

2 Kings Lighten Up Week 3

February is Black History Month when we intentionally celebrate the contributions of Black people in this nation. I need to say, first, that we ought to be celebrating those contributions every month and every day. And also, Black history is part of our shared history, so if you don't know much about Black history, use this month to begin to learn and consider how we can continue to build a nation in which all people truly experience "justice and liberty for all."

Since it is Black History month, and today we are focusing on laughter and humor as a way of shining a light on the blahs, I thought we ought to enjoy some humor brought to us by Black comedians. There are a lot of them, and I listened to them on YouTube far longer than I intended. The website Black America Web published a list of the top 20 Black comedians of all time and like a lot of comedians, their jokes include some pretty salty language and adult topics, so I've done some "cleaning up" for our diverse audience today. Steve Harvey is on the list. You may have heard his routine about getting to heaven when he joked, "You don't have to be perfect to get into heaven; I just hope God's grading on a curve." He doesn't do stand-up comedy now, but when he did, he joked a lot about the differences he sees between men and women. He said, "Women are investigators. Can't nobody find stuff out like a woman. Y'all put the police to shame, make the little investigative tricks they show on CSI and Law & Order: SVU look like counting lessons on Sesame Street."

Another comedian on the top 20 Black comedians of all time is Wanda Sykes, who told this great joke about her end of life wishes:

"I even planned my funeral. I told them what to do with my body. I said, 'Look, I'm an organ donor, so make sure that happens. And the rest of it, just burn it up.'

"And they were like, 'What should we do with the ashes?'

"I said, 'Spread them over Halle Berry.' She doesn't even have to be at the funeral, just catch her [ass] on the street one day."

Comedians rely on the news for a lot their material, which is truly amazing as I struggle to see anything funny in the news. However, Thursday night was

different. I came home from Pub Theology cold and tired after what had been as they say, “a day,” if I’m honest, it was “a week.” I crawled under a blanket and a dog and started reading the CNN headlines, not the best way to boost my mood, I know. But then I saw the headline: “Suspected Chinese Spy Balloon Found Over Northern U.S” And this is the image that immediately sprang to my mind.
(slide of picture of Pennywise clown from *It* and trademark red balloon)

I have to admit to being a little disappointed when I clicked on the story and saw the real spy balloon. It wasn’t nearly as interesting as my imagination.
(slide of picture of real spy balloon)

It feels good to laugh, doesn’t it? As I’ve reflected on the role humor plays in my life, what I’ve realized is that very often a space doesn’t feel safe to me until I realize laughter is welcome. I’ve found that to be true for other people too. Have you been in a meeting that felt tense and unproductive until someone said or did something that made people laugh? It changes everything. People begin to relax, which researchers know supports higher level thinking and creativity. Laughter makes the meeting, classroom, worship service, or family dinner, more fun. And life should be fun...maybe not all the time, but some of the time, ordinary life should be fun.

Traditional Christianity doesn’t seem to have bought into that though. In some ways, our Christians have managed to suck the fun out of life by handing down lists of “shall nots,” and rejecting imaginative, fresh interpretations of scripture. And yet, in Ecclesiastes we read,
“there is a time to weep and a time to laugh.” And I think we would feel better if we were attentive to looking for times to laugh.

The truth is, there are some funny stories in the Bible. There is a talking donkey, a preacher who preaches so long someone falls asleep and literally falls out of his seat, and a metaphor of squeezing a camel through the eye of the needle. In fact, one of the things scholars look for when they are trying to determine if something that has been attributed to Jesus was actually said by Jesus, is sarcasm and humor. That’s right, we think Jesus was funny. So really, those of us whose love language is sarcasm are truly following in the ways of Jesus.

Today's story is not a Jesus story, but it is funny. It is from the Hebrew Bible and is found in 2 Kings 2. The story is about the prophet Elisha, but it starts with his mentor, Elijah. This chapter in 2 Kings is sandwiched between the summary of the reigns of King Ahaziah (**A** ha-ziah) and his brother, King Jehoram(**Jah**-horam). Their stories are interrupted by the momentous event of prophetic succession, the end of Elijah's ministry and the beginning of Elisha's. The chapter has two principal parts: the ascension of Elijah to heaven, when Elisha takes the mantle of prophetic leadership, and the second part, which is the weirdly funny part. To understand the funny part, we must know about the first part.

Chapter two begins with a huge spoiler, "Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal." So, we know right away what the climax of the story will be. But on our way there, Elijah and Elisha travel from Gilgal down to Bethel, then from Bethel to Jericho to the Jordan River. At each stop, Elijah tells his disciple, Elisha, to remain behind while he continues the journey, but Elisha refuses to leave him. We can think of this journey as sort of a rite of passage for Elisha in which he makes his devotion to Elijah and determination to follow him to the end clear.

At last, the two prophets come to the Jordan. At their previous stops, there were other prophets who spoke to Elisha, warning him that Elijah would be taken from him that day, but here on the bank of the Jordan, the other prophets remain at a distance. There, Elijah rolls up his mantle (his outer covering or cloak), probably into some semblance of a staff, and strikes the water of the river.

The waters part and the two prophets walk across on dry ground. The mantle is a symbol of Elijah's power and authority in the same way Moses' staff represented his power and authority as he stretched it out to part the waters of the Red Sea during the story of the Israelites' escape from Egypt and Pharaoh. The biblical writer wants us to see that Elijah was a prophet like Moses, and it was that kind of prophetic leadership at stake in this story. Having crossed the Jordan, they were in the region where Moses died. There, Elisha asked to be given a double portion of Elijah's spirit. Perhaps he was asking to be treated as Elijah's principal heir or maybe he was just a bit greedy. Either way, Elijah responded to the request saying, "You have asked a hard thing, yet if you see me as I am taken from you, it will be granted, if not, it will not."

As the two continued walking, “fiery chariots and fiery horses,” like Ubers from heaven, separate the two men, and Elijah ascended to heaven. The star of the show in this story has always been the special effects, but the really important part is that Elijah’s ministry will continue, God will still speak, and it will be through Elisha.

Elisha, continuing his rite of passage, picked up the mantle dropped by Elijah and returned to the bank of the Jordan where he parted the water as Elijah had and he began his journey back, next going to Jericho. While there, the people of the city report that the water was bad, making the land unfruitful. Elisha asked for a bowl with salt in it. When the bowl was brought to him, he took it to the spring of water, threw the salt in it and pronounced the water healed. If you are counting, that is two miraculous acts for Elisha, demonstrating that he has the power of Elijah.

And now we come to his demonstration of power. This is the part of the story that is so bizarre, it is funny.

This is 2 Kings 2:23-25.

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!”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.²⁵ From there he went on to Mount Carmel and then returned to Samaria.

Take that, mean boys.

It’s okay to laugh at the Bible. It really is. It’s funny to imagine a prophet, a man entrusted with bringing the people the word of God, a man who was able to part the water and walk over dry land and who brought new life to an entire town by restoring their water supply...it’s funny to imagine that after those acts, he pivots to cursing some kids because they made fun of him, causing them to be mauled by bears. Elisha’s response seems vindictive, petty, and morally unjustifiable, certainly beneath a man of God. But the point of this little tale is not what is right or wrong. Ethics is not the issue. The point, rather, is a theological one and for me personally, it’s one I cannot subscribe to, but here it is nonetheless.

This theological point needs the preceding episode when, in the name of God, Elisha healed Jericho's water. These episodes set side by side, one in which God is called on to give life and the other in which God is called on to curse life, give us a window into how the ancient Israelites understood their God. Their God was all powerful, not like their neighbors' gods who only controlled certain things and weren't particularly reliable. The Israelite God could give life and take it away. Their God could bless and curse. Their God could save and punish. And the Israelites didn't have to understand it or like it, but they believed it.

Truth be told, a lot of Christians believe that too, and I would guess that theology is part of what pushes people away from Christianity. Who wants to believe in and serve a God who causes awful things to happen to people, a God that is as small as human beings can be sometimes? We don't have to believe that. I don't believe that. Awful things happen to people, but God doesn't cause them. Sometimes people do awful things to each other. And sometimes awful things happen because the natural world is powerful and unpredictable or because our bodies get sick or worn out, not because God curses anyone with anything.

I guess what I am trying to say is that God is not petty. God did not get on board with Elisha's pettiness and send some bears to maul some boys because they made fun of his bald head. In this story we see that Elisha had a self-image problem. In his defense, he had big shoes to fill. It was so important to him that he measure up to Elijah that, in the words of Phillips Theological Seminary's Rev. Dr. Lisa Davison, "Elisha's ministry was more about miracle-working than proclaiming a word from the Holy."

If we were to read 2 Kings from the beginning, we would learn that the boys' name calling probably hit a nerve for Elisha. In the first chapter, Elijah is described as "a hairy man," and based on the taunts from the boys, calling him baldhead, we can assume Elisha was not. Just one more way in which he just wasn't Elijah, which didn't seem to be okay with Elisha.

What Elisha needed was someone to tell him not to take himself so seriously. He didn't have to be Elijah. God needed him to be Elisha, bald head and all. The same is true for us. Life is serious business, but we don't have to take it all so seriously. We can care for ourselves by lightening up, by laughing more (even at ourselves) and embracing our own uniqueness. We need to find the silly and weird in

ordinary life and treasure it all. Sometimes it is those moments, those glimpses of humor, that get us through hard things and show us glimmers of light when life feels dark. Maybe that's why we tend to gravitate toward the people who make us laugh. Maybe we know deep down that if a person can make us laugh on a first date or when we first interact with them, that person can also make us laugh on the hard days too. And, whether we like it or not, we will all have hard days.

Laughter won't fix the things, but sometimes laughter makes them bearable. And sometimes bearable is the best we can hope for. There is a scene in the movie *Steel Magnolias* that illustrates this perfectly.

It takes place in the cemetery, following the funeral for M'Lynn's (played by Sally Fields) daughter, Shelby. M'Lynn is, understandably, overwhelmed with grief. Movie Clip-:07-1:50)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iZx1W6cHw-g>

I remember seeing that movie for the first time and feeling absolutely gutted. I was sobbing in the theater. My stomach was upset I was so miserable. And then, Clairee (at Ouiser's expense) made it bearable. That's what humor does. Humor has a way of infusing us with hope and giving us the strength to keep going. So, let's lean into that this week. I invite you to try to find something to laugh about every single day. Challenge yourself to see the funny or peculiar in ordinary things and give yourself permission to enjoy silliness and to laugh. Let laughter shine a light on your blahs or the blahs of someone you encounter. Remind yourself what it feels like to have a good belly laugh.

I will end this morning with this reminder that laughter really is part of our faith tradition.

I mentioned earlier that in Ecclesiastes we read, *"there is a time to weep and a time to laugh."*

Thomas Aquinas wrote that there is a time for *"playful deeds and jokes."*

Martin Luther once said, *"You have as much laughter as you have faith."*

John Calvin declared,
"we are nowhere forbidden to laugh."

Soren Kierkegaard wrote,
"Humor is intrinsic to Christianity."

And last Dietrich Bonhoeffer said,
"Ultimate seriousness is not without a dose of humor."

Live a little, laugh a little, and love a lot this week, dear ones. Amen.