

“Unafraid: Living With Courage and Hope in Uncertain Times”

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Place: Lakewood UMC

Themes: Fear, Faith

Occasion: Unafraid, series

Texts: Isaiah 12:2; Luke 12:22-32

Today is a new day. It’s good to be back after a week of vacation. And on this new day we begin a new sermon series. I’m going to be using Adam Hamilton’s book by the same title as my sermon today, “Unafraid: Living with Courage and Hope in Uncertain Times.”

What a great description for the times we live in right now: **uncertain**. Covid-19 has created uncertainty in terms of our personal health as well as our economic well-being. We have an upcoming election in November; that certainly creates a lot of uncertainty and anxiety in people. Since 9-11 we have been living with the ongoing threat of another terrorist attack.

Fear seems to be a way of life for us these days. And it’s not a healthy way to live. If you go to the doctor, 9 times out of 10 they’ll tell you “the source of your problem is stress; you need to reduce your stress.” How do we do that, living in the uncertain times that we do?

We can hardly overstate the extent to which worry, anxiety and fear permeate our lives. We worry about the future, about politics, about our health. We fear violent crime, racial divisions, and the future of the economy. Deep divisions in our nation leave us with an increasing sense of uncertainty. Since the stock market crash of 2008, we live with the reminder of how quickly our savings and investments can be wiped out.

In a survey that he did of his large congregation, Adam Hamilton learned that those under the age of 50 experienced fear more than those over 50. The greatest fear for those over 50 was the direction of our

country. For those under 50, the fear of failure and disappointing others topped their list of fears.

The reality is, *everyone* worries about something. We all have things we fear. And most of us will have seasons when anxiety and fear simply overwhelm us and rule our lives. Fear is a powerful emotion that shapes us in ways we don't fully understand.

Look behind the door of depression and you'll often find fear. Addictions, too. Peer beneath broken marriages and friendships, beneath prejudice and hate, and you'll find fear. Look behind the causes of most wars throughout human history and you'll find lurking behind all the other reasons, fear, often manufactured by their leaders who led their people to wage war.

Often we fear things that will never happen. And yet, whether real or imagined, those fears have power. Sometimes our battles with fear take a more serious turn, becoming a debilitating struggle with panic attacks or anxiety disorders.

There are other times, though, when fear is well-placed, and people have *good* reason to be afraid: they are facing life-threatening illnesses, the impending death of a loved one, potentially devastating legal conflicts or significant economic distress. If you haven't been able to pay the rent or mortgage, and you're facing eviction, you have good reason to have some fear. Your future is uncertain.

In the coming weeks, we're going to be talking about some things that cause people to have fear and anxiety. We'll consider crime, race and politics; fear of failure and disappointing others, fear of change and economic insecurity, fear of illness, aging and dying.

Now, upfront I have to be honest. I *don't* have the silver bullet that will keep you from ever feeling fear again. No one else does, for that matter. We can never fully eliminate fear from our lives, and actually, which is a good thing. Certain fears provide a valuable and needed warning that may keep us safe and alive. Fear of rattlesnakes, for instance.

But while fear will always be with us and around us, we don't have to be controlled by it. We can learn to address our fears, control them, learn from them and even use them. And we can press through them. In the coming weeks I'll share with you some important insights from our Christian faith, and offer a variety of spiritual practices to help manage your fears.

One of the most repeated instructions in the Bible is "Don't be afraid." These words, in one form or another, appear over 140 times in the scripture. So what does that tell us? Well, it reminds us that ordinary women and men - from the earliest history of Israel, all the way through to the first-century Christians - dealt with fear.

That admonition, "Don't be afraid," *also* shows that faith can be pivotal in overcoming fear, and finding peace in uncertain times. In the coming weeks we'll consider various scripture passages about fear, and the spiritual practices that can bring real peace. One way we can strengthen our faith, face our fears and reinforce our courage, is to read and even memorize scripture passages.

The passage from Isaiah this morning is a good one. It's a reminder that we are not alone, that God is with us and God will help us. Hear it again: "Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid." That's good stuff, right there. But if your memory is pretty good, try remembering the second part of that verse as well : "The Lord, the Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation."

Write it down on a card or piece of paper. Put it where you will see it: on your dresser, on your mirror, on the dash of your car. Read it several times a day. Try committing it to memory. Begin to re-wire your brain to trust God more and affirm to yourself that you will not be controlled by fear.

In the passage from Luke, Jesus elaborates on this theme. He tells his disciples, “Do not worry about your life.” He goes on to tell them that God is watching out for them. He cares for the birds of the air and the flowers of the field. How much more does God care for you and me?!

Jesus recognized people live with a lot of fear and anxiety, and he knew it wasn't healthy. What was his suggestion? Interrupt your negative thinking and replace it with thoughts which strengthen your faith. “Don't do this. Do this instead.” Don't worry, trust in the Lord.”

Commit a verse of scripture to memory, and use it to both interrupt the fear and strengthen your faith. Jesus said, “Don't be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.”

Most of us have known times when fear, worry, or anxiety has robbed us of the life we wanted. At times, it has led us to make bad decisions. Other times, it has kept us from taking risks or doing things which would have brought us meaning, fulfillment, even joy to our lives.

You can never completely eliminate fear – you need it. But fear doesn't have to control you. Courage is not the absence of fear. Instead, it is doing what you feel you should do, or what you long to do, *despite* the fear. As you and I learn to press through our fears, we will learn to live a life of courage and hope. Amen!

his sermon borrows heavily from the book: *Unafraid: Living with Courage and Hope in Uncertain Times*, by Adam Hamilton. New York: Convergent Books, 2018, pp. 3-9.