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“Unafraid: Living With Courage and Hope in Uncertain Times, Part 1”

This morning I’m kicking off a sermon series titled “Unafraid: Living with Courage and Hope in Uncertain Times”. Why a sermon series on fear? Because our fear and anxiety level is at an all-time high, and I’m deeply concerned about it.

Even before the pandemic, fear about the future was on the rise. A Gallup poll [found](#) that the percentage of Americans who worry on a daily basis has steadily been increasing the past decade; as are feelings of stress. [According](#) to Chapman University’s annual “Survey of American Fears,” almost 74% of Americans in 2018 were afraid of corrupt government officials; nearly 62% were afraid of pollution in bodies of water, and 57% were afraid of not having enough money for the future.

Multiple times a day, my phone and now my Apple watch alert me to the news, much of which is anxiety inducing.

When writing this sermon, I did a quick Google search of fear, and in ½ second Google produced over 1,040,000,000 results.

Friends, we are a nation of worriers.

And the ongoing pandemic, coupled with the presidential election and racial tensions, has ratcheted up our anxiety levels to an all-time high.

And I’m deeply, deeply concerned about it. I’ve been worried – what an irony! – almost since the time the shutdown began, about how this is affecting peoples’ mental health. In fact, I’ll be honest, I’m more worried about peoples’ mental health than I am someone contracting COVID-19. And maybe this is because I know more people whose mental health has taken a nosedive, than I do people who have contracted Covid-19.

Hence a sermon series on fear, and how we can face an uncertain future with courage and hope. I see your fear; I sense your anxiety; I feel your stress. I know you’re struggling. And I want you to know, you are not alone. Everyone wrestles

with fear and anxiety, worries and insecurities, including me. Fear is a universal problem. It lives in everyone's homes. The reality is everyone worries about something. No one is immune, and there is no known vaccine for fear. In fact, some amount of fear is healthy. But debilitating fear isn't, and we don't have to be controlled by it.

Over the next 5 weeks we'll look at ways to cope with fears, strategies to overcome our fears, and hear the reassuring message that faith can be pivotal to overcoming fear and finding peace in uncertain times. And as we'll see, 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.

But before we talk about the problem with fear, let's talk first about its upside. Fear keeps us safe. Gavin de Becker in his book "The Gift of Fear" called fear "a brilliant internal guardian." Fear keeps us from getting too close to the edge of a cliff so we don't fall. Fear of living in poverty when we're older leads us to sacrifice and save when we're younger. Fear of disease motivates me to eat better or exercise, and these days causes me to take precautions when going out. Hand sanitizer and a mask are now as routine for me to carry in my purse as is my wallet or phone. Fear of a tree catching fire made me remind my boys to move further away with their fireworks on the 4th. Real fear is a gift.

And our body's capacity to experience fear, and our ability to respond to perceived threats, are absolutely amazing. You may know from your biology high school class that our 5 senses send signals to the brain's amygdala, two almond shaped structures nestled deep on each side of the brain. The amygdala are the center for the emotions within the brain. Before our conscious mind has fully made sense of what we've heard, felt, seen, smelled or tasted, our amygdala has already made an initial determination as to whether what we've sensed is a threat or not. And if it's perceived as a threat, the amygdala release an early warning system that tells us we're in danger. This early warning sign takes the form of adrenaline, increased heart rate, dry throat, or muscle tensing. And when this happens, before our rational mind can even process what's happening, our amygdala has already made an initial determination as to whether what we've perceived or sensed is a threat. This is why we jump out of the way of a car before we can fully process the danger.

When Terry and I were in Michigan, we liked taking the boat out to Lake Michigan – which we were told by marine patrol is safe to do under certain wind conditions. But one day the winds kicked up quickly, and by the time we tried to go back to dock, the waves were too much for the pontoon boat. Immediately my heart started racing, and my back started to stiffen – and instead of ignoring those signs, I told Terry we needed to pull up to the beach and wait it out. And there we sat for a couple hours waiting for the wind to die down. So in this case, my fear kept us safe.

Our brain also has the ability to associate certain sensations – smells, tastes, sounds, sight, touch, even places and people, with past events, both good and bad. This ability to connect one sensory experience or stimulus with something else, whether desirable or dangerous, is called classical conditioning. (Pavlov's dog.) So we may be fearful of something because of what we associate with it. To use another boat example, when I was young (7 or 8?), I went sailing with my Dad and sister on Spofford Lake, NH, and we tipped over. I was safe with my life jacket on, but to this day sailing makes me nervous and it's not something I care to do. We might call these things sort of events or memories "triggers".

So fear has its place in keeping us safe. But we can also misread signals, worry about threats that aren't real, and find ourselves overwhelmed by false fears, paralyzing anxiety, or unhealthy fretting about things we don't need to be afraid of, will never happen, or won't save us. During the early days of the pandemic, I kept thinking back to the early days of the AIDS epidemic, and how fearful people were that they could catch AIDS just by being in the presence of someone with AIDS. Remember how brave (or crazy) people thought Princess Diana was when she shook the hand of an AIDS patient without wearing gloves? The gesture challenged the once-common (but incorrect) belief that HIV or AIDS could be transmitted by touch. In the same vein, during the first few weeks of COVID I disinfected my groceries, but I don't do that now because we know more about the virus. So I don't fret about that but I do wash my hands before and after putting my groceries away.

Remember Pavlov's dog? Once the dog made the connection between the ringing of the bell and food, Pavlov found that if he consistently rang the bell and didn't give the dog food, the dog stopped salivating. Psychologists call this fading of the link "extinction". So extinction, when it comes to worry, fear and anxiety, holds

out the promise that we can unlearn fear. Chances are, I can unlearn my fear of sailing if I wanted to; I just need to be willing, and have the opportunity to sail more – preferably when the wind isn't too strong. So we can unlearn fear, and in so doing, find freedom. I might find I love to sail as much as I like to watch people sail, which I do like to do.

So you probably know the Bible is filled with stories of people whose fears got the best of them. One of those stories we heard Carrie read earlier. The story of the Israelites being liberated from Egypt is well known. After hundreds of years of slavery, God liberated them. The Pharaoh's army was decimated in the Red Sea. Once freed, Moses cast a vision of the Promised Land for the freed slaves, a land flowing with milk and honey. The land of Canaan, the Promised Land, lay north of the Sinai, where the freed slaves now camped. Two years after leaving Egypt, the Israelites had made their way to Kadesh Barnea, just one mile south of Canaan. One mile! There they were, ready to take possession of God's promise.

But before entering the land, the Israelites sent 12 spies, who for 40 days explored the area and contemplated how they would expel the nations that currently inhabited the land. Upon returning from their mission, 2 of the spies said to the people, "It's all there, just like God promised. And it's awesome! Let's go!" But the other 10 spoke up. "We can't go and take the land," they said. "The city walls are strong, and the people are even stronger. They look like the giants of old, and we look like insects, mere grasshoppers compared to them!"

Do you know what happened next? The people believed the 10 spies, and instead of working through their fears, they camped in the desert, one mile from the Promised Land for 38 years! 38 years! Fear destroyed them. The first generation never entered the Promised Land. Fear changed the good gift of the land into a place of death. Fear transformed other humans, the giants, into monsters. So there they sat, for 38 years, 1 mile from the Promised Land.

I love this story because it paints a picture of how fear works in us. We start out with a vision of a promised land, our preferred vision of the future, something we long to do, a dream or calling to pursue, but then we begin to think about the risks and dangers involved. And within time all we can see are the risks and dangers and obstacles, and they become giants – and we freeze, or turn back and tell ourselves "I couldn't do that."

Friends, do you know how long I debated whether I should look for a new job? A long time! I came up with every excuse possible not to move. And I was good at it, and so were my excuses. They even came with proper names: Terry, Henry, Tommy, Julia, Charlotte. I can't move, I'd say, and uproot my kids. I can't move – what will my husband do? I can't move – how will I make new friends? I excelled at making my obstacles into giants. Until one day I came to the realization that dipping my toes into the possibilities didn't necessarily mean I needed to take a nosedive into the deep end. And once I did that, once I turned my giant back into a grasshopper, I learned the risks were not as great as they appeared. And I'm so glad, so glad, I did that and that I am here with you.

So many of us live our lives paralyzed by fear, just a mile from the Promised Land. Our amygdala is risk averse. That's its job. To identify and protect us from risk. And this can be a wonderful blessing, but it can also prevent us from living, to see the ordinary Canaanites as undefeatable giants.

At some point, we have to face our giants and stare them down. And if they're really as bad as we think, then we yes need to listen. But usually the risks, dangers, and obstacles aren't as large and as formidable as they appear.

Friends, I am worried about what this year is doing to our psyches.

As if people weren't already becoming more isolated, the pandemic has compounded our isolation. Sure, we can "see" our friends by Zoom, but at least for me, it's not the same and the novelty has worn off. It's something, for sure, and better than nothing, but We need human interaction. We need to see people and touch people. Theologically speaking, we were created to be together!

I know people who are deeply fearful of being with others and going out because of COVID-19, and I worry about them, and I wonder where the tipping point is between worrying about catching COVID and the effects of being in isolation.

I also worry about how pandemic is affecting our economy. The pandemic has caused millions and millions of people to lose their jobs, and businesses to shutter. The economy does matter. And while we never want to place the economy over people, there are millions of people worrying about their jobs and what they'll do if they lose them.

And this past week our local school districts all announced how they will reopen, and I don't know a parent who doesn't worry about sending his or her kid back to school and is weighing the importance of social interaction with contracting the virus.

I worry about the ongoing racial tensions, and whether I'm saying and doing the right thing. I worry about our election, and what's going to happen no matter who wins.

And these are big things; they're giants; we cannot dismiss that. But we can't ignore God's lead, either. We cannot let the power of fear push the Promised Land further into our future, as it did for the Israelites. We cannot die in the wilderness because we refuse to let go of our fears and give them to God.

And therein lies the promise of Scripture, that God will not abandon us in our darkest hours. Instead, God has a mysterious way of working through our fears to accomplish God's purpose for our lives. We can put our complete trust in God, knowing that God is in control. We can read scripture and see over and over the promise that we need not be afraid because God is with us. We can trust the God who created us to be with us through it all. The prophet Isaiah says:

So do not fear, for I am with you;
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you;
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

And in Psalm 56 we read:

When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.

⁴ In God, whose word I praise—
in God I trust and am not afraid.

What can mere mortals do to me?

My life experience, and the experience of others I know, and the bold assertions of our faith, persuade me that God doesn't abandon us in our darkest hours. Instead, God has a mysterious way of working through even the tragedies of life to accomplish God's purposes.

So This week I encourage you to

Face your fears with faith.

Examine your assumptions in light of the facts.

Attack your anxieties with action.

Release your cares to God.

Take one small of faith: reach for pen and paper; make the call; decide you'll take a risk and get your life back; look your giant in the eye.

Friends, your imagination can allow you to see threats, dangers, risks and obstacles as giants, or your imagination can allow you to picture that there is a God who loves you, protects you, sustains, strengthens you, and carries you.

Amen.

Sources:

Adam Hamilton, *Unafraid: Living With Courage and Hope in Uncertain Times*
The Atlantic, "How to Fight Fear with Love", July 16, 2020
New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Numbers, Volume 2