

“Elisha and the Bear Resistant Church”

Galatians 5: 1, 13-16, 22-25, 2 Kings 2: 1, 9, 11—22

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Of all the prophets who have ever lived, Elijah is the most beloved, most revered and most famous. Elijah has this charismatic way of doing things: he was a rugged individualist. Picture Elijah as a young Clint Eastwood. Out wandering the woods, relying on his courage, charisma and connection to God.

In fact, the Bible never says that Elijah dies. Did you notice? He just goes up into heaven. For a lot of people, the longer they remember him, the more amazing Elijah becomes. As they think back, Elijah was,

Faster than a speeding chariot,
more powerful than the strongest king,
able to leap into heaven in a single bound.
Elijah the Super Prophet!

Now, imagine being the one who is designated to follow Elijah. That is the lot of poor Elisha, who is less like Clint Eastwood, and more like the dean of a Liberal Arts faculty. He is not so charismatic as he is good at running faculty meetings.

Face it, Elijah and Elisha are just plain two very different prophets. When Elijah is about to leap into heaven, he asks, Elisha: Is there anything you want before I go? Elisha says: I want to do twice as much as you did. To which Elijah gives his Clint Eastwood smile, and says, “Dreaming’ isn’t much of a livin’.”

And Yet! When Elijah takes off into the clouds like Superman, Elisha SEES the VISION! From that spectacular parting, Elisha is filled with hope! In a Dramatic Ritual: Elisha tears off his old clothes as if to say “The Old Me is Gone!”

He snatches up Elijah’s coat twirls it around like a beach towel snaps it at the water and calls on the name of the Lord. And like Moses at the Red Sea: the water divides in two! Elisha has a vision of himself: he is the New Elijah AND the new Moses! That’s who he is!

At least in his own mind.

Then he goes into the reality of trying to fill Elijah’s shoes. How bad is it, you may ask. Well, to welcome Elisha as their new dean, the University of Prophets hold a reception. Some wine, some

cheese and crackers, pink floral center pieces. The faculty all gather around him, patting him on the back and telling him congratulations.

Then they say, "You know, we saw that Elijah take off like Superman. For the first order of business in your new reign, we want to send out 50 marathoners to go find out where Elijah landed, to see if we can bring him back.

Welcome to reality, Elisha.

When Elisha says, "Actually, I really do not think that would be a good idea." They ignore him completely, and go out looking anyway! They search for 3 days! When the 50 come back, Elisha, having just been publically insulted, ends up saying in a pretty snarky tone: "I told you so." Which, when you reflect on it, is not the strongest way to start out a new job.

There are two more crucial moves to understand Elisha's story. The very next thing that happens is Elisha goes on to Beersheba, a city well whose water was so tainted, it not only tasted horrible, they suspected it also may have been toxic. Elisha heals the well. It's a miracle! They should be thrilled with him. They have a miracle worker.

That they are NOT is plain in the very NEXT story, in 2 Kings 2: 23-25, which the Lectionary never includes. It contains a phrase that Bible translators either do not know how to translate, or do not want to translate. Friends, this story is a bit edgy, do let me simply say this large gang of young men mock Elisha, calling him "baldy," and curse him – and Elisha curses them back "in the name of the Lord." "Then immediately two she-bears come out of the woods and maul forty-two of them."

Much as I would like to say that the moral of the story is, don't make fun of the old bald guy, this story means something very different. One has to put all of these stories together. A lot of people are uncomfortable with this story about the bears mauling the young men, and think, "Isn't that horrible of God to do that." But the story does not say God sent the bears.

The real bears in this story are the 50 who go out searching for the good old days. The real bears in this story are the 42 people who disrespect the prophet, and undermine the religious foundation of the community. These people tear themselves, and their community apart.

They disrespect Elisha, and what happens? Bears tear asunder – it says their youth, but what it means is: their future. When the people disrespect their leader, the future is in jeopardy.

A prophet helps to guide and navigate the moral compass of a community. Acting as a prophet in a community is based on trust. Credibility. The prophet can't do a thing without respect. Loyalty. Trust.

Here is the thing. When they give Elisha a chance, they discover that Elisha can work unbelievable miracles. The question is, which future will they choose?

I think this is a crucial story because it applies so clearly to the issue in the church in a time of pastoral succession. The temptation is always to say: Remember Reverend Superman. Things were really great back then. Remember the good old days.

When people get focused on an idealized past, they undermine the next Pastor. There forms an atmosphere of disrespect, disloyalty and disregard.

“Remember the good old days,” can lead to the whim of nostalgia starting to calcify, turning into a habit that infects the culture. When the nostalgia turns into the idol of worship the past, it becomes a sin. What happens to a church mired in the sin of nostalgia? Bears come out of the woods, and tear the church apart.

I’ve spent a little time in bear country. Hiking in Alaska: hiking in grizzly bear country. Before you go, the Park Rangers very carefully tell you how to set up the boundaries in your camp. We set up our tent here, we did our food preparation 100 yards away. We stored the food in a bear proof container 100 yards away from there. On our hike, I saw bear tracks the size of dinner plates, but we had no problems in camp. In bear country, you respect the boundaries.

Churches have to bear proof their congregation. Set up some boundaries for behavior to avoid bears. If do not develop and respect boundaries about your spiritual leader, you attract bears.

I have a friend who is coming out with a book next year with the controversial thesis that the decline of many churches is significantly is tied to the abuse that too many churches heap out on their pastors. He makes a powerful case. No boundaries attracts bears.

Elisha’s lot in his ministry is the difficult task of following Elijah. House of Hope has a remarkable lineage of Senior Pastors. Truly, some of the finest pastors in America. I love hearing the stories of your former pastors: an extraordinary visionary; a remarkable orator; a great administrator; a fabulous builder of community; an outstanding social prophet.

I wonder what you will say about me when I am gone. Probably something like, when McDonald preached, there was an amazing amount of.... parking.

Whatever you’re past, acknowledge your history. Celebrate it. Then turn away from it, and face the future.

In the near future, you will have a new pastor. How will you do better than the people who had this incredibly hard time welcoming Elisha?

I have found the House of Hope to be an amazingly supportive church. You give me energy. You work toward important goals. You are positive. You talk about the past, but you do not dwell on it.

Mistakes that have been made in the past have been wisely, thoughtfully corrected. You have made changes, including the structure of power in your leadership. And then these stories largely have

been appropriately left in the past. Just as there can be a nostalgia for the good old days, there can also be a nostalgia for digging up the dirt on the bad old days. Both are destructive. Look forward!

This is a healthy, vibrant, amazing church, and it is to be strongly commended. Healthy churches have people who bear proof themselves against destructive behavior. Build healthy boundaries, and then keep checking the fences.

I would like to talk about the care and feeding of your next Senior Pastor. Welcome her or him exceedingly well. You only have one first start. Think it through.

I was called to one church. Somehow I had risen to the top against 100 other candidates. It was more than twice the size of my former church. I was nervous about being in this new role. Gene and Bess invited me along with the Pastor Nominating Committee to a barbeque at their house on the lake. The Search Committee surprised me. Along with their covered dish potluck, they brought the Dossiers of all the other 99 candidates. We all went down to by the lake, to a bonfire, and they burned them all! It was a symbolic way of saying, "Everyone else is gone, and you are our pastor!"

I encourage you: find powerful symbolic ways to say embrace your new pastor and say, "You are ours. No turning back. We are with you."

HOH is a very gracious, welcoming church. Grace matters. I arrived, and soon I was invited to a group dinner. Marvelous. Then I was invited to individual dinners. Tremendous. Then I was taken out to lunch. I started to gain a lot of weight. But it was a wonderful welcome. Organize your welcome well.

Recognize it is hard on a pastor to move. When I came here, everything was new. This is a complex church. My head was swimming most of the time. Some of the staff thought I had Alzheimer's. (Don't deny it, I know you thought it!) It takes time to wrap your head around this complex situation. Give your new pastor time to get oriented. That first year is incredibly challenging.

But for as hard as it is on the pastor, it is harder on their family. Garrison Keillor said, when the Saints were burned at the stake, they did not take their wives and children along with. Pastors do.

If they have a family, encourage your pastor, in that first year especially, to be very careful with their schedule, and take lots of time to be with their family.

Put committee meetings on the same one or two nights per month, so the pastor can have other nights at home with their family. It will make a huge difference in the long haul. For them, and for the church.

If there is something that does not work for you about the next pastor, talk with them about it. I saw a T-Shirt that said, "Keep Minnesota Passive Aggressive.... or whatever." None of that! Talk with the pastor about your needs and perspective.

I served a church where something was wrong but they had the hardest time telling me what it was. I brought a list of 37 things churches complain about regarding their pastors, and we went over it line by line over it at a Session meeting. It took a long, painful time for them to get it out. They finally told me: They did not like sermons. I realized they were delusional.

Nevertheless, next Sunday, I recorded my sermon. That night I sat down to watch it. I fell asleep. The next week, I recorded my sermon again. That night, I sat down to watch it. I fell asleep again. And I began to realize – they were right. So I began to take preaching classes. Things got better, and I have always been thankful that they told me what I needed to hear.

The point is: I learned and grew in my ministry because they talked with me openly and directly. Make it your goal. No gossip. No kitchen cabinet. No unsigned letters. No parking lot post game analysis. Just an honest, open discussion. Commit yourself: If there is something that is not working, talk with your pastor, who will love you for it. Give them time. Believe in them. Give Your Pastor Nominating Committee credibility: Will they give you Elijah? Or Elisha? Either way, if you trust them, and trust your next pastor, and trust the Holy Spirit, miracles will happen. It is up to you to make it work.

Take a look at the Book of Order, and it is very clear: the church only works based on trust. Trust that you will be there for each other no matter what.

The most important thing: find your passion. Live out your passion. Live out your calling in the church. If you do, you will be more focused on fulfilling your ministry than critiquing the pastor's. In fact, seek to partner with your new pastor. Dream big with your new pastor. There is nothing like dreaming of doing something miraculous as the Spirit leads us Christians together.

This past week there were two celebrations. Ujamaa Place celebrated 11 years. This organization which helps transform the lives of impoverished young black men was significantly started by Rev. David Van Dyke and the House of Hope, working in partnership. Miraculous things happen from their work.

Also this week, the Jeremiah Project, which helps young women with children break the cycle of poverty, had an event celebrating 21 years. The Director of Jeremiah named Rev. Linda Loving as one of 3 women who helped birth that idea. And then, this congregation committed \$300,000 to get it going. That one program, started by the partnership of Rev. Loving and House of Hope, has spread to other programs in Minneapolis, Rochester, Fargo, Boston, and New York. Last year, they helped 450 families lift themselves out of poverty. If that is not a miracle, I don't know what is!

When churches partner with their pastors, the miracles of God happen. The world becomes a better place. Prepare yourselves to partner strongly with your next pastor. Begin now and imagine what is coming next!