

Augusta First Baptist Church  
2 Kings 2:23-25  
Elisha: Hero of Bald Men  
“The Bible Says That” Series

August 19, 2007

There is no question that the Bible is a fascinating book. It is filled with lovely and amazing stories, that have strengthened and encouraged believers for thousands of years. But let's be honest – the Bible also has some stories that are bizarre, confusing, and even disturbing. For the next four weeks, I have selected four such stories, that on the surface are peculiar or strange. I suspect that you will have never heard a sermon on most of the Bible stories I will share with you.

To start off this series, I am going to introduce you to Elisha, prophet of God. We begin with a rather disturbing story of taunting children, a bald prophet, and a she-bear with an attitude.

*NRS 2 Kings 2:23 “He went up from there to Bethel; and while he was going up on the way, some small boys came out of the city and jeered at him, saying, “Go away, baldhead! Go away, baldhead!” 24 When he turned around and saw them, he cursed them in the name of the LORD. Then two she-bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the boys. 25 From there he went on to Mount Carmel, and then returned to Samaria.”*

Some of you, who are “follically” challenged with receding or retreating hairlines, may find in Elisha, a hero. Maybe I should re-title this sermon to “What Happens to Smart aleck Kids?” Let us look at some background on this prophet, who appears to have some, shall we say, security issues.

It is not hard to believe he has security issues, because he follows one of Israel's greatest prophets - Elijah. Elijah was the champion of the Lord, against the pagan idolatries of ancient Canaan, but was not going to be a permanent figure, and would soon be taken up to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11). Elisha was the chosen successor to the great prophet Elijah. Talk about big shoes to fill! Have any of you ever had to follow a legend? I remember when Ray Goff had to follow the great coach, Vince Dooley. I don't think he ever got out of his shadow. Such examples are numerous. I have known pastors, good people, who have followed some bigger than life preachers, and their ministry never had a chance.

Elisha was probably wealthy, because we are introduced to him in 1 Kings 19, as a man plowing behind twelve yoke of oxen, when Elijah comes along and calls him into service.

Elijah, the Bible tells us, threw his mantle – his outer garment used to protect one from the elements - upon Elisha, indicating “you are next, you are the one to replace me.”

Elisha did well following the great Elijah. In 2 Kings, there are several miracles attributed to him, solidifying his authority as one of God's prophets.

Elisha's prophetic ministry came during tough times. He was surrounded by a culture bent on compromise, accommodation, and even perversion. Israel had kings and leaders who were frequently described as evil and wicked. This prophet was a man, whose service was to call the people back to fidelity in God.

Before going any further with the message, let me offer a quick word about this story of bald-headed Elisha— smart-aleck children, and she-bears. In the words of the Old Testament theologian, Walter Brueggemann, from his excellent commentary: "Israel is on notice. Perhaps on his way to visit the pagan shrine of Bethel and subsequently condemn it, boys come and taunt him, rejecting his very presence. We may not like the story, and nearly all find it disturbing. But that is not the point. The point is a theological one. This is God's messenger, bald-headed or not, and proves to be dangerous, and like the word of God is not to be messed with...not by small boys, not by kings and not by anybody." (for further reading I recommend Brueggemann's commentary: 1 & 2 Kings, published by Smyth Helwys).

When the salvation of YHWH is compromised by political expediency, economic gain, or infidelity, there will be dangerous consequences. No, I do not like the story, but we cannot excuse away the larger picture of the people of God treating God as a relationship to be used, manipulated or objectified.

Elisha's biography and message for us today, however, cannot be confined to this rather narrow story of she-bears and children. I believe we can come to a more complete understanding of Elisha, if we consider the meaning behind his name.

Do you know the meaning behind your name? My name Greg, comes from Greek origins meaning, "watchful, alert," which, in itself, is a rather ridiculous description of me, since I am the poster child of ADD. The name Amy, is derived from the French meaning, "beloved." Aaron's name, of course has Hebrew and perhaps Egyptian origins, and could mean "exalted, or high mountain." Finally, Clark comes from the Old English, and means "cleric" or "scholar."

Elisha's name means "my God saves." Elisha's very name is a testimony of who God is in relationship to you and me. What does that say to us today? When we say, "my God saves," we are saying:

#### 1) My God Liberates (2 Kings 2:13-14)

*13 He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. 14 He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, "Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?"* When he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over.

Elisha moves from the wilderness on one side of the Jordan, to the civilization on the other side. This may seem awfully subtle, but remember, Israel found freedom leaving Egypt and crossing the Jordan River into the land of promise.

The bottom line is, that our God is unfettered and undomesticated – there are no boundaries that can prevent the salvation of God. From wilderness to civilization, the prophetic powers pointing to God has no limitations. “My God saves,” means, that neither the power of wilderness nor the power of tyrannical monarchy will stand in the way of YHWH’s emancipation.

Do you believe that salvation is liberating, and do you believe that there are things in your life that you need to be freed from? We all struggle against the pull of sin. The baptismal waters do not remove that. What has you feeling most trapped and most captive? The first step towards freedom is being able to identify what has you captive. Elisha came to deliver a message that you do not have to live as a slave.

Sometime during the 1940's, for one short year, my granddaddy had a tenet farmer and his family work for him. His name was Willie Rae. He was known to drink too much and work too little. Of course, those were tough times for African-American families. They were denied basic rights, and the deck was stacked against them. But Willie Lee had a daughter, who wanted to play piano, but could not afford lessons, much less own a piano. So she wrote, and wrote and wrote. This daughter grew up and wrote a novel that won the Pulitzer - The Color Purple.

When the church confesses that God saves us, he also frees us. It means that God can free us from the things in life that leave us most trapped and captive. When we say “my God saves,” we are also saying:

2) My God Heals, (2 Kings 2:19-22) 19" *Now the people of the city said to Elisha, "The location of this city is good, as my lord sees; but the water is bad, and the land is unfruitful." 20 He said, "Bring me a new bowl, and put salt in it." So they brought it to him. 21 Then he went to the spring of water and threw the salt into it, and said, "Thus says the LORD, I have made this water wholesome; from now on neither death nor miscarriage shall come from it." 22 So the water has been wholesome to this day, according to the word that Elisha spoke."*

Elisha healed a poisonous spring in Jericho, by tossing salt into it. This is, as one commentator phrases it, Elisha’s “coming out” miracle, and was witnessed publicly. The testimony of Elisha’s name is, that when God saves, God heals.

The truth of the matter is, that there are times and will be times, when our sources of life get poisoned or polluted. It can be an abusive parent or spouse, personal demons that torment, and so on. This is Israel – their once pure, life sustaining spring, was now a mess, in fact, it was deadly.

Healing is not simply about everything getting better. Healing is about wholeness. Elisha represents to the people that God has come in their midst to restore their lives. Healing or

wholeness can be rejected. Notice that this story comes right before the she-bear story. God has come to bring healing, but some are unwilling to be open to such healing.

When we say “my God saves,” we are also saying:

### 3) My God Rescues (2 Kings 4:1-7)

*1 Now the wife of a member of the company of prophets cried to Elisha, "Your servant my husband is dead; and you know that your servant feared the LORD, but a creditor has come to take my two children as slaves." 2 Elisha said to her, "What shall I do for you? Tell me, what do you have in the house?" She answered, "Your servant has nothing in the house, except a jar of oil." 3 He said, "Go outside, borrow vessels from all your neighbors, empty vessels and not just a few. 4 Then go in, and shut the door behind you and your children, and start pouring into all these vessels; when each is full, set it aside." 5 So she left him and shut the door behind her and her children; they kept bringing vessels to her, and she kept pouring. 6 When the vessels were full, she said to her son, "Bring me another vessel." But he said to her, "There are no more." Then the oil stopped flowing. 7 She came and told the man of God, and he said, "Go sell the oil and pay your debts, and you and your children can live on the rest."*

He helped a widow earn her way out of debt through selling oil from a jar that kept replenishing itself. This is a story of the salvation, as rescue from poverty—material and spiritual.

All these stories from the fourth chapter, while very much different in content and setting, are nonetheless connected. They point to the power of YHWH over all forces. God is constantly dispatching rescue to the disposed and the marginalized.

It is more than just stories of charity and such. It is a story of the poor being given the chance to overcome against the odds. It isn't just that this lady got behind on her payments. She was the underdog from the beginning. God loves an underdog!

Elisha, in following the tradition of many Old Testament prophets, is here to show Israel a different kind of reality, an alternative world that is ordered, not according to economics or politics, but YHWH.

Finally, when we say, “my God saves,” we are also saying:

### 4) My God is Beyond Category

Chapter 6:1-8, tells us the story of an iron axe head, that is lost in the water, to the dismay of the borrower. After Elisha threw a stick in the water, the axe head floated to the top. Once again, the connection with the story is that of “abiding astonishment,” at the very power of God. The point of this miracle, or any biblical miracle, is not to explain it away. This YHWH, is the God of great reversals. Not only can He cause axe heads to float but: the poor reversed to well-being, the dead to life, the lowly to places of honor, and the lost are found.

The point of all these miracles is to amaze and astonish, not for the acts themselves, but to point towards the power of YHWH. All the technology in the world, and for Israel, in this context, cannot remove one from reliance upon God.

We are invited to give testimony of this God of Elijah–Elisha and Jesus, who moves beyond our categories, and beyond our expectations. There is much in this life that we can explain, but, there is much that cannot be explained. Do you think God can be beyond a category in our lives today?

When all is said and done on this earth, it will not really matter what my name or your name means. But the meaning of Elisha's name will be all-important. We cannot afford to miss out on the biography and the message of the one whose name means, "My God saves." He does, he really does.

Do you know about God's salvation? Some of you have entered it, tasted it, but not fully experienced it. You are still captive, still searching, still longing. Elisha has a message for our twenty-first century ears.