

“The Sky is Falling! Faith and Politics”

Date: October 4, 2020

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Psalm 146; Romans 12:18-21

Theme: Fear, politics, faith

Occasion: Unafraid, series

When I was a little boy, my parents read to me a little book called “Chicken Little.” It came out again a few years later in a book titled “Henny Penny.” But the story has been around for at least 2,500 years. Its earliest version tells the story of a rabbit who believes the world is collapsing. It was told by the Buddha. In every age, human beings have struggled with fear.

In the version I remember, growing up, a hen is scratching at the ground, as chickens do, when an acorn falls on her head. Startled, she declares, “The sky is falling!” and runs off to tell the king. Along the way, she meets her friends, other barnyard animals: a rooster, a goose, a duck, a turkey. And she tells each one *that the sky is falling*.

Each of them in turn is seized by fear, and a kind of animal hysteria breaks loose. The point of the story is to show how easy it is to catastrophize what’s happening around us, and how quickly this kind of fear can spread when it is passed on to others.

If you read the story as a child, you’ll recall that fear led these poor animals to suspend their logic, their ability to think for themselves. And on the way to tell the king the news, they meet a red fox, who offers to show them a shortcut to the palace. Their fear has kept them from seeing correctly, and recognizing the fox as their predator. They follow the fox right into his den, where they become dinner for the fox’s family.

We live in a time when it feels like the sky is falling. One of the top concerns for those over the age of 50 is the fear for the direction of our country. At least as polled by Adam Hamilton’s congregation. It is to that

fear we turn now. We are now in the heat of a presidential election. And people's feelings are running high.

Sadly, both sides use fear to stir up their base. Those who work in politics know this can be a winning strategy. If you cast enough doubt about your opponent, how horrible it will be for the country if he is elected, you play to people fears and it gets them involved and engaged. It is also true that when people are afraid, they *are* more motivated to go to the polls.

Fear is an easy emotion to tweak in people. And it's effective when it's used in politics. Those who study this have also found that when people are anxious, they tend to seek out information from sources that actually reinforce their anxiety.

Many of us turn to the same news outlet day after day, and our views become largely shaped by that particular source, whether it's Facebook, Twitter, the New York Times, CNN or Fox News. Watching the same news source day after day, we tend to take on the views of that media.

With that in mind, it might be helpful to consider a different approach. You don't have to watch hours and hours of news to get your information. But you might want to try watching a couple different ones. For example, Adam Hamilton says he reads the New York Times and also watches Fox News. He also reads Breitbart News.

The reason for doing so *isn't* that he necessarily agrees with their points of view, but rather he reads and watches different sources so that he can understand how others are thinking, what they are feeling, what they fear, and what they propose.

If we think back on the people whom Jesus called to be a part of his inner circle, it's a fascinating study in contrast. Among the twelve men whom Jesus called to his disciples were people who held hostile points of

view to each other. Matthew was a tax collector working for the Romans, and thereby he supported their rule over Palestine. On the other end of the spectrum there was Simon the Zealot, who was a member of the Zealots, a political party committed to the overthrow of the Romans and all who worked with them.

These two men were as far apart politically as you could be in first-century Palestine. And yet Jesus called both to follow him. I wonder how those two men got along, what they talked about at mealtime, and if either of them changed their political views during the three years they sat under Jesus' teaching.

I know that sitting in front of me – either in person or watching me on a screen – are devout followers of Jesus Christ. I also know that we don't all agree on politics. Some of you will vote the way I do, and some of you will vote for the other candidate.

Some of you celebrated when Barack Obama was elected, and others of you mourned for our country. And for many of you, you have been deeply grieved by the current president, and many of you have supported his policies and believe he is taking the country in a good direction. And we disagree, do we not?

When it comes to the fears we feel regarding the direction of our country, our acronym for overcoming fear is particularly helpful. Let's look at it again.

Face your fears with faith.

Examine your assumptions in light of the facts.

Attack your anxieties with action.

Release your cares to God.

Americans have good reason to have faith in the resiliency of our country and the efficacy of checks and balances. We've had some very interesting characters in the White House over the course of our history. Ultimately, though, the bedrock of our faith is not in our country, but in the God who rules over all things.

The words of Psalm 46 are so comforting and reassuring. Hear them again: "God is our refuge and strength, a help always near in times of great trouble. That's why we won't be afraid when the world falls apart.... Nations roar; kingdoms crumble. God utters his voice and the earth melts. The Lord of heavenly forces is with us! The God of Jacob is our place of safety."

In addition to facing our fears with faith, we can also examine our assumptions in light of the facts. It's important that we fact-check both candidates. I am dubious of any 60-second campaign commercial. And I don't think any of us learned more after watching this week's debates.

If we feel anxious about a candidate or an issue, then we need to get involved. Campaign for your candidate: work the phones; go door to door. But if we choose to act, we must do so in a way that reflects our faith in Jesus Christ. We don't need more people playing the part of Chicken Little by fear-mongering. Nor do we want to lower our integrity by acting in ways that do not reflect Jesus.

St. Paul's strategy for dealing with those with whom we disagree, or who may have wronged us is especially instructive. Hear the words again: "If possible, to the best of your ability, live at peace with all people. Don't try to get revenge for yourselves, my dear friends, but leave wrath to God. Do not be defeated by evil, but defeat evil with good."

You see, how we treat those with whom we disagree is both a test and a demonstration of our character and faith. *Being right* is not the

defining mark of the Christian life. We are defined and ultimately judged, by how we practice love.

Friends, we must speak up, stand up, and work for what is right and just. But when we've done all we can in pursuit of what is right as we understand right, we have to release our concerns to God.

I don't believe God dictates the outcome of elections, nor do I believe God is pushing buttons or pulling strings in our national politics. God allows both individuals and nations to do foolish and sometimes evil things that are opposite to his will.

But God has a way of working through the evil around us, *and* those who participate in it or advocate for it. God specializes in forcing good from evil, of bending foolishness of humans to accomplish a higher purpose. Trusting this helps me to feel hopeful about the future of our nation.

No, Chicken Little, the sky is not falling. God is our refuge and strength, a help always near in times of great trouble. That's why we don't have to be afraid, even when the world seems to be falling apart. Amen.

This sermon borrows heavily from the book: *Unafraid: Living with Courage and Hope in Uncertain Times*, by Adam Hamilton. New York: Convergent Books, 2018, pp. 74-81.