

“What Kind of Security System?”

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Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Psalm 9:1-14; John 8:32

Occasion: Unafraid, series

Theme: Fear, trust, faith

When Adam Hamilton wrote his book entitled *Unafraid*, it was the year 2016. At that time he said, “In a recent Gallup poll, 53% of Americans reported they worry “a great deal” about crime and violence.” He said “this was up from just 39% two years before and it was the highest level since 2001.” What led to this surge in fear about violence and crime?

He then speculates. Could it have been recent mass shootings, which were reported in the news? Maybe it was the result of a number of television shows which feature violent crime. Some he talked with said they thought it was the steady stream of 24-hour news programming, and the increase of people using social media. Still others pointed to the result of fear-mongering during the 2016 election season.

Whatever the cause, the result is the same – *more* people believe there is an increase in violent crime, and thus their fear level has increased. Today we want to look at some ways to cope with this very real fear that many people have.

One approach has been to use the insights which come to us from a therapy that has often been used to help people overcome certain fears. It comes from a treatment approach called cognitive therapy.

Cognitive therapy recognizes that feelings often begin with thoughts – and those thoughts are sometimes distorted, based on inaccurate information, faulty assumptions, overly negative views of oneself or the world, or mistaken beliefs – what some call ‘stinkin’ thinkin’.”

Now, this kind of thinking leads to worry, fear, anxiety and a host of other misplaced feelings, which in turn can lead to unhealthy or misdirected actions. Cognitive therapy is a process, used to identify faulty thinking or assumptions; and replace those thoughts with more accurate information and more positive thinking, which in turn offers relief from a person's problematic feelings.

Adam Hamilton offers us a helpful acronym to help those of us who are struggling with fears, using the letters of the word fear itself: F-E-A-R.

Face your fears with faith.

Examine your assumptions in light of the facts.

Attack your anxieties with action.

Release your cares to God.

How does this relate to cognitive therapy which I was just talking about? Well, there's a lot more to that method than I was able to describe, but it does seem to echo the first two words of our acronym: "Face your fears with faith." And "Examine your assumptions in light of the facts."

Jesus said, "You will know the truth and the truth will set you free." Facts can liberate us from faulty assumptions, and in the process free us from fear. Because we live in a time when irrefutable facts are dismissed as "fake news," the challenge is discerning what is true.

Since we are bombarded with so much information – via television, magazines, newspapers, social media and other electronic news sources, we simply have to do our homework – which often includes reading different perspectives on both sides of an issue or debate.

Essentially what we are being asked to do is a little bit of research. Often times we jump to conclusions, form opinions based on automatic thoughts that come into our head, and knee-jerk reactions. One form of

knee-jerk reaction is catastrophizing – assuming the worst in a situation.

There's also the tendency to make generalizations. Racial prejudice is one form of this way of thinking. But sadly, we all are tempted to do it, when we form opinions about people of a different political party than our own. It's the tendency to think “*all* of them are like this,” or “*all* of them think like that.” Generalizing, catastrophizing, making assumptions, jumping to conclusions, we can easily increase our fears.

So, let's turn our attention to people's fear about violent crime being on the rise in the United States. It's easy enough to understand. We hear reports – often on a daily basis – about crime. Mass shootings get our attention. Violent TV shows fuel our belief that America is not a very safe place to live. It would be natural for this exposure to lead us to feel unsafe.

But the facts about violent crime are quite different from our fears. In truth, violent crimes have been reduced by more than half since the early 1990's, and the murder rate has dropped to the level that it was in 1964. While recent crime rates may go up and down slightly, they are still down significantly lower, compared to the highs of several decades ago.

In addition, the people *most* afraid of violent crime – suburbanites – are the least likely to be affected by it. According to the Justice Department, the most likely victim of crime is a low-income African-American man living in the inner city, and the crimes are often gang-related.

Roughly 15,000 murders take place in America each year – a frightening statistic, particularly when given no context. But consider a recent report in a prominent medical journal estimating that more than 251,000 people die annually in the US due to medical error.

This would make medical error the third leading cause of death in the US. According to this information, you are 16 times more likely to die as a

result of a medical error than to be murdered. Other data helps to put violent deaths in perspective. You are twice as likely to die in a car accident in any given year, than to be murdered, yet most of us are not afraid every time we get in our car.

When we seek out the facts, we often learn that the world is not as scary as we fear. And when it comes to our fear of violent crime, we're much safer today than we've been in a generation.

Let's go back and consider our acronym for addressing fear:

Face your fears with faith.

Examine your assumptions in light of the facts.

Attack your anxieties with action.

Release your cares to God.

Cognitive therapy is all about the second – examining our assumptions in light of the facts. I'd like to close by looking at the first and third words – Facing our fears with faith; and Release your cares to God.

The spiritual practice I'd like to suggest today is called *lectio divina*, which is Latin for "divine reading." We've talked about this practice before, here at Lakewood. *Lectio divina* involves slowing down, reading scripture, meditating upon it, and listening for God speak to you through the particular passage being considered. Too often we race through scripture, simply to get it done and say we've read it.

When we're fearful, we can find a great sense of peace by slowing down, meditating upon scripture, and listening for God to speak. Let's take a look at one of the most beautiful passages in the Psalms. King David knew what it was like to have enemies seek to kill him. He had known threats throughout his life. But listen to what he wrote:

"The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the

stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?...Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord.” (Psalm 27:1,14)

It’s one thing to read a scripture like this, but it’s quite another to trust these words, and to trust the God who inspired them and then to make them your own. Begin by finding a quiet place. Start with prayer, “Lord, I long to hear from you. Lord, speak to me through these words of Scripture. I’m listening, Lord.”

Read the passage slowly and silently to yourself. Pause, then having read the passage once, pray again, “Lord, speak to me; your servant is listening.” Then, read the scripture aloud, slowly, and see what word or phrase speaks to you. Ponder that word or phrase for a moment. How does it speak to your fear or anxiety?

Pray another time, “Lord, speak to me; your servant is listening.” Now, read the passage silently and underline those portions that speak to you. Take these words and incorporate them into a prayer of your own. “Thank you, Lord, for your presence and love. Please be my light and salvation. Help me not to be afraid. Help me to remember that with you by my side, I don’t need to be afraid.”

Well, we’ve learned that the truth can set us free, and that, when it comes to addressing our fears, facts are our friends. We’ve also learned that being quiet and listening for God to speak can be a key to overcoming fear. And we *can* recover the confident, hope-filled life God intends for us.

It is my prayer for you, this day, that you lean more heavily upon the Lord, and allow him to quiet your fears. 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. 43- 54.