

“Living Your Okayest Life: But What If I Am Overwhelmed?”

Series: *Living Your Okayest Life*

Scripture: 1 Kings 19:1-16

Rev. Pen Peery

February 9, 2025



First Presbyterian
Church of Charlotte

Last week, we started a February sermon series called “Living Your Okayest Life,” which is a nod to this year’s Willard Lecturer, Kate Bowler, who will be here on March 6th. Kate’s lecture is titled “Life After Perfect” – she’s focused on helping people set down the expectations of perfection and embrace our own, real, imperfect humanity.

In worship, we are going to affirm the humanity of the people we meet in Scripture whom God calls into service in the world. Last week we talked about Moses and his worry about his inability to speak well. Today we are going to talk about a prophet named Elijah who found himself feeling overwhelmed.

Before I read our passage for today, please join me in prayer:

Holy God – sometimes when we hear your word in Scripture...and, in it, the names of people who we never knew and who sound unfamiliar...it is easy for us to tune out. Today, though, help us to remember that even in these ancient and dusty stories what you are teaching us is what it looks like for you to keep your promise – to always be our God, because you have claimed us as your people...both then, and now. So, by your Holy Spirit, give us ears to hear and hearts to understand. We ask it Jesus’s name...Amen.

So, this is a story that has a lot of names in it. I know some of you know a lot about the Bible and can probably teach me a thing or two...and I know some of you get a little turned around when we talk about people in the Bible not named Jesus. Before I read today’s passage, let me give you a little bit of an orientation.

When today’s story takes place, what you think of as Israel is divided into two kingdoms: Israel (in the north), and Judah (in the south).

Elijah – the main character in this story – is a prophet called by God (our God) to work in the northern kingdom of Israel. As you might surmise, a prophet’s job is difficult. They challenge, confront, disrupt, speak hard truths...especially to the people who have the most power. Not everyone is cut out for the work, but Elijah is particularly good at it.

The king of the northern kingdom of Israel is King Ahab, and he is married to Queen Jezebel. Originally, King Ahab worshipped God (our God), but Queen Jezebel worshipped a different god named Baal. It turns out that Baal had prophets, too. Eventually, Jezebel got Ahab to sign on with Baal instead of with God...which did not make God happy.

After a successful and tiresome career of prophet-ing, when King Ahab turned his back on God, God asked Elijah to confront the false prophets of Baal. There was one of Elijah. There were 450 prophets of Baal. When it was all said and done, Elijah was the last one standing. (If you want to read about that it’s in chapter 18...though, be warned, it’s kind of gross.)

Our Scripture picks up after Elijah has vanquished Baal’s prophets. I am reading from the 19th chapter of 1 Kings. Listen with me for the word of God...

+++

“Living Your Okayest Life: But What If I Am Overwhelmed?”

Series: *Living Your Okayest Life*

Scripture: 1 Kings 19:1-16

Rev. Pen Peery

February 9, 2025



First Presbyterian
Church of Charlotte

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, ‘So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.’ Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.

But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: ‘It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.’ Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, ‘Get up and eat.’ He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, ‘Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.’ He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.

Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’ He answered, ‘I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.’

He said, ‘Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.’ Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’ He answered, ‘I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.’ Then the Lord said to him, ‘Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place.

+++

Unless I am *really* missing something, I doubt any of us knows *exactly* what Elijah was going through was like: after obliterating an army of prophets by the sword, and then being chased by a blood-thirsty Queen, and then fleeing to a neighboring kingdom outside the Queen’s jurisdiction before taking shade under a tree in the middle of a Middle Eastern wilderness.

Those are some details of biblical proportion.

But, taking a step back from the details, I bet a good number of us know something about what it feels like to be exhausted from hard work...and what it feels like to be isolated and alone as a result of being so committed to that work that you lose touch with the rest of the world...and what it feels like to finish a difficult project or task or season and know that there really was **no rest** for the weary because there was **certainly** more work to do – but that all you really want to do is escape from it all and just disappear for a while.

“Living Your Okayest Life: But What If I Am Overwhelmed?”

Series: *Living Your Okayest Life*

Scripture: 1 Kings 19:1-16

Rev. Pen Peery

February 9, 2025



First Presbyterian
Church of Charlotte

And that also describes what Elijah was going through.

Elijah was overwhelmed.

And I bet there are a number of us who know what that feels like.

I bet there are parents who know something about pouring yourselves out for your kids...generating the energy it takes to make the house run, the activities go, the therapies happen, the homework completed, the carpools coordinated, the friendships encouraged, and – most importantly – the relationship between parent and child tended...and then knowing that’s just this week.

I bet there high schoolers who know something about living with the pressure to approach every class, test, grade, extra-curricular activity, summer program, service project, and choice as if their college career (and life) depended on it.

I bet there are more than a few people in this room or within the sound of my voice who are actively caring for someone who is sick. You know something about the irony of pushing the limits of your own health in order to be present with your loved one whose health is fading away.

I know there are people who are overwhelmed by the state of our nation and world. Who, this week, are worried about their job security. Who are worried about answering the knock at the door for fear of who (and what agency) might be on the other side. Who have friends in other places – like Haiti – who can now no longer access medical care because the American dollars have dried up.

We might not be able to identify with all the details about Elijah’s situation, but I suspect there are right many of us who can identify with what it is to feel overwhelmed.

For me, anyway, if I really drill down into it, the most difficult part of feeling overwhelmed isn’t so much the external events that lead to the feeling. The question at the center of the overwhelming storm is personal: what is my role in this? How can I meet these weighty expectations? How can I assume more responsibility to help find a way through? What can I do to fix it? Those are the questions that start to stack up on the chest...that cause you to need to take some deep breaths...that wake you up in the middle of the night.

Elijah runs away into the wilderness – afraid, exhausted, and also – it seems – a bit defeated. “It is enough,” he says, “now, O Lord, take my life for I am no better than my ancestors.”

“I’ve done what I can, Lord, and if there’s more work to do – take my life. I can’t handle it. Leave me be. I’m sorry I wasn’t better suited to finish the job.”

+ + +

I remember the first time I saw my Uncle Ed cry.

My uncle was born on John’s Island, SC. He could speak two languages, English, and Gullah. Uncle Ed was a man of the land. He was a farmer. A fisherman. A hunter. He taught me how to shoot skeet. He’d let me ride on the tractor with him outside of Chesnee, SC where he and my Aunt lived.

“Living Your Okayest Life: But What If I Am Overwhelmed?”

Series: *Living Your Okayest Life*

Scripture: 1 Kings 19:1-16

Rev. Pen Peery

February 9, 2025



First Presbyterian
Church of Charlotte

Uncle Ed was a presence. Physically, he was stout. His skin was sunweathered from spending so much time outdoors. A man of few words, he chose them carefully. He was a good – and strict – father to my cousins. He was traditional. He worked hard to provide for his family. Beyond the family living under his roof, he shouldered the load for his extended family...and for his employees...and for his neighbors. Through all of it, Uncle Ed seemed strong, calm, in control; the picture of responsibility. If it sounds like I am describing a kind of mythical man’s man gentleman farmer...you’re spot on. He pretty much was.

When he was in his mid-60’s, Uncle Ed was diagnosed with cancer. That year we went to Ed’s house for Thanksgiving. Though we knew there would be treatment paths and ample time to fight the disease growing in his body, we also knew that the diagnosis was likely terminal. Ed sat down at the table – at the head, which was his custom – and before he said the blessing, he wept...and he thanked us all for being there and told us how much we meant to him.

For those of us sitting around the table, those tears felt like permission.

From a man in my life who embodied what it looked like to have it all together, and to carry it well and with poise, and to never betray any sign of weakness...here was Uncle Ed, making friends with the fact that he was overwhelmed...that he was not going to be able to carry it all any longer. Here was Ed, letting down the guard he spent a lifetime building up – so that, finally, we might care for him instead of the other way around.

+ + +

He didn’t know it when he ran away into the wilderness, but Elijah wasn’t alone.

In the midst of feeling overwhelmed and outmatched and unsure of where to go next, God showed up for Elijah in three, successive ways that reveal wisdom and grace...for Elijah, and for any of us who find ourselves overwhelmed like Elijah.

First, God met Elijah’s **physical needs**. The angel of the Lord brought a jar of water and a cake baked on hot stones to give Elijah strength. My guess is that at some point in your life you’ve had an angel of the Lord bring you a casserole, or a caramel cake, or some comfort food when you’ve been in the wilderness. It matters.

Second, God makes his **presence** known to Elijah. Not in a strong wind, or an earthquake, or a fire, or any other showy way that we might expect...but in the sound of sheer silence...which reminds me that God’s presence is here...with us...if we can quiet ourselves down enough to recognize it.

And, third – right at the end of our passage for today – God asks Elijah to pass the mantle of being a prophet to someone else. To take the yoke of responsibility that Elijah felt the burden to carry and to place it on the shoulders of Elisha. And that, my friends, is a reminder that none of us are built to carry the load on our own and forever – we are only asked...and built...to walk with it a little while.

A scholar named Sara Koenig puts it plainly: What this encounter shows us is that, in the end, God doesn’t **depend** on Elijah. But that Elijah **matters** to God.

“Living Your Okayest Life: But What If I Am Overwhelmed?”

Series: *Living Your Okayest Life*

Scripture: 1 Kings 19:1-16

Rev. Pen Peery

February 9, 2025



First Presbyterian
Church of Charlotte

Can we – who are overwhelmed with life and the world and our place in it all – hear the grace in that distinction?

Are we able to both do the important work of finding what is ours to do, even while we set aside our ego that can drive us to think that we can fix it?

God does not depend on us.
But we matter to God.

For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son...that the world might be saved through him.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

+++