

A Preacher Say, “I Am Not Okay”

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, January 9, 2022, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [1 Kings 19:1-9](#)

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Angels have been on my mind this week. When I saw this photo on Facebook yesterday, I thought it was a blown glass, crafted to look like 2 angels. It turns out it is a photograph of two drops of rain falling into a puddle, taken with a super-slow-motion camera. Stunning. I think I saw angels because angels have been on my mind this week.

This is the first of a four-part sermon series, inspired by the Rev. Otis Moss, III. In this series, we will look at four stories from the Bible when a character, in one way or another, says, “I am not OK.”

Today we have a story of a time the prophet Elijah – the prophet for whom Jews set a place at their Passover Seders, a prophet who is that important in the Hebrew scriptures and to the Jewish religion – says, “I am not Okay.” So I’m going to talk about Elijah. The thing is, I can’t talk about this story without talking about angels, too. I realized that at the Monday Morning Bible Study. So, angels have been on my mind this week.

The story we heard Ceci read is the middle section of a story that takes two chapters to tell. There had been a drought in Israel for three years. Three years of drought in the desert region means that grazing lands have dried up and food production has fallen.

Somewhat surprisingly (at least to me), the question people are asking is not, “Why?” They’re not asking, “Why is this drought happening?” The question people are asking is, “Who?” “Who is causing the drought?” and “Who can end the drought?” Is the great Baal, Baal of the heavens, in charge, or is Yahweh in charge?

On one hand, we have Elijah – whose name literally means Yahweh is God – claiming that Yahweh is in charge. On the other hand, backed by Queen Jezebel and King Ahab, we have huge numbers of Hebrews claiming that Baal is in charge. A showdown happens at Mount Carmel. On one side, we have a few hundred prophets of Baal, and on the other side, we have Elijah. In the contest worthy of a Cecil B. DeMille film (I’ll let you read all the details for yourself), Elijah proves that Yahweh is truly God. The scene is so Hollywood, so over the top, that it’s hard to take it seriously. And because it’s hard to take seriously, it become easy not to take seriously what happens after the contest – when Elijah tells the crowd gathered there to seize the prophets of Baal, and Elijah kills them all.

Now we get to the part of the story that is today’s reading. When King Ahab tells Queen Jezebel that Elijah has killed the prophets of Baal, that he has killed the prophets she was backing, she gets angry. She sends a message to Elijah that she’s going to kill him. When the queen issues a death threat, it’s not an idle threat, and Elijah is frightened.

He is so scared by this threat that he flees into the countryside, into the wilderness, to hide. Fear drives him into the wilderness, and then things change for him emotionally. Alone in the wild, Elijah plants himself under a broom tree and his fear turns to depression. There's no explanation about why this change happens. At the Bible study, we speculated that perhaps it is guilt or shame that did it. Perhaps Elijah felt guilty for killing hundreds of people, even if they were prophets of Baal. Elijah does pray, "I am no better than my ancestors." Whatever the cause, the depression is deep. Elijah prays that Yahweh will take his life. And he lays down and falls asleep.

While he's sleeping, an angel comes to him, touches him, and tells him, "Get up and eat." (You see why angels have been on my mind?) Miraculously, there's food and water there, and Elijah partakes, and then he goes back to sleep. The angel comes a second time, wakes him again and reminds him to eat. He does, and he is strengthened for the journey ahead.

One of my favorite conclusions drawn from this story is, *Never underestimate the spiritual power of a nap and a snack.*

Yes, Elijah needed a nap and a snack. And he was so not-okay that he also needed an angel. He needed someone to get the food ready for him. He couldn't manage on his own. His anger and guilt and depression were so great he needed outside help.

As we were discussing the story in the Bible study, Joy Barnitz was reminded of the classic movie *It's a Wonderful Life*. Now, I'm guessing most of you have seen *It's a Wonderful Life*. If you haven't, I apologize for any spoilers that are coming.

In the movie, Jimmy Stewart plays George Bailey, a man who had always hoped to leave Bedford Falls and see the world. Instead, the Great Depression hits, and, through a series of events that I won't spoil, fear that the family run Savings & Loan will collapse keeps him from leaving. This fear leads to a despondency that leads to a suicidal depression. And that's when Clarence shows up. Clarence is an angel who helps George see that he actually has a wonderful life – even with all its heartaches and hardships.

In his fear and depression, George needs an angel. He needs someone to help him see what he could not see on his own: that he is surrounded by love, that he has more friends than he could count, and (as the movie concludes) "No man is a failure who has friends."

Friends are important. In fact, friends are often the angels God sends us when we are not okay. And Clarence isn't the only angel in the movie.

Jim Rediehs says that Mary is the true hero of the story.¹ He notes that the movie starts off with Mary praying for God to be with George. Her prayer, along with the prayers of others who join her, are the catalyst for the angel, Clarence, being sent to George. Mary is the one who sees the beauty of the old broken-down house that becomes their home. Mary is the one who offers their \$2,000 of honeymoon money to keep the Savings & Loan afloat during the run on the bank. "When George is depressed by his friends moving onward and

¹ Jim Rediehs, in a post in the Facebook Group, "It's A Wonderful Life," <https://www.facebook.com/groups/2216706492/permalink/10158213088561493> (posted 24 December 2021; accessed 26 December 2021).

upward in the world and thinks he's a disappointment to his wife because of it, Mary makes it clear that she 'didn't want to marry anybody else in town.'"² And Mary is the one who goes all over town to ask for help for her husband. Uncle Billy remarks, "Mary did it, George! Mary did it!" And if you watch the movie carefully, you'll see that Mary doesn't want the credit. What she did, she did for love.



Referring to this still from the movie, Rediehs invites us to notice where Mary is in the frame. Mary is in the background and still important as she rises above everyone else. She is watching over George, as she has been all these years. She is "as much a guardian angel to George as Clarence was."³

May we all be blessed by Marys in our lives.

There's one more story about fear and angels I want to talk about because

fear doesn't always lead to depression. Sometimes fear can turn us into monsters. Take a look again at the Epiphany story. I know I preached on this text last week. Still, our sacred texts are rich and there's always more truth and light coming from them.

You might remember that Matthew says that when the Magi stopped in Jerusalem to inquire about the newborn king, Herod, the current king of Judea, was frightened. Nadia Bolz-Weber says we can look at this story as being the story of two men: "Herod, who is a ruler on a throne of power, and Joseph who is a peasant in an unconventional marriage."⁴

This is what she says about these two men:

"One man is powerful and one man is not. And yet the text only describes one of these men as being afraid. And it wasn't the peasant. Matthew's Gospel tells us that King Herod made the Magi tell him where this baby was because he was frightened.

"Frightened of a baby. Threatened by a horoscope and a newborn.

"And this fear that his position in life is so tenuous that it must be fortified by sacrificing whoever it takes is not a theoretical by the way – this Herod guy literally killed two of his own sons because he felt threatened by them. His own sons.

"Fear that what he had could be taken away, or fear of not getting what he wanted turned him into a monster. So much so that when he can't quite locate the right baby, the one that is so threatening to him, he just sends for all the children two and under in and around Bethlehem to be killed.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Nadia Bolz-Weber, "Epiphany," *The Corners*, <https://thecorners.substack.com/p/epiphany> (posted and accessed 6 January 2022).

“Take that in.... This is what fear does. Fear disguises itself in so many ways: as greed, hate, isolation, addiction ... the list is endless. But in the end fear is at the root of all of it. And while you and I might not be murderous tyrants, none of us are free from the effects of fear in our lives. It keeps us isolated and small and it steals away joy and possibility.

“But in Joseph we see a different kind of man than Herod. Joseph was not afraid.

“An angel came from God and spoke love, was love, embodied love, sought to protect love – like a divine can of compressed air, and this cast out Joseph’s fear so that he could function the way he was intended to. And here’s one clue – one way that we can know that Joseph was not afraid: he didn’t bat an eye when the angel said that his baby and wife weren’t safe so he should take his family to Egypt....

“With fear cast out, Joseph was able to believe it possible that God’s redemptive work can happen anywhere – even Egypt. With fear cast out, Joseph no longer had to see everything through the lens of what it was in the past. With fear cast out, he was able to beat a king, protect his wife and child, and preserve that which is good in the face of tyranny....

“Herod’s fear caused death and Joseph’s fearlessness protected life. Of course the irony is that Herod feared this baby for all the wrong reasons. The Christ child did not knock Herod off his pathetic little throne. History took care of that.

“No. Jesus of Nazareth did not overthrow Rome, he laughed at Rome. He saw Rome for what it was: temporary. Fleeting. Harsh and demanding and tyrannical, yes, but temporary.

“And this child, protected by the songs of angels and the heart of his mother and the fearlessness of his father, came to free the people. Free us from the shackles of sin and fear. Gospel people are free people and free people are dangerous people. Free people aren’t ruled by fear. Free people see Rome for what it is.

“And you know what? There are angels hovering round us, good people of God. There are messengers of love all around. And again, and forever, they say: do not be afraid. Do not be afraid. For in the heart of God there is enough love to cast out fear. Herods of the world, take note.”⁵

Amen.

⁵ *Ibid.*