

Unafraid: 1. Age of High Anxiety

Isaiah 42:10; Psalm 56:3-4

April 8, 2018

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We live at a time when fear, worry, anxiety, and stress are constant companions. It's the world we live in: terrorism, climate change, economic insecurity, school shootings, identity theft. Society is changing at a speed never before seen in history, changes that force us to make changes or adapt to the change happening around us. The ubiquitous smartphone is only 10 years old. How did we manage before smartphones? Back in the dark ages when I went to college, we had one phone on campus that could be used for long distance calls, and if you were willing to wait long enough you could use it. I used it maybe once each school year when I'd run out of money. Today, our daughter is in Nepal, and I start to worry if we haven't heard from her at least once a day. Anybody else worry about their children? Or health concerns? Or the constant "breaking news," tweet or text message that calls out to me with one more thing to be concerned about: a shooting in California – be afraid; a plane crash in some remote region of the world – tragic yes, but suddenly it feels like I should contact anyone I know who might be traveling by plane.

Or maybe you have no fears. What about stress? Do you know what stresses me out? You do! My job. We had a great Easter with lots of guests and most of the seats were filled. But the next morning I realized there's another Sunday coming. What will I say and will it be worth listening to? And what if the people who came on Easter decide they don't want to hear anything more from me? And what if I come up with something to say but nobody shows up? What do I do then? And then I think about all of the details that make this church function and what have we forgotten and who has been missing and is everything being cared for? I feel the pressure. I work to counter that, but it's there.

It keeps us awake at night. It impacts our relationships and our health. Fear. Worry. Stress. Anxiety. We all experience this. In this series, we will look at our fears and what scripture can teach us about how to live with courage and faith. The goal is not an absence of fear, but a mastery of fear. To recognize legitimate fears, dismiss exaggerated fears, and not let fear keep us from doing what we yearn to do. I remember the nights when our daughters were little and one of them would cry out – Daddy, Daddy! And I would come running. She was afraid, and either the closet door was open or there was something under her bed and she was certain there was a monster – and I would close the closet door and look under the bed and no persuading could change her mind. She needed a light, only then would the darkness lose its power. Or she needed my presence, only then would vulnerability lose its power. That's what this series is about.

Fear is actually a gift from God. It is how we detect danger and respond to it. We have this early warning system that is meant to help us survive. It's like the smoke detectors in our homes. The sensors detect the early indications of smoke and it sets off an alarm to tell us there is danger so we can act – but sometimes the detectors are fooled and it's just steam from the shower or toast that burned, but it could also save your life. And in a similar way, our five senses send signals to our brain that alerts the medulla to produce two hormones – adrenaline and cortisol – that prepare our body for action. Heart beats faster, breathing increases, we start sweating, our pupils dilate, our hearing sharpens, blood flow increases to our muscles because there's danger and it's time to fight, flight, or freeze. And all this happens within seconds.

When Amanda and I were first married we had a little miniature poodle that slept under our bed at night. One winter night – this was before we had children – the dog began growling, loud enough that it woke us up and then we heard someone walking upstairs toward our second floor bedroom – and fear called us to action. Amanda reached for the phone to call 911. We opened the bedroom door and the dog ran to the top of the stairs barking wildly. And I grabbed the only thing I could find which was my shoe (if you’ve seen my feet, my shoe could be a weapon) and as I got to the stairs whomever was in our house slammed the front door. And I look back on that night and realize fear may have saved us from who knows what. But the problem is that after that night, the early warning system kept going off for months – and even now when I hear a noise in the night, my first thought is “someone’s in the house.” And when we experience a physiological response even when there is no danger, that’s called anxiety. This feeling of doom or unease when there is no obvious danger – that’s anxiety and 57 million adults – 1 in 5 of us – suffer from anxiety. That’s more than any other mental illness. Fear can be good. It’s why we buckle up in the car. It’s why we save for retirement. It’s why we install smoke detectors. But often what we perceive as threats are not threats. And it can paralyze us.

In the book of Numbers, we find a story about the Israelites. Moses has led them out of Egypt, and now they are on a journey to the land that God has promised to them. After two years, they arrive at Kadesh Barnea, just one mile south of the Promised Land. Before entering the land, Moses selects 12 men to secretly enter the land and check what’s there. When they return, two of them (Caleb and Joshua) report “**We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.**” But the other ten report: “**We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are... They are giants... We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.**” And sometimes we are caught between the two – fear – is it real or imagined? I can or I can’t. Moses and the Israelites choose fear – scared of the giants, they back away. For the next 38 years, they wander in the wilderness. Why 38 years? That’s how long it takes until a generation dies off and a new generation is ready. Just one mile from their destination and they are paralyzed by fear. They weren’t really grasshoppers and the people they would face were not really giants. That was fear talking.

What we need is a faith bigger than our grasshoppers, a faith big enough to match the giants. Sometimes we say we will pray about it. Only to let prayer be our excuse not to move. When prayer is what powers our move – prayer is what provides the direction forward. There is a phrase that appears more than 400 times in the Bible: **Do not be afraid.** We are called to face our fears. Sometimes it is a therapist who can help us sort out what’s real and imagined and how to face what’s before us. Sometimes it’s medication that can calm our anxiety so we can face what’s there. How do we face our fears? Here’s what God says through the prophet Isaiah: **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 hand.** It is the promise that I repeat whenever I’m at the bedside of someone who is facing an uncertain outcome. You may not be in control, the path before you may not be clear, but we keep moving forward, knowing that God will not let go of you. Isaiah was speaking to people who had seen death and destruction. They had lost their homes, forced into exile, and now fifty years later, an entire generation had grown up in Babylon and had never been to Jerusalem, but King Cyrus was sending them back to Jerusalem and an uncertain future. Fear. Worry. Anxiety. Stress. And yet God had not and would not let go.

In his book, *Unafraid*, Adam Hamilton uses the word Fear as an acronym to offer four important steps in the face of fear. 1. **Face fears with faith** 2. **Examine assumptions** in light of facts 3. **Attack anxieties with action** 4. **Release your cares to God.** It’s not absence of fear but mastery of fear.

In 1984, Amy Grant and Michael W. Smith teamed up to write a song based on Psalm 119:105. **Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.** They were recording the song at a studio located on a ranch high in Rocky Mountains. Michael wrote the melody and a refrain based on that verse of scripture, but he had no idea what the verses should be and he asked Amy to complete it. So later that night she starts walking back to her cabin. It's an 8,000 acre ranch and it's dark and in the middle of nowhere. And she got lost. She knows there are bears and other animals out there and she's terrified. But as she is walking, she finally sees a lamp and starts walking toward the light not realizing it was the light from her cabin. When she reached the light that was her cabin, she sat down and wrote these words that became the song: **When I feel afraid and think I've lost my way. Still, you're right beside me. Nothing will I fear as long as you are near. Please be with me to the end.** Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.

When our children were in preschool, they would ask me to take them to chutes and ladders. That was 30 years ago and maybe it's still there, Hyland Park in Bloomington had an amazing array of slides and ladders. And I would go with Lauren and Bethany and we had great fun together. I'll not forget. There was one slide. Lauren wanted to go down but it was long and was a tunnel and from the top of the slide she could not see the bottom. She was afraid. Every other time we had been there she walked away. She wouldn't go down the slide. Fear was too much for her. But on this particular day she got to the top of the slide and called out, "Daddy will you catch me? I will, Lauren. I will catch you. But Daddy I can't see you. Trust me. Let go. And I'll catch you." And when she let go and came through the chute her body was tense with fear but her face immediately turned to joy when she saw that I was there to catch her.

Fear. Worry. Anxiety. Stress. They may be our constant companions, but there is one who is greater – greater than grasshoppers, and even greater than the giants. God, will you catch me? I can't see you. Will you catch me? The message of scripture and thousands of years of believers respond: Our God will never let go of us.

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of April 8, 2018

Weekly Prayer: Always-present and Always-loving God, you know what we carry in our hearts and minds. You know the fears that persist as we hear the latest news and respond to the demands of living. Speak to us a message of calm and comfort. Remind us once again that your peace is available to us. May that peace which surpasses all understanding be what we experience today, through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Monday, April 9

Scripture: Psalm 56:3-4, 10-11

Whenever I'm afraid, I put my trust in you—in God, whose word I praise. I trust in God; I won't be afraid. What can mere flesh do to me?

God: whose word I praise. The LORD: whose word I praise. I trust in God; I won't be afraid. What can anyone do to me?

Observation: In 1933 a deep economic depression gripped the United States. In his inaugural address, new President Franklin Roosevelt said, "Let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance." President Roosevelt was, knowingly or not, following a

Biblical tradition. In Psalm 56, we hear an expression of deep trust in God that was repeated in Psalm 118, sung at the end of Passover *seders*, and quoted in Hebrews 13:5-8. Trusting in God's unfailing love, the psalmist, Jesus and the early Christians all asked, "What can anyone do to me?"

Application: When we read the question, "What can anyone do to me?" our first (frightening) thought may be, "People could do plenty to me." Only as we look below life's surface does the psalmist's question make more sense. What bad, perhaps even malicious, obstacles has God's presence helped you survive, or even turned into a good purpose? How does that affect your ability to trust God moving forward?

Prayer: Lord God, I want to learn to live with the same kind of trust the psalmist expressed. Teach me each day how to put my trust in you whenever I am afraid. Amen.

Tuesday, April 10

Scripture: Isaiah 41:8-10, 13

But you, Israel my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, offspring of Abraham, whom I love, you whom I took from the ends of the earth and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, "You are my servant; I chose you and didn't reject you": Don't fear, because I am with you; don't be afraid, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, I will surely help you; I will hold you with my righteous strong hand.

I am the LORD your God, who grasps your strong hand, who says to you, Don't fear; I will help you.

Observation: Through Isaiah the prophet, God pledged to strengthen and help any descendant of Abraham willing to join in God's redemptive mission for the world. Later, the apostle Paul, who counted on God's strength for his life mission, extended Isaiah's promise to all Christ followers. "If you belong to Christ, then indeed you are Abraham's descendants," he wrote (Galatians 3:29).

Application: Many scholars believe chapter 40 on in the book of Isaiah spoke to Israelites living through the bitter experience of defeat and exile in Babylon. Few things could make people feel more powerless. What situations are you facing that leave you feeling powerless and afraid? Read today's passage again, and put your name in place of "Israel," "Jacob" and "Abraham." As you do, ask God to speak courage to your heart.

Prayer: Lord God, I wish all the bad in our world would just go away right now—but it won't. But you promise that you can and will ultimately make it all come out right. Give me courage to do my part in working with you. Amen.

Wednesday, April 11

Scripture: Matthew 6:25-27

"Therefore, I say to you, don't worry about your life, what you'll eat or what you'll drink, or about your body, what you'll wear. Isn't life more than food and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds in the sky. They don't sow seed or harvest grain or gather crops into barns. Yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren't you worth much more than they are? Who among you by worrying can add a single moment to your life?"

Observation: Today's passage may feel radical at first, utterly against simple common sense. That must have been even more of a challenge for Jesus' first hearers. Jesus' audience would have been ordinary peasant people who had to worry about their next meal all the time, yet Jesus tells them not to worry about anything. He asks them instead to view the world with new eyes, in order to see all around them evidence of God's care and provision.

Application: Worry generally focuses our energy and attention either on the past ("I wish...") or on the future ("What if..."). Jesus called us into the present, the only "time" we can directly affect and use to meet with God. Practice pausing your worries and concerns, and 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.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you modeled a life of peace and trust. Help me to keep learning how to live a life in which my energy can focus on your purposes rather than my fears. Amen.

Thursday, April 12

Scripture: John 14:25-27

"I have spoken these things to you while I am with you. The Companion, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I told you. "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give you. I give to you not as the world gives. Don't be troubled or afraid.

Observation: Describing Jesus' last night before the cross, John wrote the ominous words, "When Judas took the bread, he left immediately. And it was night" (John 13:30). But the darkness didn't overcome Jesus, the light of the world. With evil people plotting and Easter's light only visible by faith, Jesus told his followers that he was leaving them his peace. His peace rested on the Holy Spirit's presence with them, "not as the world gives." If they could grasp it firmly, they could find Jesus' peace even at times of great fear.

Application: From Barclay's Commentary: "The peace which the world offers us is the peace of escape, the peace which comes from the avoidance of trouble and from refusing to face things. The peace which Jesus offers us is the peace of conquest. No experience of life can ever take it from us and no sorrow, no danger, no suffering can ever make it less. It is independent of outward circumstances." In what ways have you experienced the difference between the peace Jesus gives and the types of peace the world offers?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for offering me a peace that isn't temporary, that nothing can take away from me. Now please help me to live into that peace more each day. Amen.

Friday, April 13

Scripture: Philippians 4:4-7

Be glad in the Lord always! Again I say, be glad! Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people. The Lord is near. Don't be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.

Observation: Do we truly understand peace? The apostle Paul's statement that God's peace "exceeds all understanding" may make more sense when we realize that he sent this letter from

a dank, dreary Roman prison cell (cf. Philippians 1:12-14). Even there, he had God's peace. And he shared a key he'd found for living in God's peace: to take anything that might worry him and give it to God in prayer.

Application: Paul, at peace even in prison, did not say, "I sure was lucky to be born with a peaceful temperament." Instead, in Philippians 4:11, he said, "I have learned how to be content in any circumstance." Under what conditions, good or bad, do you find it a struggle to remain in God's peace? What experiences or examples have helped you learn to make choices or take actions that lead you toward accepting God's gift of peace?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I want to turn my worries into prayers. I lay before you all the things that worry me today, and I open my heart to your gifts of peace and contentment. Amen.

Saturday, April 14

Scripture: 1 Peter 5:6-10

Therefore, humble yourselves under God's power so that he may raise you up in the last day. Throw all your anxiety onto him, because he cares about you. Be clearheaded. Keep alert. Your accuser, the devil, is on the prowl like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith. Do so in the knowledge that your fellow believers are enduring the same suffering throughout the world. After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, the one who called you into his eternal glory in Christ Jesus, will himself restore, empower, strengthen, and establish you.

Observation: Early Christians faced hostility, ostracism and often persecution. They might be beaten, imprisoned or even executed. Peter wrote a stirring call to those people. As they lived in conditions guaranteed to make people anxious, he urged them to bring all their anxieties to God in trusting prayer. Peter and those early Christians looked beyond the boundaries of this life. They trusted that all earthly struggles are only "for a little while," while God's restoration of us to the kind of life humans are meant to live is an eternal reality.

Application: In what ways have you learned to trust that God cares for you? In what parts of life, if any, is it still hard for you to trust that? Read John 21:15-19 to see why Peter could say with such confidence that God will restore you, and make you steadfast, strong and firm. Are there failures from which you want God to restore you? Are there areas in which you wish to be more steadfast or strong? Ask God in prayer to work with you to make restoration and strength a reality for you.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, keep me clear-headed, keep me alert. Let me use those qualities to let you carry my anxieties, rather than trying to carry them myself. Amen.