

“I’d Like to Hear a Sermon About: The Bible Says What?”  
 Anna Pinckney Straight  
 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia  
 July 8, 2018

2 Kings 2: 19 – 25

*<sup>19</sup> 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.” <sup>20</sup> He said, “Bring me a new bowl, and put salt in it.” So they brought it to him. <sup>21</sup> 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.” <sup>22</sup> So the water has been wholesome to this day, according to the word that Elisha spoke.*

*<sup>23</sup> 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!” <sup>24</sup> 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. <sup>25</sup> From there he went on to Mount Carmel, and then returned to Samaria.*

Elisha is the protégé of Elijah.

Called by God around 850 years before the birth of Christ,  
 when Israel and Judah are at risk of being conquered.

Elijah and Elisha are trying to lead the people out of the disaster  
 the people have brought upon themselves,  
 tasked by God with trying to get the people back on the pathway of faith.

The stakes are real. This is not a fairy tale.<sup>1</sup>

But Elijah, in 2 Kings, has done his work and the end of his ministry is at hand.

He will soon be carried up into heaven in a whirlwind.

Elisha has prayed to receive a double portion of Elijah’s righteous, powerful spirit.

Elijah’s truth-telling and God witnessing power.

Elijah responds: “You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you;”

Elisha does see Elijah being carried up.

Elisha picks up Elijah’s mantle.

He parts the waters of the Jordan and crosses through it.

He allows fifty men to go and search for Elijah,

because they do not believe Elisha when he tells them what has happened.

(When they return without finding Elijah and Elisha gets to say a grand “I told you so.”)

Then, the words we heard a few minutes ago.

Elisha, on behalf of God, purifies one of the wells of Jericho by putting salt in it.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://montreal.anglican.org/comments/bkoutlns.shtml?>

Which brings us to the boys and the bears.

What is that?

Some boys make fun of Elisha and are then mauled, and likely killed, by bears.

It doesn't make sense.

Does God work that way?

Does God kill innocent children on a whim?

**Let me say this clearly: God does not work that way.**

But there this is in the Bible.

It won't surprise you to know that scholars across the years have tried to make sense of this. Explain it. Rationalize it.

Andrew Wilson's study of the text suggests that these aren't really young boys making fun of Elisha's baldness, they are actually much older and have come from enemy territory. When they call out Elisha's baldness they are saying he isn't a real prophet who should die. That his God is not the real God. It is, in its own way, Wilson claims, a declaration of war warranting Elisha's response.<sup>2</sup>

Brian Irwin believes that this text isn't an anomaly at all, but a part of a much larger, very consistent narrative that was a part of the process of establishing Elisha's authority and placing a difficult truth before the people, that those who follow the words of the prophet will be blessed, as the people were with clean water. And those who do not are punished with injury and curse, as with the youth and the bears.<sup>3</sup>

Others have suggested that this is a later addition to the text, put in by some editor who wanted children to listen to their elders. To scare children into minding by telling them that if they don't listen they run the risk of being attacked by bears.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Wilson, Andrew. 2017. "Good News Bears: How one of the Bible's most bothersome passages points to Jesus." *Christianity Today* 61, no. 1: 26. ATLASerials, Religion Collection, EBSCOhost (accessed July 7, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Irwin, Brian P. 2016. "The curious incident of the boys and the bears: 2 Kings 2 and the prophetic authority of Elisha." *Tyndale Bulletin* 67, no. 1: 23-35. ATLASerials, Religion Collection, EBSCOhost (accessed July 7, 2018). <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/73609/1/Irwin-2%20Kings%202-TynBul.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Irwin, Brian P.

(v. 24). The Hebrew verb **בָּקַע** has the sense of 'split open' and appearing here in the *Piel* likely indicates that the boys were severely injured if not killed. The text offers no formal postmortem on the children, choosing instead to focus solely on the progress of Elisha,

Still others find in this text a parable for the human condition, the pull between our better and worse angels, that Elisha is like a new Marvel superhero or newly created inhuman in the Marvel universe, heady with new powers and so carried away with how to use them, he misuses them.<sup>5</sup>

It's a lot of gymnastics going on. Which is why I come down in the place where Choon-Leong Seow comes down, that this is not an ethical situation, this is a theological proposition. He writes: "The episode of Elisha's cursing the youngsters is challenging for anyone who come to the Bible as Scripture. Elisha's response seems vindictive, petty, and morally unjustifiable."<sup>6</sup>

Morally unjustifiable.

Did the people of Elisha's time see it in the same way? I cannot speak for them.

Certainly, I was a very different time with very different, pre-enlightenment world view, but I cannot imagine that it was a world in which parents did not love children, and which they did not know the commandment "thou shalt not kill," just as they knew "thou shalt not bear false witness."

But today this story remains. And while it can't tell us what to do, maybe it can serve as a cautionary tale. A reminder that people will look back at us and see things we'd rather not reveal. Things that are obvious in the future and, if and when we are honest with ourselves, are obvious now, too. Morally unjustifiable.

That you shouldn't wish or work to bring harm to others, no matter what they say to or about you.

Which brings me to Pinckney.<sup>7</sup>

Pinckney. My middle name.

Pinckney was my grandfather's last name. He was an only child, his mother dying shortly after he was born in the flu epidemic of 1918. He was raised and adopted by his maternal grandparents, the Allans, but they decided he should keep his father's name, carried down the Roger Pinckney line.

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Marty, Martin E. 2004. "Bear facts." *The Christian Century* 121, no. 18: 63. ATLASerials, Religion Collection, EBSCOhost (accessed July 7, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Kissileff, Beth. "How a Doctor Finds Hope at a Jerusalem Hospital." *The Christian Century*, June 21, 2018. <https://www.christiancentury.org/review/books/how-doctor-finds-hope-jerusalem-hospital>

<sup>6</sup> Choon-Leong Seow. "The First and Second Books of Kings." *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Volume III*. Leander E. Keck, editor. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999. Pages 178-179.

<sup>7</sup> Some of this portion of the sermon is adapted from something I wrote in June of

I include “Roger” in my description because there are several Pinckney families with roots in South Carolina. Politicians, entrepreneurs, and constitution-signers. Years ago I read that more Pinckneys have run for president and lost than any other family. The Pinckneys aren’t one family that came to the United States and spread out, they are families who were distant cousins in England who separately left England in order to settle in South Carolina. As people of money, land, and privilege, they built and maintained their lives on stolen lives and stolen labor, with slaves: men, women, and children whose names were taken away from them and replaced with the names of those who claimed to, as was horrifically legal at the time, own them. People who were kidnapped from their homes.

Yes, it was a different time, but even then, people knew it was wrong.

Morally unjustifiable.

Even then there were people who fought back.

Even then there were people who knew it was wrong and who didn’t want to make waves.

Even then there were people who knew it was wrong but weren’t willing to make sacrifices to make it right.

Yes, it was a different time.

But it is a time that still has many unpaid bills in our modern world.

Growing up in Charleston, most of the racism I learned was observational.

At Second Presbyterian Church, the church that taught me about God’s love also taught me that an all-white church was normal, normative.

I attended Porter-Gaud School, where I began the 1st grade with an all-white class, and by the time we graduated, 12 years later, had one African-American class member.

I lived in a white world in a city that was not white. I didn’t question it.

Most of the racism I learned was observational. But, I am ashamed to admit, not all of it.

When I was in college, there were professors who refused to let me get away with that, and called me out on the damaging, untrue southern stories about the nature of race, slavery, and the civil war that I had been told since childhood. They didn’t tell me what to believe, they challenged me to study.

I studied and read and came to see them for shallow mistruths told to justify and excuse a wrong. Morally unjustifiable.

I may not be personally responsible for slavery, but I am a recipient of white privilege, an inheritor of a system that is un-equal and un-fair and in which not everyone is born with the same horizon or available bootstraps.

I do not believe that is of God. The Kingdom of God for which I wait and which is already in our midst speaks of a different world- a world of justice where wrongs are righted. A place in which the rich go away empty and the hungry are fed. A balancing of accounts.

When my husband and I decided we wanted to get married, we were living north of the Mason-Dixon line. The name Pinckney might as well have been Jones or Bobwhite. I'm the very last on my little branch of the Pinckney family tree. According to tradition, my maiden name should have become my middle name. Instead, I chose to keep my middle name right where it was, close to me. Not in spite of the sins of the past, but because of them. I kept Pinckney as a personal reminder. As a continual presence in my life, so that each time I write, speak, hear, or read my name, I would be reminded of the mistakes of the past and know that I have more in common with the people of the past than that which is different. There are most certainly, most definitely things that I am getting wrong now, too, that my children and grandchildren will know and name and wonder how I could get it so wrong.

And I kept the Pinckney name to help me be boldly honest about my desire to be a part of the world God desires. To be a part of the faith community that welcomes God's kingdom.

It was a personal decision for this name of mine, but it became considerably more public three years ago when the name Clementa Pinckney founds itself in the national news. The Reverend Clementa C. Pinckney. A senator in the state of South Carolina and pastor of the historic congregation that worships less than two blocks from the church where I grew up, grew up knowing nothing about it. Two blocks and worlds away. Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, where in June of 2015 he and eight other members of his church were murdered.

Clementa Pinckney. Are we family? While I don't know if there is any DNA connection, there is a historical one in our names, a connection brought by ownership and sustained by violence that continues today. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. wrote for the New York Times about him:<sup>8</sup>

for one still so young, Mr. Pinckney was deeply aware of the history he carried within himself, a history of the courageous and the slain, of the triumphant and the terrorized. He was fluent in the lives and careers of brave black people who had served state and church since the Civil War. He was acutely conscious of the missed opportunities of Reconstruction, of the contradictions that could have been settled, of the innocent lives that could have been spared, a century before the civil rights struggle of the 1960s, had Americans following the Civil War only been willing to put racial healing and equal economic opportunity first....

Pinckney said, 'I think South Carolina has — and across the South we have — a deep appreciation of history. We haven't always had a deep appreciation of each other's histories....I feel that we're fighting some of the old battles.'

That was three years ago. There have been many reminders since then, too, that there has been no peace treaty for the old battles, yet.

Who this Pinckney was, a name he shares with me, gives me something to aspire to.

And thought Lewisburg, West Virginia is certainly not Charleston, South Carolina, we are not

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<sup>8</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/19/opinion/henry-louis-gates-if-clementa-pinckney-had-lived.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/19/opinion/henry-louis-gates-if-clementa-pinckney-had-lived.html?_r=0)

exempt from these truths, either.

Lewisburg is a cool small town, a cool small town that lynched two black men in 1930.<sup>9</sup>

It was a different time. But it is still our story.

Elisha's time was different, too, but this story from 2 Kings only has impact if we love our children. If we know it to be counter to the way things are supposed to be.

The way things are supposed to be- with the world watching and waiting to see if the boys in the cave in Thailand will be saved. I cannot imagine Elisha's time was any different in that respect.<sup>10</sup>

And I firmly believe that Elisha stories aren't in our past, they are very much in our present, too.

Where are we witnessing the 21<sup>st</sup> century equivalent of Elisha and the bears?

Is it in the separation of families at our borders?

Is it with our seeming unwillingness to take action to prevent or change the pattern of gun violence that has our nation by the scruff of the neck? Are guns our modern-day equivalent of Elisha's bears?<sup>11</sup>

Education? Climate change?

It isn't just these national issues, either.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.rarenewspapers.com/view/630836>  
[https://textbooks.lib.wvu.edu/wvhistory/files/html/10\\_wv\\_history\\_reader\\_konhaus/](https://textbooks.lib.wvu.edu/wvhistory/files/html/10_wv_history_reader_konhaus/)  
<http://westvirginianews.blogspot.com/2011/04/lynchings-still-haunting-reminder-to.html>



<sup>10</sup>

Thailand Cave Rescue Live Updates: Four Boys Are Out, 9 to Go <https://nyti.ms/2J1Lzpz>

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/national/mass-shootings-in-america/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.081693c3fb6a](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/national/mass-shootings-in-america/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.081693c3fb6a)  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-41488081>  
<http://www.gunviolencearchive.org/>  
<https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2017/10/06/555861898/gun-violence-how-the-u-s-compares-to-other-countries>

I believe we have similar memories, stories, events in our own lives, too. Stories of hurt, violence, grief we don't know how to process, that continue to haunt us. Patterns and relationships that aren't what God intended that are being called to get back on track, on the track of mutual love and respect.

It is, of course, not one of these things, but all of them.

How can we stand up, to change, to work against the things that are wrong, and we know are wrong, because they go against the very commandments Jesus gave us, to care for one another. To welcome the stranger.

To work not for what is better for me or for you,  
but what is better for the much larger universal US.

The original question about this passage was for me to explain what grace was to be found in this story of Elisha and the bears, a story which should really be called "The 42 boys."

There are some stories that have no silver lining. This one from 2 Kings and many of the stories of our own histories and lives- so terrible that cannot be redeemed or found to have purpose.

But even in the morally unjustifiable there is grace.  
Even in the terrible God is present~ there~ with us.  
There is grace in these texts, these stories, these histories,  
in the way they remove the blinders from our eyes,  
insisting we see what we might prefer remain hidden,  
but can never heal as long as they are kept out of the light.

Hundreds of years from now, what truths will be discussed?

And what will we be able to say our response was?

Will it be said that we stood by or that we were willing to get in the middle of it all, risking being wrong, risking our reputations, risking being called names not of our choosing in order to stand with the one who is already there, in the middle of things, Jesus our Lord.

Will I?

Will you?

Will we?

The story of the 42 boys might never be your favorite. It certainly isn't my favorite bed-time story, but hearing it, wrestling with it, reminds us all that even and especially in the difficult texts, the Bible is a place where we meet God, a place where we learn how to be a part of welcoming God's love, welcoming the kingdom of God.

And knowing, as we gather in this place, not only are we not alone, but God has been this way before. And as the people of Elisha's time and our time and all the times in between, God is looking for us, waiting to walk with us, to show us the pathway of faith, hope and healing, truth and reconciliation, liberation and justice, peace.

Alleluia. Amen.