



2.8.26...Is God Violent or Peaceful? | 2 Kings 2:23-25

In Aurora, Illinois last year a 17-year-old was arrested and charged after police say he violently attacked a 70-year-old man during an attempted robbery.

In Walnut Creek, California just last year, police arrested four teenagers for assaulting and robbing an elderly man near the Rossmoor Shopping Center.

Last year in Jasper, Alabama, a 16-year-old boy has been charged as an adult following a violent attack on an elderly woman in her home.

In 2024, 37,000 thousand teenagers across the United States were charged with violent offenses.

Violence is easy to find, it took less than three minutes to pull up these incidents and facts. Unfortunately, we kind of expect violence now and have gotten used to it.

But it can still be troubling when we see violence in the Bible, especially when it seems like God sent the violence. How do we make sense of it and how do we see God?

We started this sermon series talking about how we see God is important. And how scripture can help us clarify or correct our view of God.

Sometimes we struggle to see God clearly because we are looking through the equivalent of coke-bottle glasses, looking at God through our own hurts and through what is happening in our world.

When the world and pain are our lenses through which we look at God, God is going to be distorted, God's character twisted out of shape.

And when we look carefully at Scripture, putting on the lens of God's Word...it helps us see God more clearly, removes the distortions, ultimately scripture helps us see that God's character is complex, reasonable, and ultimately trustworthy.

Approximately 965 years ago, near Bethel, only 11 miles north of Jerusalem, our text recounted an incident in which the prophet Elisha who is traveling on foot is mocked by a group of youths.

They jeer at him repeatedly, calling him "baldy" and telling him to leave.

Elisha responds by pronouncing a curse in the name of the Lord. After which two bears emerge from the woods and maul forty-two of the youths. Elisha continues on his journey.

So, how do we deal with Elisah, the boys, and the bears?

For some of us who are losing our hair, or have lost it completely...this might not seem so out of bounds, right?

I might say, "Those snots deserved what they got!"

But most readers are understandably upset by this story. Shouldn't have Elisha, as the man of God, been able to manage his anger better?

Weren't those just young, grade school kids and innocent, cuz boys will be boys, right? And it was Yahweh who made the bears appear supernaturally.

Doesn't Elisha and God seem like they are overreacting?

Let's take a deeper look.

First, there are a variety of ways to translate "boys" in Hebrew. Looking at the context of this story, it is unreasonable to assume a bunch of young children were out tramping around the wilderness, unsupervised. It is much more likely that a group of teenagers were roaming about.

So, it wasn't a harmless group teasing Elisha but a gang. It is more likely that he was being threatened by a pack of teenagers and that he felt his life was in danger. He was acting in self-defense not in a petty fit of rage.

Second, disrespect in the Middle East is a very serious offense especially with their "honor culture", honor is everything. People then in that culture and people now in that culture can still be severely punished for disrespecting elders, leaders, and kings.

Also, Elisha was a man of God who had preformed many miracles deserving respect. In fact, he had just come from purifying that town's poisoned well. Ungrateful of them.

Also, many readers assume the kids were killed. But the text doesn't say that and scripture does not shy away from saying when someone died.

And in the King James version the bears are female, which some scholars claim would have been less violent than male bears. But there is a reason why you don't stir up a momma bear.

Instead of thinking God picked on children as our perspective, we see Yahweh protecting his prophet.

Prophets, Lamb contends, would have had a hard time getting life insurance back then. Because prophets were often beat up, run out of town, and abused. Prophets didn't live very long.

And one might ponder like Lamb does, would it have been good for the assassination attempt of Claus von Stauffenberg (the character Tom Cruise played in the 2008 film, *Valkyrie*) against Adolf Hitler to succeed? Lamb thinks so.

If the assassination and subsequent coup had occurred and World War II ended even one year earlier, hundreds of thousands would have been saved.

So, in applying that logic in the positive, Yahweh was protecting Elisha so that he could continue to bless the sick and hungry, widows and orphans.

And God was keeping Elisha alive so he continue to teach Isreal God's ways which are predominantly peaceful. Where we say again that swords become unnecessary and are beaten into plowshares and nations stop fighting each other.

Because the God of the Old Testament is a God of peace and wants his people to be at peace with their neighbors.

Well, okay...how did Jesus act in the New Testament? Was Jesus a sword-wielding or peace bringing Messiah?

What do you make of Matthew 10:34, where Jesus proclaimed, <sup>34</sup> **“Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.”**

Or Luke 12:51 with Jesus' distressing comment, <sup>51</sup> **“Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division.”**

Why did Jesus say these words?

Better Christians than I, think it was a warning to us as followers of Jesus. Warning us that our choice to follow Jesus would cause major tensions among family members both biological and spiritual.

Unfortunately, I am more a fan of the John Wayne form of justice, **“I'm not going to hit you. I'm not going to hit you. Ah...the heck I won't!”** And then he knocks out the bad guy. So, satisfying.

Thankfully, thankfully...Jesus is primarily in a peacemaking and peace bringing mode.

When he rose from the dead and came to his disciples the first words out of his mouth were, “Peace be with you.”

And again after he had shown them his hands and feet said, “Peace be with you.”

Eight days later when Thomas was present, Jesus came again and said, “Peace be with you.”

Jesus, the prophesized Prince of Peace, knew the power of speaking blessing and giving the gift of peace. Jesus’ peace was powerful.

Paul found Christ’s peace so profound in his own life and ministry he began all his letters with a blessing of peace.

After passing the peace on to his disciples...adds new depth and meaning to our passing of the peace, right?

After showing them his hands and feet, we see how Jesus was willing to be a victim of violence so that we might know peace with God.

In his ultimate act of peacemaking and self-sacrifice...we are called to extend peace as well, to live as peacemakers.

How might we continue to grow as peacemakers in a world that needs peace so desperately right now, today?

Lamb shared a story that got me thinking.

As he was writing God Behaving Badly, 9/11 happened. And his wife, in her time of prayer, was sensing God asking her to invite their Muslim neighbors over for dinner.

She balked at that idea. At first. But then she followed through. Tears welled in the eyes of their neighbors, nobody had invited them to dinner, ever!

One can’t help but wonder, what would happen if we invited ICE agents to dinner? What if we prayed for the ICE agents to know the peace of Christ deep in their hearts?

Such a deep peace that their arms and wills would just go limp at the very thought of violence.

What if the witnesses brought peace to overflowing? Deep peace, bringing the balm of Gilead to their efforts?

Because of God’s story and Jesus’ efforts, even atheists like Richard Dawkins likes Jesus. Famous non-violent activists like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Ghandi looked to Jesus’s peace keeping for their inspiration, and as their model.

Violence is easy to find, making it cheap. But peace is costly. It costs us comfort. It costs us certainty. It costs us the satisfaction of being right or getting even.

And that’s why peace is so rare—because it always asks more of us than violence ever does.

Yet this is the way of Jesus. Not because Jesus was naïve about violence, but because he faced it head-on and refused to let it have the final word. He absorbed it. He carried it. He broke its cycle with his own body.

And when he stood among frightened disciples—men who had failed him, denied him, abandoned him—his first words were not accusation nor judgment. They were peace.

That same peace is offered to us. Not so much as a feeling we manufacture, but as a gift we receive and then practice.

Let's truly pass the peace, the kind of peace that loosens clenched fists. Peace that softens hardened hearts. Peace that dares to see enemies as people God still longs to heal.

So, in a world that expects violence, may we become a people who practice peace. In a culture shaped by fear, may we be shaped by trust in the God of peace.

And in moments when peace feels impossible, may we remember that the risen Christ still stands among us, still speaks blessing, still calls us to be peacemakers...with "Peace be with you." Amen.

**Time of Reflection:**

1. What lens am I most often using to see God right now—fear, pain, anger, or trust—and how might Scripture be inviting me to see God more clearly?
2. Where might God be calling me to practice peace this week, even when it feels uncomfortable or undeserved?