

Jan 5

Unafraid – Living with Courage and Hope “An Age of High Anxiety”

Isaiah 41:10 - 13

Psalm 56:3-4

Today we live in an age of high anxiety: stress, anxiety and worry are at an all-time high. There seems so much to fear: terrorism, global warming, mounting deficits, school shootings, and identity thefts to name a few. We now can get news 24 hours a day and much of what we hear further intensifies our fears. We feel a twinge in our gut every time the stock market declines, or news breaks of a terrible accident, an earthquake, or a mass shooting. All of this negativity has an effect on us. Why wouldn't we be afraid?

Let's face it, most of us wrestle with some combination of fear, worry or anxiety from time to time. The goal of this sermon series is to give us the tools to live "Unafraid." Now you might be thinking that is an impossible goal. I know I did before I read the book with that title by Adam Hamilton. As I thought about what he said, I began to understand that fear is a choice. In these uncertain times we are called, as people of faith, to live with courage and hope, not with fear and hopelessness.

Much of our worry, anxiety and fear comes from two of our brain's systems that are designed for our protection and self-preservation. One of these we know of as the "fight or flight mechanism." It is the body's smoke detector. When it detects a potential threat, before your conscious brain even processes the threat your early warning system has already sounded the alarm. Hormones are released triggering a cascading series of effects in your body: your heart rate increases, blood is shut down to unnecessary functions in your body and diverted to the muscles, your blood pressure increases, your pupils dilate, all as your brain prepares your body for the imminent threat. These reactions are absolutely necessary for survival. We need them and should give thanks to God for them.

However, there's a second mechanism built into your brain that is intended to anticipate future events, particularly needs like food or water or shelter but also threats. This system doesn't respond to current threats but instead prepares you for possible

things that might occur. This system anticipates and brings to mind things that are potential threats or simply things critical for you to be mindful of. For example: It might snow—take your gloves. It's cold—have the kids wear their coats. Wear your seat belt—you could be in an accident.

You are probably already realizing that this is the system that many of us need to work on if we want to live unafraid. The problem with this system is your imagination. Your imagination, coupled with the data you receive from others, from the news, from the old tapes that play in your head, can lead you to anticipate threats that are not real, or which are real but whose chance of affecting you are minimal. Your imagination can inflate threats and lead you to catastrophize, which means, to assume the worst possible things are going to happen. Allow ourselves to live too long in these loops and we become fear-filled and this causes us to lose trust in God and to quit celebrating the joys of the present.

I love the acronym for fear. I shared it during Advent. It is: **False Events Appearing Real.** Think about how many things we worry about that never happen. Or, to use a phrase of today, how has “fake news” upset you, caused you to make decisions that you later regretted and more! Without effort our body leads us to live in fear.

But this is not what God wants for us. The most often repeated refrain in scripture is “DO NOT BE AFRAID.” It is found on the lips of God, or an angel, or Jesus over 100 times. The scriptures that we read today from Isaiah is one of those passages where God says, “Don't fear.” Why? Because God is with you. The one, from the Psalms we read, talks about how when we are afraid we are to put our trust in God. It ends again with the reminder that we walk with God, or God is with us. Then the question is asked, “What can mere flesh do to us if God is with us?”

When I read texts like this, I read them as though God were speaking directly to me. I may even respond to each line: “Thank you, Lord that you are with me. Help me not to be afraid. You are my God. I trust that you will strengthen me and help me and hold me by your mighty hand.” Instead of imagining that I'll die of cancer, or that my future is grim, or that my enemies will defeat me, or that the world is on the verge of

falling apart, in prayer and praise I imagine and trust that God is with me, that God will strengthen me, help me and hold me by God's mighty hand. As I makes these promises personal, a message directly to me from God, I find my anxiety quiets down and the fear subsides. This is not denying that there are problems and that difficult and challenging things occur. They do. But it is placing our trust in God.

Let us think a little more about what causes worry which leads to fear. Worry generally focuses our energy and attention either on the past ("I wish...") or on the future. If you are looking back at events and worrying about how you could have handled it differently, well here is a kind word for you. Let it go. You can't undo the past. There are no "do-overs or mulligans" as there are in the game of golf. Face squarely what you did or didn't do. Ask forgiveness if appropriate, make amends if you can and release it. I know so many people who spend a lot of time on the "would of, could of, should of" bus. They are afraid that what they did in the past will come back to bite them in the future. They wish they had done something different and worry about how it is affecting things today. And...you get the idea.

If you are worrying about things that could happen in the future, the good news is most of what you worry about will never happen. Now this is not saying don't prepare for possible future event. Worry differs from wise planning or taking precautions. Worry is basically a mental spinning of your wheels. Planning and taking precautions are being aware that some potentially negative things might happen or, with planning, can be avoided and you do those things. Then, again, you let it go. Worrying about things over which you have no control and you have done your due diligence in preparation is wasted energy! It completely denies trust in God.

One other thing that leads to fear is the psychological activity called projection. We worry about what people might think if we do such and such, or what they will say if we don't look certain ways. We assume that if they don't speak to us they don't like us and on and on. None of this is healthy emotionally and most of it is False Events Appearing Real.

To live unafraid is to live as Jesus would ask us to live. Jesus calls us to live fully in the present, the only "time" we can directly affect and use to meet with God, to share

love with others and to seek for and receive gifts of forgiveness. I want you to practice pausing your worries and concerns, and instead spend time sensing God's presence with you. Keep doing this (whether you call it "meditating," "going to your 'happy place'" or some other name you choose) until you are able to 'be' with God anytime, day or night—in the present moment. In experiencing that moment you should feel surrounded by love and for a time be able to let go of those things that cause you concern. Knowing you are not going through something alone is so helpful.

And here is the other thing. Jesus made the practical point that worry seldom does any good. Can you think of things you spent a lot of time and energy worrying about that never happened? I know I have. Worry has no effect on projected outcomes. This is why Jesus says to not be afraid but to live life today with trust and hope.

I had a friend who was a stockbroker. He talked about how he had two kinds of clients. There were the planners who came in, decided on a goal and what strategies would be best to achieve that goal. He would spend hours with them in the beginning, setting up their investment strategy. After that, they basically left it alone. They would check in once or twice a year and ask if the market had changed enough that they needed to do something different but that was it.

The other type were the worriers. They were always calling or emailing him every time the market went up or went down. They often demanded that he sell when things were going bad to limit their losses and often pushed him to buy when the market was on the uptake. He liked these clients because they generated a lot of commissions but they were also the ones who would go from broker to broker because they were always dissatisfied. It is hard to outguess the market and so their returns were never what others might be get.

Those clients are a parable of life. Are you the planner who sees the goals, steps back, trusts God and lives fully in the moment? Or, are you the worrier who always is rethinking the past, worrying about the future and cannot fully trust or celebrate the present? We will continue to look at some of the things that cause us fear and see what God has to say to us during the next few weeks. But for now hear that we are called to let go of fear and worry and trust in God It is the first step towards being unafraid.