas about the counter-story of Elisha and the bears. You and anyone else you know is welcome. Again treats will be available. Please come and partake of both the treats and the conversation which will follow. So until then: Amen, for now.

MORNING WORSHIP

Monday, November 12

Prelude

“Toccatà in C Major”

J.S. Bach
Tim Gabriel, Organ

Welcome/announcements

Invocation

Order for Confession and Forgiveness

ELW p. 116

Prayer

God of justice, stir the words of your prophets in new and surprising ways until your world is at peace. Amen.

Hymn *“Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life”*

ELW#719, vv. 1-4

Scripture

II Kings 2: 23-25

Sermon

Rich Bowman, Religion

“The Ambiguity of Divine Power and Presence: Elisha & the bears”

Hymn

“The Church of Christ, in Every Age”

ELW #729

Lord’s Prayer

Benediction

Postlude

“Rejoice, Ye Pure in Heart”

Robert Hobby

CAMPUS MINISTRY ANNOUNCEMENTS

GUATEMALAN GIFT MARKET - Need some great Christmas gift ideas. Come to the Guatemalan Gift Market in the Commons, by the cafeteria entrance. The market will be held on **Wednesday and Thursday, Nov. 14th and 15th, from 11:00 am - 3:00 pm.** The organization that sponsors this market is called 'Sharing the Dream'. Guatemalan Gifts sells crafts that Guatemalan women and families have made at fair trade pricing. 93% of the money goes back to these families to help pay education costs and benefit the whole family.

SERVICE LEARNING TO NEW YORK CITY - Everyone is invited to participate in a service learning trip to Manhattan during interim break. Jan. 31 - Feb. 6th. Primary work is in two soup kitchens; public health involvement for nurses and others who are interested is being explored.

Vickie Reiff and Darcy Haas are co-leading the adventure. Questions, call chapel office-5403.

The deadline for deposits for the New York trip is Nov. 19th

CHAPEL CALENDAR

Tuesday (13th)	Koinonia, 10 am
Wednesday (14th)	Holy Communion, 10 am - Reli. 257 Class - Guatemalan Gift Market - Commons by the cafeteria entrance
Thursday (15 th)	Guatemalan Gift Market - Commons by the cafeteria entrance
Friday (16 th)	Worship, 10 am - Ashley Mercer, Sr. Spkr.
Sunday (18 th)	Worship, 11 am - Pr. Paul
Monday (19 th)	Hymn Sing, 10 am.