

“Pretty Amazing”
 Sermon for 14 May 2017
 Texts: 2 Kings 2:23-25; Psalm 105:12-22

Kate Braestrup was pretty amazing at the 26th Annual Maine National Guard Interfaith Prayer Breakfast: bold, audacious, unintimidated! She’s the Maine Warden Service Chaplain and she picked for her text 2 Kings 2:23-25, a troubling and even disturbing episode. The passage falls in the narrative detailing the aftermath of Elijah’s translation: **And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. And Elisha saw it and he cried, “My father! My father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!” And he saw him no more.** (v. 12) Kate could have chosen this passage. It’s disturbing itself. To natural eyes, it would appear that Elijah had been taken up by a tornado and swept into the skies . . . only to be set down, we might suppose, some distance hence. Therefore fifty strong sons of the prophets organize a search party and for three days they search, returning to Jericho where Elisha was staying. Elisha had refused to endorse the search. And when they came back empty-handed. the prophet remarks tersely, **Did I not say to you, ‘Do not go?’** (v.18) So, having pursued their materialistic understanding, evidenced by their search for Elijah’s body, or person. They are poised for a spiritual advancement: 1. first to accept the supernatural translation of Elijah from earth to heaven bodily and 2. transition their allegiance from Elijah’s authority to Elisha who has inherited his mantle of authority (**and a double portion of the your spirit on me!** (vv. 9-10).) So the fifty failed the first test of submission when they ignored his **You shall not send.** (v. 16) *They pestered him to get their own way, or to satisfy their curiosity, or to pursue their unbelief!*

Of course, this is all prelude to the chosen text. 2 Kings 2:23-25 which records a travel incident—you know, like taking the wrong turn, or suffering a blow-out on the Interstate. Elisha is traveling from Jericho to Bethel. Before he leaves Jericho he sweetens the bitter waters of Jericho, thereby lifting part of the curse against that city: **Thus sayeth the Lord, ‘I have healed this water; from now on neither death nor miscarriage shall come from it.’** This solid demonstration of miraculous power doesn’t seem to have earned Elisha any respect because we read **as he was going up on the way, some small boys came out of the city and jeered at him . . .** some militant atheists have seized upon this passage as an illustration of how bloodthirsty and savage the God of the Bible is (demonstrating that they certainly haven’t mastered all the lessons entailed in the episode such as *mocking divine authority is ill-advised!*). They do this with varying degrees of sophistication, but most miss the subtleties in the passage: namely that “small boys” is one meaning of the Hebrew here, *but young men, rowdies or punks, or candidates for military service* **are alternate readings.** Secondly, the same error, or linguistic ignorance carries over to **jeered at him**, the Hebrew also carries the sense of “mocking, verbally abusing and taunting.” We might render the verse, “as he was traveling away from the city, a group of hooligans surrounded him and subjected him to threatening, abusive language.” *Quite a different picture, I think, and one more consistent with the severe chastisement that some forty-two members of this young mob received at the paws of two she-bear.* **And he turned around, and when he saw them, he cursed them in the name of the Lord.** (v.24) We read that the she-bear **tore** them—some versions read mauled them; but the same word also denotes “scratched them.” None of the lads was killed, no limbs were reported as lost or even broken. *God did not send vicious bear in to slaughter innocent children!!* So, it

would appear that careless translation (or opportunistic word choice?) can lead to exaggeration in either direction—either too serious, or too minimized! When bible scholars say that “the context rules,” we are applying the sense of the whole passage to each part, or sequence in the passage. Here’s the crux: the Word of God is elevating the authority of God’s prophet and warning those apt to careless to be respectful. We wouldn’t think of failing to put high voltage warnings around a power station—perhaps we need warning labels on God’s person and His spokespersons.

Still, the incident is shocking. *That is precisely the point.* The incident is meant to shock us. Yes, it is even meant to offend us and to warn us. It is not a good idea to abuse, mock or insult the man of God! However, where was this counsel when it came to the treatment of the Lord Jesus? If Elisha was aided by two she-bear, who do you think might have come to the aid of the Son of Man *had He chosen to curse, confront or deal with them?* Do you think that Roman armor, or swords would have been any use? What if several archangels had shown up with their weaponry? Or heaven’s regions had descended upon Jerusalem? The bloodlust of the angry mob of defiant and unbelieving Jews would have been staunched and their murderous intent deflected into something quite other: like flight, retreat . . . and pleading for the rocks to cover them!

Here I pause to make application. Kate was lifting up the authority of the Bible for all to see. She reserved to the Scriptures the prerogative to shock, dismay and even offend. *Nothing detracts from the authority of the Word of God—nothing!* Now she wisely steered clear of hot button issues (such as passages on sexual mores that we assume to be obsolete, troublesome, nettling). In one swift stroke she struck the head off the claim by some to biblical irrelevance. ***The Bible is relevant whether we agree with its message or claims.*** The Bible employs shock and awe. Anyone familiar with it would have to agree that this is so. You may not approve of Elisha cursing his would-be assailants. “Men of God would always be milk toast kind and spineless . . .” You may marvel that God can employ she-bear as handily as floods, fire and foreign nations to bring about His will . . . but our objections are irrelevant when held up against His majestic and divine sovereignty! He’s God and if He wants she-bear to chastise bad boys that’s okay. And we can apply first aid and bind their wounds. Don’t mock the prophet, don’t mock the Bible—a solid principle set forth in Psalm 105.

Psalm 105:

**12 When they were only a few men in number,
Very few, and strangers in it.**

**13 And they wandered about from nation to nation,
From one kingdom to another people.**

**14 He permitted no man to oppress them,
And He reprovved kings for their sakes:**

**15 “Do not touch My anointed ones,
And do My prophets no harm.”**

**16 And He called for a famine upon the land;
He broke the whole staff of bread.**

**17 He sent a man before them,
Joseph, who was sold as a slave.**

**18 They afflicted his feet with fetters,
[a]He himself was laid in irons;**

**19 Until the time that his word came to pass,
 The word of the Lord [b]tested him.
 20 The king sent and released him,
 The ruler of peoples, and set him free.
 21 He made him lord of his house
 And ruler over all his possessions,
 22 To [c]imprison his princes [d]at will,
 That he might teach his elders wisdom. [NASB]**

Footnotes:

[a] Psalm 105:18 Lit **His soul came into**

[b] Psalm 105:19 Or **refined**

[c] Psalm 105:22 Lit **bind**

[d] Psalm 105:22 Lit **at his**

Before we proceed, two word(s) of caution are in order, v. 15 was not written for Elisha and it is not restricted to him, or to God's apostles of the second testament! The force of this warning is distributive. Secondly, the passage is about God's people collectively as God's anointed ones, as God's own prophets—or, as we would suggest, His church and His servants of the gospel. See Genesis 26:11 where Ambimelech **warned all the people, saying, 'Whoever touches this man, or his wife shall surely be put to death.** And in verse 29: **we have not touched you and have done you nothing but good and have sent you away in peace. You are now blessed to the Lord.**" Matthew Poole adds this observation: "and they are called prophets because God did familiarly converse with them, and revealed his mind and will to them, and by them to others; and because they were instructors and teachers of others in the true religion." Gen. 18:19 (of Abraham) **For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him.**

Kate spoke a strong, forthright word to the assembled. *She admonished us to respect the Bible. Respect the God of the Bible!* Unapologetic. Yes, her approach was oblique—she didn't take on head-on other controversial topics. But she had a clear word for those of us who are clueless about violence, and she traced that to lack of exposure to it, to the truth not too few of us have killed and slaughtered our own meat, or dressed our fish and poultry. Too few of us know the sound of a fist hitting flesh, or of police trudgeons sticking protestors, or of stripes or lashes. We are fortunate to have men and women in service who know those sounds, who have kept violence at bay so that most of us have a relatively peaceful existence. Thanks to them, to their peacekeeping efforts here and abroad. She called out the cowardly clergy who pretend to be little Martin Luther King Jr.s—feigning civil disobedience cheaply, getting arrested for hype by "brutal" cops who are no such thing. The loudest noise being the click of the handcuff's! Fakers who invite publicity, send their tiny tweets—barely having time incarcerated to emit them! She warned us that Dr. King's protest worked because of a culture of violence. His letter from the Birmingham jail was no joke. He paid the cost. He earned respect,.

She warned those who shout about peace and violence these days and, frankly, know nothing about either.

Jesus formed a weapon out of cords, and whipped and *violently* beat the money-changers out of the temple space *which they had turned into a robbers' den!*. What are we to do with those who want to pretend that never happened—that she-bear never came to the defense of Elisha? The violence deniers!

The victims of rape, the victims of violent crimes . . . they know things we need to know so that we can wake up, grow up . . . ***so that we can understand and accept the instruction*** of Scripture. So that God would forebear and not send she-bear amounts us as yet another object lesson! Kate closed with a declaration that *Scripture is necessary to the world we actually have*, to the world we inhabit . . . it is not written to some more attractive persons in some other attractive place but for us, where we are as we are. Learn from Scripture to deal with this world, this humanity . . . face the hard truths, study the difficult passages, face the offense and be edified. . . suffer correction, take instruction . . . and so learn from Hebrews 12:13-15 to **Make straight paths for your feet, so that the lame will not be debilitated, but rather healed. 14 Pursue peace with all men, as well as holiness, without which no one will see the Lord. 15 Be careful that no one falls short of the grace of God, so that no root of bitterness will spring up to cause trouble and defile many....**

In all my recent years of attending this affair, I have seldom heard such a bold, courageous truth-affirming, God and Scripture honoring Word! I wish you all had been there! Kate was the she-bear to those who would mock our God, ridicule His Word, scorn His ways!

God bless you, ma'am, you were the best! Go in peace. May God increase our prayers.

Amen.