

HOPE FOR HARD TIMES
LESSONS ON FAITH FROM ELIJAH AND ELISHA
“When Words Hurt”
2 Kings 2:23-24
Sunday, October 18, 2020

The boys in my neighborhood had been talking about playing a game of baseball on the field behind the elementary school for weeks. I was eleven years old and had had very little experience at playing baseball. The only bat I had really swung was one of those plastic bats used in wiffleball. Even though I had a baseball glove I had never caught a pop fly; in fact, I had done very little with that glove except toss a ball back and forth in the backyard with my brothers. To say I was an experienced player would have been the furthest thing from the truth.

I remember the night of my first baseball game. I walked to the field with my plastic bat and glove in hand. When the other boys saw me with that plastic bat they began to laugh and make fun of me; “Look at the little baby showing up with his plastic bat.” As the team captains started to choose their teams everyone who had shown up to play, including the girls, were chosen; that is, all except for me. When I asked whose team, I would be on; they all laughed at me and said, “Go home loser. We don’t play with babies.”

I left that field broken; with tears welling up in my eyes I ran home. That day I threw my plastic bat and my baseball glove in the trash vowing to forever turn my back on baseball.

In his book *Sticks and Stones* Ace Collins speaks to the power of words: “*Words have derailed political campaigns, started wars, ruined marriages and even led to a man named Jesus being crucified on the cross. The fact is, words are a powerful tool and perhaps an even more powerful weapon. They can destroy and they can inspire. And how we use them says a great deal about each of us.*”

We’ve all heard the old adage ‘Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never harm me;’ have we not? Many of us have even used it as a means of brushing the dust off our bruised egos; but if truth be told; words not only hurt, they wound sometimes leaving a scar for life.

Elisha most certainly must have learned that lesson in our passage for this morning. In his book *Hope for Hard Times* Magrey DeVega writes of Elisha’s sticks and stones: “*Elisha, having just experienced a remarkable, life-transforming moment of transition, took up the mantle of Elijah’s power and responsibility. You and I would be filled with anticipation and excitement, just as he must have been in spite of the sadness he also surely felt now that Elijah was gone. And just like that, the shoe dropped, as misfortune was lurking just around the corner.*

Right after he scooped up the mantle and wrung it dry from its miraculous river-parting, he was suddenly greeted by a crowd of prophets, including fifty strong men. They were former servants of his predecessor Elijah, and they had not seen what had just happened to their master. They were convinced that he was still around, that God had picked him up and deposited him far away, and they came storming up to Elisha looking for answers.

And when Elisha tried to explain to them the truth, that Elijah was not hiding from them but was in fact gone for good, they would have nothing of it. They insisted that they be allowed to go and look for him. To Elisha it must have felt like a vote of no confidence in him; they were doubting his word, and they wanted to do everything in their power to restore their former master, Elijah. They persisted in their request to Elisha until, as 2 Kings 2:17 says, ‘he became embarrassed.’”

There is no way to sugar-coat this: words hurt. In fact, Jesus said, they kill. In Matthew 5:21-22 Jesus said, “*You’re familiar with the command to the ancients, ‘Do not murder.’ I’m telling you that anyone who is so much as angry with a brother or sister is guilty of murder. Carelessly call a brother ‘idiot!’ and you just might find yourself hauled into court. Thoughtlessly yell ‘stupid!’ at a sister and you are on the brink of hellfire. The simple moral fact is that words kill.*”

Rabbi Simeon ben Gamaliel, a contemporary of Jesus, one day asked his servant to go to buy some good food for him in the market. When the servant returned home, he presented the rabbi with a tongue.

The next day, the rabbi told the servant to go to the market to buy some bad food. Again, the servant returned with a tongue.

When the rabbi asked the servant why he returned with a tongue both times, the servant made this astute observation: "Good comes from it and bad comes from it. When the tongue is good, there is nothing better, and when it is bad, there is nothing worse."

James 3:6 tells us that the tongue is like a spark: *"It is an evil power that dirties the rest of the body and sets a person's entire life on fire with flames that come from hell itself."*

Homiletics describes two types of words. There are the words that are soft and soothing and be transformative as oil on the skin. They can "heal, smooth and calm the most troubled spirit."

Then there are words that are dropped like bombs. Their intent is to hurt, destroy; even kill. Their like landmines just waiting for the first footfall. We've heard them used a lot during our latest round of political campaigning. We've heard them used over and over again as our country continues to grapple with racial injustice. We've heard them used against the LGBT+ community. And they have even been used to destroy a little boy's hope of ever playing baseball.

Truth be told, we have all used both kinds of words. We have used words to build up but we have also used word to intentionally destroy. Have we not?

This brings us back to Elisha. DeVega writes of him: *"There he was, having experienced a remarkable high in his life, and he was immediately greeted by his fellow prophets, who were convinced that Elisha wasn't telling then the truth about what happened to Elijah. They doubted his word and his leadership. And even after the men came back from a fruitless, three-day search that failed to find Elijah, his troubles were not over."*

A group of young people took their turn hurling insults. In this case, it had to do with follicularly-challenged head. They called him 'baldy.' But it wasn't just his bald head they were insulting. The said, "Get going, Baldy! Get going, Baldy!", which was another way of saying, 'Get out of here! You're not welcome!' It's as if they were saying to him, 'You are a complete alien to this place! You are not one of us! Go back to whatever planet, foreign land, or group of weirdos you came from!'"

Being follicularly-challenged myself I know how being called baldly can hurt. But they weren't just attacking his appearance says DeVega; *"They were insulting his identity, his dignity, his humanity."*

Words hurt the most, says DeVega, *"when people insult the deepest part of who we are; when they do more than demoralize — they dehumanize; when they refuse to acknowledge the humanity of a person, as if someone doesn't deserve to breathe the same air as everyone else."*

If it were just my baldness someone was making fun of; even though I would be hurt, I would simply try to brush it off:

"I'm not bald. I'm hairing-impaired," I would joke.

"I don't consider myself bald. I'm simply taller than my hair," I might laugh.

Or even better yet: "I'm not really bald. I'm a hair donor," I would say.

But when you demoralize and dehumanize me that's when I want sick the bears on you. DeVega says of this urge: *"The temptation, of course, is to lash back, to return insult with insult, injury with injury, to cleanse our hurt souls of rage by channeling it with return fire."*

And this is exactly what Elisha did; he cursed the boys back. According to the biblical commentary Interpretation he cursed the boys back, not because they had insulted him, but because they insulted God.

Regardless of what led Elisha to sick the two bears on these forty-two youth, DeVega says that we the reader are left to wrestle with Elisha's response. He writes: *"We can either raise it up in a virtue as a model response, or we can treat it as a negative example to learn from. Indeed, there are times when it is right to stay firm, respond in anger, and react with righteous indignation to injustice. Sometimes, it is okay to burn with a white-hot holy anger when people are being mistreated and oppression rules the day."*

There are lots of examples of that kind of response in the Bible, and this very well may be one of them.

But we can also remember the exponentially greater number of examples in the Bible when reacting in such a way is not God's prescription, when the hard work of peace is the way to follow, and we are called to seek justice through nonviolent means.

Jesus, after all, calls us to bless those who curse us and pray for those who persecute us. James calls us to be quick to listen and slow to anger and to bridle our tongues. Paul commands us to be angry but not sin, and to not let the sun go down on our anger.

The trick, of course, is to know how to use our words to heal rather than hurt. Because for every instance when we would want to summon the bears against our attackers, God may be calling us to forge a pathway to peace, understanding, and forgiveness.”

When Boston Red Sox player Wade Boggs played third base at Yankee Stadium, one of the Yankee fans made it a personal mission to harass him. The man had a box seat close to the field and would torment Boggs with obscenities and insults for the duration of every game. Finally, Boggs decided he’d had enough.

As the man began his typical insult routine at the next game, Boggs walked directly over to the man, who was sitting with a group of friends.

“Are you the guy who’s always yelling at me?” Boggs asked.

“Yeah, it’s me. Whatcha gonna do about it?” responded the man belligerently.

Boggs took a new baseball out of his pocket, autographed it, and tossed it to the man.

When words hurt, I see that we have basically two choices: we can either strike back with the wrath of God and curse our attackers as Elisha did; or we can, like Boggs, be more Christ-like in our response. John Eldredge in his book *Epic* said of Jesus’ work: “Wherever humanity was broken, Jesus restored it.”

What about you?

Where do you see your hope lie?

In striking back?

Or in turning the other cheek?

Since I call myself a Christian, I really see I have no choice, but to be more like Jesus and turn the other cheek.