

Are All the Stories of the Bible Real or Are They Just Stories?

Questions from the Floor II (sixth sermon in the series)

2 Kings 2:23-24

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Our Old Testament text this morning is from 2 Kings 2:23-24. One of the members of the nominating committee that brought me here, Marcus Scott, has harangued me for years to preach on this text. Its correlation to our question may seem tendentious at best, but stay with me. Listen for a word from God:

²³ Elisha went up from there to Beth-el; 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.

Luckily, we also have a gospel text this morning is from the 18th chapter of John, verse 37-38a:

Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Pilate asked him, "What is truth?" After he had said this, he went out... (John 18:37-38a)

The Word of our Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Over the last six weeks, you have provided us questions to address. Like this week's, "Are all the stories of the Bible real or are they just stories?" Or the one I addressed a few weeks ago, "What is hell?" In turn, I have a question for you. Where are the easy ones?

Did Adam and Eve have belly buttons? Yes. No. Maybe. I don't know. Okay, it's not that easy.

Who did Cain and Abel marry? Well, ummmm...

Why do you have a beard? Oh, wait, you actually did that one.

Did the prophet Elisha really call bears out of the wood to maul a flock of children because they called him baldy? I think the take away for that is, "Don't mess with the minister." (Look!) Or with Marcus, who's bald. (Sorry, Marcus, but I think they already knew).

So, is this true? The whole enterprise. This book. Is it real? Is it true? Is it factual? Historical? Honest? Worthwhile testimony? Are all the stories of the Bible real or are they *just* the greatest stories ever told?

“What say you? What do you say, Casey? What do you say?”

“Yes.”

“Yes?”

“Yes.”

“She-bears mauling children over an issue of vanity?”

Okay, let's take a step back. Take a look at this. (Hold up Bible). This is four pounds of truth.

“What is truth?”

“Hold on, Pilate. We'll get there.”

This is four pounds of truth. Have you read it? Really read it? The way you read a love letter? With a rapacious glee, an eagerness to fully drink it in. Ezekiel actually ate this, the Word of God, he desired it so much. Tastes like honey, he said. Sweet. Like a romance.

Have you read it? Have you read it so much it becomes part of you? Have the love songs sounded in your dreams? Have the rebukes whistled in your ears as consider mischief? Has wisdom of the comforted whispered to you in your distress? Have the riddles plagued you with a sleepless night? Have you read it?

But that's the wrong question, really.

Has it read you? Has the story of the good Samaritan offered an insight to the inflexibility of your boundaries? Has the story of Jonah pinned you down for your fear of others? Has John the Baptist convicted you of double-heartedness? Has Ehud, the left-handed terrorist for God, asked you to reevaluate the violence you condone? What? You haven't read that one? Judges 3. Has Mary walked with you during a frightening choice? Has Hannah illuminated our tortured assumptions about motherhood? Has Samson identified for you strength you didn't know you had? Has Nicodemus been your guide in the darkness when you weren't ready to believe?

We look at this book and because we are modern people we bring modern assumptions to it, and one of our modern assumptions is a scientific worldview; and so we take these four pounds of truth and we try to impose our definitions of truth upon it—but this book is more interested in defining the genre for us. This book wants to tell us what truth is. And I'm grateful for that.

Don't get me wrong. I appreciate science. When my daughter was in the hospital and needed the full knowledge and imagination of practical scientists, I was glad that men and women have dedicated their lives to empirically known, hypothesized, tested, retested, double-blind-clinically-trialed, concluded, peer-reviewed, challenged and retested again,

knowledge. Science answers a whole host of questions I care about. But they also ignore, or comically try to answer others: Love, transcendence, liberation.

Honestly, you're going to tell me about love with words like "norepinephrine fires in the cerebral cortex" when I have the Song of Solomon? Please. You're going to tell me about transcendence with words like "solenoids emit a weak but complex magnetism in the temporal lobe harvesting a sense of presence in the subject" when I have the call of Isaiah to the heavenly court? You're going to tell me about selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitors when I have Psalm 130? You're going to tell me about psychological liberation when I have Exodus? Redemption when I have Mark? Justice when I have Luke? Sacrificial love when I have John?

You're kidding me, right? Science may speak to portions of these questions, but not to the portions that orient our lives.

I've never once had this conversation:

"Casey, my heart is breaking."

"Well, have you considered that it might be the reduced output of norepinephrine now that you're no longer new to each other?"

"Casey, it feels like I've not just been abandoned by her but by God as well."

"Well, I have some solenoids that I could place on or around your temporal lobe—which I understand creates a sense of another's presence in the room. Would you like that?"

"Casey, I think I'm going to go talk to Steve."

What I'm after is this: We've reduced the notion of true to that which is verifiable, that which is factual, historical, that which can be measured objectively—and that is an unholy reduction of these four pounds.

I like to think of the words of e.e. cummings here. He said, "Beware. Given a scalpel we'd dissect a kiss. Sold a reason, un-dream a dream." Beware, because a scalpel can't understand a kiss and norepinephrine doesn't understand the truth that Jesus witnesses to, "That God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son to stand before Pilate..."

So why would we ever try to turn this book into a history book or a science textbook? Why would try to turn these four pounds into something that is mute when it comes to question about love, God, liberation?

Why?

I know why. You know why. It's not a great secret. We are modern people. It's hard not to look at the serpent in the garden and say, "Hold on, now. I've never heard a serpent talk. I am not that naïve."

Let me tell you a story that might help. I've told it before, so I'm sure all of you remember it perfectly. Karl Barth, the prominent theologian, was traveling in the U.S. He was giving a lecture on Genesis 3, the story of the serpent in the garden, when a student raised his hand and said, "Dr. Barth, you couldn't possibly believe in this nonsense, could you? You can't actually believe that a serpent could talk?"

And Barth replied, "I'm not interested in whether the serpent could talk. I'm interested in what the serpent had to say."

Which is a perfect illustration of what Paul Ricoeur calls the second naiveté.

The first naiveté is not asking the question, a literal belief in the serpent's speech. The second naiveté happens when you pass through the critical phase, of questioning the factuality of it all, and come to the conclusion that these four pounds aren't about making claims of whether the serpent could talk, it's about making claims about love, God, liberation. And that these claims are not only worthwhile, but the best we've got. The best we'll ever have. So, we read the story and we don't ask if the serpent can talk— we ask what the serpent is trying to say to us.

"Fine, Casey. I'll buy that. Fine. But tell me about the she-bears."

"Which she-bears?"

"The ones that maul forty-two children because they called Elisha baldy."

"I was hoping you'd forget about that."

I could make something up, tell you why it's critical that we respect the feral nature of God; but quite frankly no one will find that satisfying. There are simply some stories in scripture that are confounding. This is one.

But let me tell you why I'm glad it's in scripture.

Elijah and his protégé Elisha were renowned for having powers beyond the normal prophetic set. Elijah could call down fire from the heavens (and though Elisha doesn't, there's the suggestion that he could). Elisha can call forth the natural world to do his bidding. They heal people from a distance. An interesting thing happens to these two iconic figures when we get to the New Testament: Elijah (and to a lesser extent, Elisha, but it's there) becomes the template for John the Baptist except in one gospel, the gospel of Luke. There they become the template for how Luke talks about Jesus. Jesus becomes a grander, more powerful Elijah, a more robust Elisha. If you want to know how that works, talk to me later.

But he's a more loving, more just version of those prophets. In Luke, when the Samaritans refused to receive Jesus into their town because he was journeying toward Jerusalem, when they insult him this way, James and John have an idea straight out of the playbook of Elijah and Elisha. "Lord, you want us to call down fire upon them to punish them?"

And Jesus rebukes them. And he must rebuke them vigorously, because I'm certain the next part of that plan was this: "Lord, can we call out the she-bears to maul their young? They will never disrespect you again!"

Stories like the she-bears are a reminder that God can do whatever God wants. Stories like the one in Luke are a reminder that God doesn't—no matter how bloodthirsty his disciples get. Remember that our final arbiter is always Jesus, the one who would rather succumb to violence than perpetrate it, the one who, when faced with this choice before Pilate, said that he came into the world not to be its king, but to witness to the truth."

"But what is truth, Casey?"

"Okay, Pilate, let's deal that now. By Jesus' definition, the truth is God, not some factuality, not some historicity."

"But what about the historicity of the resurrection? Doesn't Paul say that if Christ hasn't been resurrected then our faith is in vain?"

"Yes. So, listen to this. At the heart of our story is a historical event. It is, however, a historical event that nobody can prove ever happened."

"But... but..."

"It is a matter of trust."

"Trust in what, Casey."

"A trust in God, the truth that Jesus witnesses to."

"Can you trust in these four pounds as a reliable witness to who God actually is? Read it. Really read it. Drink it in like a love letter. Read it. Be read by it. Engage it. Read it critically and then with a born-again naiveté. Then ask yourself this question: can you trust it as a reliable witness to who God actually is?"

I can. That's why when you ask me, "Are all the stories of the Bible real or are they just stories?" I can simply say yes.

Amen.

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