

A Quick Trip To the Maul
2 Kings 2:19-25
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
July 22, 2007
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Do you remember the last time you started a new job? Do you remember being nervous, wanting to impress your boss and fit in with your co-workers? Do you remember wanting to do well? Have you ever been the person who was hired and had to follow an employee who was very effective and very powerful and very loved?

I want you to remember that, and now imagine that you've been hired by the Founder of a large company, a personality that was huge, but that has been largely absent from the day to day operations for a number of years. You show up for your first day on the job, and discover that most of your co-workers don't really care for the welfare of the company and are simply there because it pays the bills. Worse, the Governor of the state is trying to shut your company down, and will speak against you publicly every chance he gets. The three co-workers nearest to you are sure that you will shut down, and so they're trying to get in good with the Governor so that they'll be able to work for him when the time comes.

That, folks, is the situation that Elisha finds himself in. He was called by God to succeed Elijah, who is the main prophet in the Old Testament. Elijah is a man so possessed of God's spirit that he didn't even really die, he was just swept away into the presence of the Lord. Say what you want to about him, but Elijah had style. And he left Elisha in a difficult time. Jehoram, the king of Israel, was in charge, and he is described as one who "did what was evil in the sight of the Lord." The moral climate of the country is, in a word, polluted. And now Elijah is gone and Elisha is the new prophet in town.

The writer of 2 Kings begins to describe Elisha's ministry with a couple of stories that are designed to give the reader a sense of Elisha's credentials as a prophet of God. You heard the stories a moment ago – let's talk about them briefly.

In the first story, we see that the people of Jericho come to the prophet and recognize that although their city is blessed in many ways, it's limited by the fact that the water system is polluted. Nothing will grow. The first readers of this book would hear that and they would say, "Of course, nothing will grow. Jericho is under a curse. It's right there in Joshua 6:26 – because Jericho resisted the people of God when they came into Canaan, it was cursed. But somehow, in the centuries between the battle of Jericho and the ministry of Elisha, a faithful community came into being. People began to seek the Lord. In our reading for today, the leaders of this town come to Elisha in a posture of faith and bring their problems to the man of God. God, through Elisha, lifts the curse and the spring of water is restored. I'm told that if you go to Jericho today, you can often see a

line of local women at the spring, hoping for the blessing of fertility.

The second story, well, it's not quite so endearing. Elisha is on his way to Bethel, which means literally, the "house of God". Except at this time, Bethel is not a *Beyt-el* – it is *not* a godly place. It is the center of idol worship in Israel, and the city wherein the god Baal is worshipped above all else. Bethel could not tolerate the Word of the Lord, or the presence of a prophet.

So before Elisha even gets to the city itself, a group of young men comes out to jeer him. He responds to their taunting by cursing them in the name of the Lord, and all of a sudden a couple of bears come out of nowhere and take care of most of the slower members of the group in short order.

Modern readers get to this story and say, "Ewww...This is the Bible? What kind of a God would allow this to happen? Doesn't God know that young people are all innocent and pure?" But the first readers of this story would think that this is a no-brainer. It's a story about young people experiencing the consequences of their own behavior. If you mock a true prophet of the Lord, you are mocking God himself. And anyone who mocks God might as well just ask to be struck by lightning or afflicted with boils. That's just asking for trouble, and the kids got what they deserved. That's how the original hearers of the story would have interpreted it.

And, as I said, these two stories are the Biblical introduction to Elisha as a powerful and true prophet of the One True God of Israel. In these actions, he is confirmed in his office as a prophet.

This morning, I'd like to look a little closer at the two towns that are involved. I've already spoken a bit about Jericho and Bethel, but I'd like to compare them.

One of these is a town with a checkered past. It hasn't always been easy to be faithful in Jericho, but there is a vibrant community there now. The elders of that community are seeking God's wisdom and asking for life. Yes, there is a pollution that mars the landscape, but that pollution is seen, recognized, named, and healed by the power of God.

The other town is a place with a rich tradition, having been founded by Abraham's grandson, Jacob. Yet it has betrayed its pedigree and is willing to exist as a place where God is not acknowledged at all. Problems? Pollution? What are you talking about? It's all good. There are no sins in a place where there is no virtue. And, not surprisingly, the kids from this town don't have a sense of God. They lack a moral compass. And so the bears come out and eat the young people. That can't be surprising. What do you think happens to a culture that chooses death? God allows them to choose, and they vote him out.

As I said, that hits our modern ears hard, and we react with a mixture of disgust and confusion. God did this?

Before we put God on the spot for this one, though, I have another question. As we baptize Vivian this morning, I wonder what kind of a community are we? What kind of a community are we becoming?

Are we a place where elders seek wisdom and people are teachable? A place where we want to look for signs of God's healing in our lives and in the lives of others? A community that is not afraid to look at the hard truth so long as the looking leads to healing?

Or are we a place where the name of God is not recognized, where we pretend that we don't have any problems? A place where young people do not have access to elders who will love them and care for them and challenge them and discipline them?

My fear, beloved, is that the church of Jesus Christ, at least as we know it in the USA, is a church that baptizes its kids in Jericho and then helps them to pack their bags for a life in Bethel.

In too many neighborhoods around this country, my friends, we wander into a sanctuary on Sunday mornings – a place where things are safe and secure, a place where we are able to talk a little bit about sin and confession and where we long for healing – but then we go right back out into the world unchanged, unchallenged by the Word of God, and therefore unhealed.

While I was studying the passage at hand on Thursday morning, the Cross-Trainers were doing something special. Instead of the usual Cross-Trainers schedule of Bible Study, Arts & Crafts, and Recreation, Thursday was a day where the kids were immersed in the story of God in Christ and invited to follow Jesus in their own lives. And as I was reading the passage, the staff marched 41 young people into the sanctuary in silence and helped them to consider the call of God in their own lives.

And here is what I thought on Thursday morning when that sanctuary was being filled up with children who have not grown up in the faith community: what do you think Second Kings would look like if the leaders of Jericho had sent a team of Cross-Trainers over to Bethel a couple of weeks before Elisha got there? I know, this is just crazy talk...

But what would have happened, do you suppose, if those 42 kids from Bethel had had someone to love and guide them closer to God like the 41 we had this week? Someone to tell them the truth? Someone who could live with them and teach them that it's not a great idea to mock a Prophet of the most high God?

I don't know. I don't know what would have happened.

But I do know that there was a lot of gunfire in the West End this week. Crafton Heights was on the front page on Wednesday. The city schools are in such a crisis that they've had people coming here asking for ideas in recent

weeks. The state is falling all over itself in a rush to legalize gambling and start taking money from a lot of folks who can't afford to be losing it at the slots. Our country has more wealth than ever before...and more poverty than ever before. The nation is mired in war that is unpopular and seemingly never-ending.

I'm not kidding you – when I walk outside these doors, a lot of days, I'm sure that I'm in Bethel. There is so much pollution and fear and rebellion...

But by the grace of God, and in the name of Jesus, this morning I am claiming this place as Jericho, not Bethel. I am declaring that there is a community here who wants to hear the words of the Lord and who is open to serving the God of the covenant.

When Elisha was starting as a prophet, he was confronted with an entire water system that had failed. The literal meaning of the Hebrew words that the locals used to describe the situation is that the water was so “evil” that the land “produced miscarriages”. The whole system was bad. But Elisha got a little bowl and stood in front of a part of the spring and brought health to the whole system.

In a few moments, I'm going to be standing up in front of you with a little bowl of water and about six pounds of beautiful baby girl. I'm asking you to join me in claiming that water today as water for healing and renewal and rebirth. Not just for Vivian, or even for Vivian and her family. Claim this water and this child as God's word of health and hope for us, and through us to the children and elders of this community. And through this community to the entire city, and state, and nation, and yes, even the world. There is hope. There is healing. There is salvation to be found in the Lord. Let us confess this, live into this, and share this every chance that we get. Thanks be to God! Amen.