

*Week 1: Unafraid... Or are we?*  
January 13, 2019 ~ Trinity Heights UMC  
Isaiah 43:1-7, Numbers 13:26-33

This week we kick off a series called Unafraid: Living with Courage and Hope in Uncertain Times. This is a book and sermon series that Adam Hamilton first shared with his congregation at Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City. We have a number of studies that are looking at this topic over the next five weeks. I encourage you to consider joining one of the groups. They are listed in your bulletin and in the e-blast sent this last week.

I want to note that I am *not* preaching Adam's sermons and I am *not* preaching what's in the book, directly. So you won't repeat exactly what you hear this morning in your small groups.

Right now, I want you to find the piece of paper and the marker somewhere near you. We are going to use those after the sermon, and I'll give you more instructions then. Right now, I want you to think about what you fear. What are you scared of? I would suggest that all of us are fearful or anxious or full of worry over something. We worry about the future, about politics, about our health. We fear violent crime, racial divisions, the future of the economy. We fear cell towers in our back yard and low-income housing down the street. We fear the homeless relocating to our neighborhood and we fear the high-occupancy student housing in our downtown. There are many things that we fear or are anxious about.

Sometimes this fear can be debilitating. I went to the doctor when I was in my third year of ministry because I was experiencing shortness of breath. I was fearful asthma was setting in. Instead, he told me it was stress. I wasn't breathing deeply enough, and was becoming lightheaded and began to hyperventilate. It was all around the stress of a new church and multiple funerals back to back. I was fearful of failing as a pastor, of people not liking me, of attendance declining.

"Fear is a powerful emotion that shaped us in profound ways we don't often fully understand" (Hamilton 6). Sometimes it can rob us of quality of life, lead us to make bad decisions, keep us from taking risks that could have brought great meaning to our lives.

What do you fear? As I share this morning, I invite you to write on that piece of paper what you fear. In our family, we agreed we have fear of terrorists cutting off our fingers, fear of the wrong choice in school for our kids, fear of boggarts (from Harry Potter).

Let's be clear though: Fear is not a bad thing. It's a normal human emotion that can protect us. This summer in Alaska, we were told to stay away from moose. Don't let them near you and be ready to get away from them. When we were walking through the trail at the park near our house, I was hyper-vigilant about noticing the bushes around us. Was there a moose? Were the kids too far from me? What was our "out" if we did see a moose? Then the day came that we were walking at a different park and a moose did saunter right out on the trail in front of us. My heart started beating faster, my hands got sweaty, and I grabbed the child's hand beside me as we started walking backwards away from the moose that was following the trail towards us. All of these were normal responses to my fear. My body signaled the threat and I responded. The moose take a right and went into the bushes, by the way. Danger over, the walk resumed, complaining about walking resumed.

At its base level, fear is intended to help us sense and avoid danger. While fear can protect us, we now in live an age where we are fearful for things that are not healthy to be fearful of. We find ourselves fretting over things that we don't need to be afraid of, of things that will never happen, or of things that are useless to worry about because our worry can't protect us or change anything.

The thing is, we are not alone. The Bible is full of stories of people who let fear get the best of them. The Bible shares stories of ordinary men and women of God who responded in fear instead of responding in faith.

For example, there's Adam and Eve (Genesis 3). You know the story—Eve and then Adam eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and they realize they are naked and go clothe themselves with fig leaves. Then, scripture tells us that when they heard God walking in the garden, they hid. He asked why, and Adam said, "I heard you in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid." (Genesis 3:10)

Adam and Eve were afraid of God. Why were they afraid? They weren't sure what was going to happen. They heard God's warning, and now they didn't want to die. They didn't want punishment. They were afraid, living in fear instead of awaiting a relationship with their Creator.

Or, there's Moses and the burning bush (Exodus 3-4). Moses was out tending his father-in-laws sheep, and he came upon a bush that was on fire but not burning up. He went to investigate and encountered God. God asked Moses to go deliver His people from Egypt. Now, we don't find the words "Moses was afraid" in this story. But Moses came up with a lot of excuses about why he shouldn't go. "What if they don't believe me? I'm not a good public speaker. Please just send someone else." Fear of the unknown was driving his excuses to God.

Sometimes the fear is kinda known, though. Take for example the story of the Israelites after they came out of Egypt. Moses had done his job, the people came through the Red Sea, they got manna and quail from heaven and water from a rock... they received the Ten Commandments and all the other laws to abide by. Finally, they made it to the Promised Land.

And here's where things went wrong. (Numbers 13-14) Before entering Canaan, the land flowing with milk and honey that Moses had promised them, they sent 12 spies into the land. For 40 days, they explored and scouted out the area. This was the land promised to Abraham hundreds of years before. When they got back, they reported to Moses and Aaron. Hear the story from the Bible: *Numbers 13:26-33*

<sup>26</sup> They came back to Moses and Aaron and the whole Israelite community at Kadesh in the Desert of Paran. There they reported to them and to the whole assembly and showed them the fruit of the land. <sup>27</sup> They gave Moses this account: "We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. <sup>28</sup> But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak there. <sup>29</sup> The Amalekites live in the Negev; the Hittites, Jebusites and Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live near the sea and along the Jordan."

<sup>30</sup> Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, "We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it."

<sup>31</sup> But the men who had gone up with him said, "We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are." <sup>32</sup> And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, "The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. <sup>33</sup> We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them."

Those same people who witnessed God releasing them from Egypt, who had crossed through the Sea and eaten the miracle of quail and manna, these same people now cried and were fearful about what was ahead. Some even argued that they should go back to Egypt!

You see, we are not alone when we find ourselves acting out of fear. The first humans, Adam and Eve were scared of the unknowns of a life lived knowing good and evil. Moses was fearful of what Pharaoh would do to him. The Israelites were scared of the huge obstacle between them and the Promised Land. They were afraid of what they saw rather than trusting

God's provision and promise. Their giants were real, but they were also "what-ifs." We are not alone in looking at the what-ifs of our life and being fearful or anxious or worried. We are not alone in letting our imagination run away with us.

But here's the thing—"We can focus our imagination on all the things that might happen... or we can focus our imagination on the presence of God... and trust that we will sense His love and mercy holding us near" (Hamilton 39).

That's what our passage from Isaiah 43:1-2 tells us:

"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have summoned you by name; you are mine.

<sup>2</sup> When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;

and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you.

When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned;

the flames will not set you ablaze.

We don't have anything to fear! God will be with us. God knows our name and knows what we are going through, so we don't have to be fearful of the unknown. We can face the future unafraid! I know, that's easier said than done. So let me give you two tools for living with courage and hope rather than letting fear overtake you.

First, there a thing therapists call "exposure therapy." This is confronting your fear a little at a time. When Will was scared of the swimming pool at age 4, we used exposure therapy on him. First, I got in the water and talked with him. Then, he sat on the edge and put his feet in. Next, he sat on the top step. After a while, he held onto my neck for dear life and let me hold him in the water. Finally, he was able to let go and splash around in a swimming ring. Exposure therapy. That took forever. But a little at a time, he was able to face his fears and overcome them.

That doesn't work for all things. If you are trying to overcome a true phobia or something traumatic, this is not something to do by yourself. Get a counselor who can walk you through that. It can work though.

Another tool for overcoming fear and living with courage and hope is to pray our scriptures. There are many ways to do that. I have two of these books I enjoy using to jump-start my scripture prayers. You can read the Psalms and let them be your prayers. Speak them to God, and hear God speaking them back to you.

You see, fear and finding peace in the midst of fear is one of the major themes of the Bible. I've told you before, but the words *fear* and *afraid* appear over four hundred times in the Bible. But remember, the words "Do not be afraid," is found more than 100 times.

If we go back to our passage from Numbers, the story continues into chapter 14. Ten of the spies were terrified, but two offered a different perspective:

Numbers 14:7b-9 "The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. <sup>8</sup> If the Lord is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us. <sup>9</sup> Only do not rebel against the Lord. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will devour them. Their protection is gone, but the Lord is with us. Do not be afraid of them."

Caleb and Joshua counseled that the people didn't need to be afraid because God was with them. This is what we celebrate here in this Epiphany season: God is here. Compared to a God who can part the Red Sea and give water from a rock and manna from heaven, the enemies of the Israelites were nothing! There is nothing to fear when you are in line with the God-with-us.

I love to go fishing. Well, I love to fish with my uncle. I have never had the desire to have my own boat or go fishing on my own. I fish with my uncle. When I was in college, I would go see

him once a semester or more, and we would go fishing. We go out of Jupiter Inlet to do what they call bottom fishing. Redtail Snapper is the target species, but we keep anything that's legal sized and good to eat.

Over the years, I have watched my uncle. He knows what he's doing. He's had a boat since he was 12 years old and I'm still convinced that Uncle Dan knows everything. He knows exactly what fish species is on the end of the hook. He knows where to find fish. He knows what sinker to put on the line, if any at all. He knows what size the fish species has to be to keep it.

And he knows the ocean.

When we went out with the kids this last trip, we didn't go far out of the inlet. We passed the breakers so they could say they were in the Atlantic, but the waves were too rough to go out with the kids. The thing is, the kids didn't notice and they were disappointed in his decision. The inlet looked just fine to my desert rats. But he knew what to watch and how to tell it was too rough. He could read the wind and the waves and the boats around us and know that it wasn't safe.

There were other times we went out, though. I can remember the one time he told me, as usual, to hold on, right here. Then we started going close to parallel to the shore instead of straight out like we usually do. It took us longer to get out, but the boat was doing this as we were going. It was crazy.

But I wasn't afraid. My adrenaline was racing but it was exciting, not frightening. You see, I had been fishing with my uncle so much that I trusted him completely. I knew the Boston Whaler is an unsinkable boat. I knew where the life jackets were. And I knew that my uncle was in control. And I was going to be safe. I had complete trust in my uncle because I knew him and trusted him.

This is what God asks of us. 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.

What do you fear? What is weighing heavy on your heart? Or, what silly thing makes you jump and your heart race?

If you haven't, I invite you to write that down on that piece of paper. In a few minutes, we will sing our scripture song. Psalm 32:7 tells us

You are my hiding place;  
you will protect me from trouble  
and surround me with songs of deliverance.

That's our assurance... we can trust in God. This Sunday traditionally remembers the baptism of Jesus in the river. Today, we will let the waters in the baptismal font wash away our own sin of fear. While not all fear is sin, let us confess to God those things that we fear rather than trusting God to work in. Remember, we can let our imaginations tell us all the things that might happen, or we can let our imagination remind us of the presence and power of God. Write those things that you need to trust God to transform.

When you are done, as we are singing, bring your fear to the baptismal font. Bring your fear here, to let the waters of baptism wash away those fears and be transformed by God. Bring your fear to God, and let God's love and mercy overflow.

Let us pray: O God, pour out your Spirit upon these waters, that they might receive the fears we bring, and transform them to trust and mercy and love. Transform us, as well, that we might know that we can hide in you, safe from those things that frighten us. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.