

Unafraid: 5. The Sky is Falling
Psalm 46; Mark 6:1-6
May 11, 2018
Pastor Steve Richards

When our children were little, we had certain books that they heard so many times that they memorized the story long before they were able to read it. And they've never forgotten the story. That's also true when I was a child, and one of my favorites was *Chicken Little*. Do you know the story? Chicken Little is out scratching in the chicken yard one day, when an acorn hits her on the head, and she says, "The sky is falling. I must go and tell the king." I never understood what the king would do about it, but along the way she meets Henny Penny and say, "The sky is falling. The sky is falling. I must go and tell the king." And Henny Penny joins in. The two of them meet up with Duck Lucky: The sky is falling. The sky is falling. And Ducky Lucky joins them. Then they see Goosy Loosy: The sky is falling. The sky is falling. And soon there is mass hysteria as they all run off to tell the king. When I was a child, I didn't realize it but this was a story about being afraid of things we don't understand and how easily that fear can build when it is passed along. It is what some have called "catastrophizing" – making something far worse than it is, something as simple as an acorn dropping on one's head.

This morning's message is a continuation of a series based on the book by Adam Hamilton – *Unafraid: Living with Courage and Hope in Uncertain Times*. I first heard the story of Chicken Little in the 1960s, a time when many felt the sky was falling – this nation experienced the assassination of 3 prominent leaders, the social unrest of the Civil Rights movement, increased protests against the war in Vietnam, the loss of trust in government officials. In our schools, we had drills where we climbed under our desks to prepare for the atomic bombs that we feared would be dropped on our nation. Many felt the sky was falling. That was fifty years ago, and though the circumstances have changed, today there are many who feel like the sky is falling.

Each year since 2014, Chapman University has conducted a survey of Americans' greatest fears, and what they have discovered is that Americans are more afraid than ever. The top fear identified by 75% of Americans: corruption of government officials. At first that surprised me, but isn't that what we are hearing constantly in the news? Both political parties have made each other out to be crooked and lying. Can we trust anyone? The Gallup organization conducts an annual poll of Americans about their sense of the direction of this country and our satisfaction with our own lives. The most recent poll indicates that 87% of Americans are satisfied with the direction of their own lives but only 29% are satisfied with the direction of the country. And even that level of satisfaction varies depending on which political party is in power. Republicans have a higher level of confidence in the country's direction when Republicans are in power. And it's just the opposite when Democrats are in power. There is a deep divide in our country.

2018 is another election year. Our older daughter is a media buyer for political ads. She's not involved in creating the ads, but she selects where and when the ads will appear. And she said, "Dad, you may not want to watch television this fall." With the election in this state of a new governor, two senators, all the representatives, there's a lot at stake for both political parties and the ads are going to be negative. Though we complain about negative ads, they are effective because they work on our fears. Researchers have found that when we are anxious, we tend to seek out information from sources that actually reinforce our anxiety. Be afraid of this candidate or that candidate – and we hear enough that we end up acting on our fears – but the side effect ends up dividing us.

Last Monday, I was in western Minnesota, playing golf with my college roommate. He's on the city council in his small town, and on the eighth hole he received a call that he was needed at a Planning Commission meeting so there would be a quorum. He told me I could come along provided I didn't say anything. No embarrassing stories about our college days and no comments on the agenda. I found out why. There were a lot of comments about people who live in the Cities. And if I hadn't been sworn to silence, I might have spoken up just to say, there's someone in the room from the Cities. But I stayed silent and because I stayed silent, I heard a divide that I didn't realize existed: small town and big city. We have perceptions and those perceptions become our reality.

If you've been part of this church for any length of time, you know that I stay away from partisan issues, but there have been times when I've mentioned the president – and even when my comment was supportive, I receive comments and emails – some thanking me, some disagreeing with me, and some wanting me to leave politics at the door. Several years ago, we surveyed our congregation on a number of things and one area was whether you consider yourself to be progressive, moderate or conservative – and at least at that time, you were equally divided. I like the fact that this is a church where we don't all agree. We don't all see the world the same way, but it is more challenging. There have been times when I've been told I'm too conservative and times when I've been told I'm too liberal – and sometimes it is in response to the same message. The defining mark of the Christian life is not being right but it's love.

In Mark 3, we find this scene: **Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath.** According to Jewish law, it was wrong to work on the Sabbath unless someone's life was at risk. The Sabbath was the one day of the week to avoid all work in order to rest and focus on one's devotion to God. And as far as we know this was not a medical emergency. This man's life was not at risk. The right thing to do was to wait until the next day. That's what the law said. **Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?"** The irony was that they were already plotting to put Jesus to death. Jesus' point? There's something more important than right – and that is love – and Jesus heals the man. Love is the defining character of a Christian.

I want this to be a place where we can say you are my brother and sister even if we don't agree, and I want to listen and learn from you and I want to be able to share my perspective in love. Jesus called both Simon the Zealot and Matthew the tax collector to be his disciples – they were the extreme opposites politically. Zealots wanted to kill the Romans. And tax collectors wanted to work with the Romans. And yet, Jesus welcomed them both. I believe we are a bridge in a divided community.

Sixteen months ago, President Trump signed an executive order banning the entry of refugees from several predominantly Muslim countries. At that time, I responded that I hoped our congregation would sponsor a refugee family, not because I wanted to take issue with the president who was fulfilling a campaign promise. Instead, there seemed to be a growing fear of refugees and even immigrants, and I felt we could be a bridge. I still have this crazy idea that people in our community might look at Messiah Church and say, "See how they love."

So last week, I decided to learn more about refugees. Worldwide, there are 65 million displaced people. Of that number, 22 million have been screened and given refugee status by the United Nations High Commission on Refugees. Of that number, only 1% or 220,000 are resettled to

another country annually. This year, it's estimated that 45,000 will be resettled in this country. About 900 here in Minnesota.

This congregation has a team ready to welcome a family. We've been waiting for almost a year, and we are next on the list. We are working with a program funded by the federal government and administered by the Minnesota Council of Churches. Let me share one family's story. They arrived a few weeks ago, sponsored by the United Methodist Church in White Bear Lake. It's a mom and a dad and five children ranging in age from 9 to 16. In 1996, the mom and dad fled the ethnic violence in a region of Burma, known as Karen. They fled to a refugee camp in Thailand and three years later that were granted refugee status by the United Nations which means if they return to their home they will be persecuted or killed. For the past 22 years they have been living in this refugee camp. Today, there are 40,000 people living in this camp. The description of this camp is similar to what I've seen in trips to Kenya. No electricity. No water. No sewage system. Homes constructed from bamboo because they are forbidden to use permanent building materials – even though persons have been living there for decades. Rat infested and when it rains, it is a mess. That's where they gave birth to their five children. For 22 years, they have been waiting in line to find refuge somewhere. During that time, they have had to prove their story, undergo medical screening and security screening multiple times. In 2010 a relative was permitted to immigrate to this country, eventually coming to the Twin Cities and applying for the rest of her family to come. In January, they were given permission to find refuge in this country.

I spoke to the pastor of the sponsoring church. She and few people from the church as well as the family's relatives were at the airport to meet them. Imagine 22 years in a refugee camp, and then one day you board a plane – something you've never experienced to a place you've only heard about, and after two days of travel, arriving at the Minneapolis airport. Only the 16 year old knew any English and in the confusion, it took them an hour to get through the airport to find the group that was waiting to welcome them. The pastor told me that when they finally came down the escalator (something they had never seen before), the 16 year old was so overwhelmed all she could do was sit on the floor, sobbing. That's how it feels to find refuge.

I needed a human story to make this real. My concern is that our nation's collective fear may lead us to forget what it means to love. Soon after the Holocaust Museum opened in Washington DC, Amanda and I spent a day there. If you've not been to that Museum, you follow a timeline through the Museum that begins when Hitler came to power and when you get to 1938 there were 100s of thousands of Jews trying to leave Europe as they realized what was happening. At the time, 67% of the American public was opposed the Jews entering this country. In 1939 the MS St. Louis left Germany with 900 Jews on board seeking refuge. They arrived at the Port of Miami and were turned away. They ended up returning to Germany where many of them were killed. After World War II, President Eisenhower proposed receiving 250,000 refugees and 59% of Americans said no, even after hearing what they had been through during the Holocaust.

All of us face fear. But in the face of fear, what do we do? The writer of Psalm 46 tells us: **God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in times of trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea... The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.**

The writer does not say the world will never fall apart, but we always have a refuge. Do you remember how the story of Chicken Little ends? In their fear, they meet up with a fox who offers to show them a shortcut to the king's house – only that shortcut leads to the fox's den where he

and his family have a marvelous dinner and Chicken Little and her friends are never heard from again. Their fears consumed them. My hope is that we are those who are guided, not by fear but by courage. We respond to a hurting world because our refuge is the God of love. Therefore, let's be the bridge that this world so desperately needs.

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of May 13, 2018

Weekly Prayer: Faithful God, loving Parent of every one of us, you promise to be our refuge and our strength, an ever-present help in times of trouble. Grant us the grace to live as if we truly believe this, even on our most difficult days. May others see in us a love rooted in the unconditional love that Jesus shows for us and for all the world. Amen.

Monday, May 14

Scripture: Psalm 46:1-3; Psalm 113:1-8

God is our refuge and strength, a help always near in times of great trouble. That's why we won't be afraid when the world falls apart, when the mountains crumble into the center of the sea, when its waters roar and rage, when the mountains shake because of its surging waves. Selah

Praise the LORD! You who serve the LORD—praise! Praise the LORD's name! Let the LORD's name be blessed from now until forever from now! From sunrise to sunset, let the LORD's name be praised! The LORD is high over all the nations; God's glory is higher than the skies! Who could possibly compare to the LORD our God? God rules from on high; he has to come down to even see heaven and earth! God lifts up the poor from the dirt and raises up the needy from the garbage pile to seat them with leaders— with the leaders of his own people!

Observation: Sometimes we say, with a wry smile, that in today's world "the only constant is change." But many times this idea brings us not a smile, but deep-seated fear. That didn't just start. In the psalms (Israel's hymn book), we find mention of the world falling apart, mountains crumbling and the sea (an ancient symbol of chaos and disorder) roaring and raging. But we also find the confidence that God is high over all the changes that cause us fear. God is always our refuge and strength.

Application: What experiences have you already had that made it feel as though your world was falling apart? Did you allow your faith in God to provide you with a stable place to stand as everything else seemed to be crumbling? What makes it valuable to build your trust in God before the next time when everything seems to fall apart? The writers of psalms were positive that God was present with us at any time of fear, "always near in times of great trouble." That trust was based on the faith that God is eternal.

Prayer: Lord God, I want to praise your name from sunrise to sunset because I genuinely trust that you are "high over all the nations." Let my praise to you override my fear about any other realities. Amen.

Tuesday, May 15

Scripture: Psalm 23:1-3; Psalm 96:10-13

The LORD is my shepherd. I lack nothing. He lets me rest in grassy meadows; he leads me to restful waters; he keeps me alive. He guides me in proper paths for the sake of his good name.

Tell the nations, "The LORD rules! Yes, he set the world firmly in place; it won't be shaken. He will judge all people fairly." Let heaven celebrate! Let the earth rejoice! Let the sea and everything in it roar! Let the countryside and everything in it celebrate! Then all the trees of the forest too will shout out joyfully before the LORD because he is coming! He is coming to establish justice on the earth! He will establish justice in the world rightly. He will establish justice among all people fairly.

Observation: The familiar King James Version rendering of Psalm 23:3 is "he restoreth my soul." Along with "still waters," it may sound to us like a day at a peaceful spa. But "he keeps me alive" (the Common English Version's translation) reflects the fact that for sheep, water and grass were not luxuries, but absolute necessities for survival. The Lord who ultimately rules over our world provides the things we need to keep our spiritual life always alive.

Application: Earlier in his life, King David had been a shepherd (1 Samuel 17:34-36) and likely composed Psalm 23. He described God as guiding him (and all God's children) "in proper paths." Living as we do in a culture that places great store on our freedom to choose our own path in life, how easy or difficult do you find it to trust God to point to the proper paths for your life? How can confidence that you are on the proper path reduce your fear of change?

Prayer: King Jesus, truly, you rule! You rule the universe, including our world—yet you will rule my heart and life only if I ask you to. So please rule my life, and direct me in the proper paths. Amen.

Wednesday, May 16

Scripture: Matthew 6:9-10; Mark 12:13-17

Pray like this: Our Father who is in heaven, uphold the holiness of your name. Bring in your kingdom so that your will is done on earth as it's done in heaven.

They sent some of the Pharisees and supporters of Herod to trap him in his words. They came to him and said, "Teacher, we know that you're genuine and you don't worry about what people think. You don't show favoritism but teach God's way as it really is. Does the Law allow people to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay taxes or not?" Since Jesus recognized their deceit, he said to them, "Why are you testing me? Bring me a coin. Show it to me." And they brought one. He said to them, "Whose image and inscription is this?" "Caesar's," they replied. Jesus said to them, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." His reply left them overcome with wonder.

Observation: Jesus' enemies tried hard to ask him "no win" questions, for which either answer would get him in trouble. Taxes were as much or more a hot button then they are today. But Jesus' answer said it wasn't as simple as a "yes" or "no." There was indeed a valid realm for "Caesar" (human authority), and a citizen's duty to pay taxes fit into that. Yet God's kingdom was a larger realm, and in the Lord's Prayer, Jesus clearly indicated that God's kingdom commanded his (and our) ultimate loyalty.

Application: Rev. Matthew Simpson, in the funeral sermon for Abraham Lincoln, said: "To a minister who said he hoped the Lord was on our side, he replied that it gave him no concern whether the Lord was on our side or not. 'For,' he added, 'I know the Lord is always on the side of right;' and with deep feeling added, 'But God is my witness that it is my constant anxiety and prayer that both myself and this nation should be on the Lord's side.'" * Do you think Lincoln was correct to resist assuming that God would automatically favor whatever he decided to do?

How can you allow the Holy Spirit to guide you in discerning whether you are “on the Lord’s side” of decisions in your life?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, guide me to a clear sense of what my loyalty to you and your kingdom asks of me. Help me to respect earthly authorities, but never more highly than I respect your authority. Amen.

* From <http://lincoln.digitalscholarship.emory.edu/simpson.001/>, page 16.

Thursday, May 17

Scripture: Psalm 115:1-2, 9-11; Acts 5:17-29

Not to us, LORD, not to us— no, but to your own name give glory because of your loyal love and faithfulness! Why do the nations say, "Where's their God now?"

But you, Israel, trust in the LORD! God is their help and shield. Trust in the LORD, house of Aaron! God is their help and shield. You who honor the LORD, trust in the LORD! God is their help and shield.

The high priest, together with his allies, the Sadducees, was overcome with jealousy. They seized the apostles and made a public show of putting them in prison. An angel from the Lord opened the prison doors during the night and led them out. The angel told them, "Go, take your place in the temple, and tell the people everything about this new life." Early in the morning, they went into the temple as they had been told and began to teach. When the high priest and his colleagues gathered, they convened the Jerusalem Council, that is, the full assembly of Israel's elders. They sent word to the prison to have the apostles brought before them. However, the guards didn't find them in the prison. They returned and reported, "We found the prison locked and well-secured, with guards standing at the doors, but when we opened the doors we found no one inside!" When they received this news, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were baffled and wondered what might be happening. Just then, someone arrived and announced, "Look! The people you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!" Then the captain left with his guards and brought the apostles back. They didn't use force because they were afraid the people would stone them. The apostles were brought before the council where the high priest confronted them: "In no uncertain terms, we demanded that you not teach in this name. And look at you! You have filled Jerusalem with your teaching. And you are determined to hold us responsible for this man's death." Peter and the apostles replied, "We must obey God rather than humans!"

Observation: Hebrew poets often used repetition to stress the most vital parts of their message. The triple repetition of “trust in the Lord” in Psalm 115 was an example of that. Jesus had warned his followers that, although they would face hostility from authorities, they should not fear those people (Matthew 10:16-26). And when the highest religious authority in Jerusalem ordered them not to preach or teach about Jesus, the apostles trusted in the Lord and said, “We must obey God rather than humans!”

Application: Along with the three-fold call to “trust in the Lord,” Psalm 115 repeated a promise three times: “God is their help and shield.” We hear and pray regularly for followers of God who have lost jobs, been involved in accidents or been diagnosed with deadly diseases. In what sense is God still trustworthy at those times, still their help and shield? Have you experienced trying times like that in which trusting God was the “lifeline” that got you through the experience?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, to your name always be the glory. Empower me to live a life that, in easy decisions and hard ones, glorifies you through my loyalty and obedience. Amen.

Friday, May 18

Scripture: Psalm 23:4-6; Psalm 46:4-7

Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no danger because you are with me. Your rod and your staff— they protect me. You set a table for me right in front of my enemies. You bathe my head in oil; my cup is so full it spills over! Yes, goodness and faithful love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the LORD's house as long as I live.

There is a river whose streams gladden God's city, the holiest dwelling of the Most High. God is in that city. It will never crumble. God will help it when morning dawns. Nations roar; kingdoms crumble. God utters his voice; the earth melts. The LORD of heavenly forces is with us! The God of Jacob is our place of safety. Selah

Observation: The expression of trust in Psalm 23 did not promise that God's people would never face painful, "dark valley" experiences. In fact, in common with other Biblical passages (Isaiah 43:3), it assumed that such times would come into all lives. The value the psalmists saw in trusting God lay not in being able to avoid pain and sadness, but in having God with us even in the darkest of times.

Application: Psalm 46:4 is poetry, not geography. There is no river in Jerusalem. The word, river, is a symbol of life-giving power, in contrast to the threatening waters and waves of Psalm 46:3. How did that psalm set the stage for Jesus' dramatic claim: "On the last and most important day of the festival, Jesus stood up and shouted, 'All who are thirsty should come to me! All who believe in me should drink! As the scriptures said concerning me, 'Rivers of living water will flow out from within him'" (John 7:37-38) In what ways has Jesus quenched your inner thirst?

Prayer: Lord God, sometimes I forget you. Sometimes I try to ignore you. But I do not want to face this scary world alone. And I thank you for never giving up on me, but pursuing me with your goodness and faithful love. Amen.

Saturday, May 19

Scripture: Psalm 46:10-11; Revelation 17:9-14 (ref Ezra 7:11-12; Revelation 11:15-19)

"That's enough! Now know that I am God! I am exalted among all nations; I am exalted throughout the world! The LORD of heavenly forces is with us! The God of Jacob is our place of safety. Selah

This calls for an understanding mind. The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated. They are also seven kings. Five kings have fallen, the one is, and the other hasn't yet come. When that king comes, he must remain for only a short time. As for the beast that was and is not, it is itself an eighth king that belongs to the seven, and it is going to destruction. The ten horns that you saw are ten kings, who haven't yet received royal power. But they will receive royal authority for an hour, along with the beast. These kings will be of one mind, and they will give their power and authority to the beast. They will make war on the Lamb, but the Lamb will emerge victorious, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings. Those with him are called, chosen, and faithful."

This is a copy of the letter that Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest and scribe, a scholar of the text of the LORD's commandments and his requirements for Israel: Artaxerxes, king of kings, to Ezra the priest, the scribe of the Instruction from the God of heaven. Peace!

Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and his Christ, and he will rule forever and always." Then the twenty-four elders, who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshipped God. They said, "We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and was, for you have taken your great power and enforced your rule. The nations were enraged, but your wrath came. The time came for the dead to be judged. The time came to reward your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and to destroy those who destroy the earth." Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the chest containing his covenant appeared in his temple. There were lightning, voices, thunder, an earthquake, and large hail.

Observation: The traditional King James Version translation of Psalm 46:10 is, "Be still." But the Hebrew did not refer to going to a quiet mountain retreat. It was a call to say "enough" to our noisy inner fears, and with them silenced, to recognize God as our place of safety. At the end of the Bible, in visions packed with symbols, Revelation proclaimed Jesus' final triumph over evil. In the first century, for Christians, the persecuting Roman Empire (Rome—the city on seven mountains, or hills) was evil incarnate. The vision gave Jesus a double title—"Lord of lords and King of kings." It echoed a title Caesar often claimed. Jesus was king, even over all other kings, even over Caesar. He was, and is, "our place of safety."

Application: Rome was hardly unique. Human rulers have often claimed divine approval or status (e.g. Nazi soldiers wore belt buckles that said, in German, "God is with us"). Many rulers today, formal or informal, claim exalted status for themselves. Do you trust that Jesus is "king of kings" over all of them? In what ways is that trust the foundation for the peace and hope in which we can live at all times?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you are the King of kings, you are the Lord of lords. I cannot fully grasp all the reach of that, but I can and do ask you to be Lord of my life, to make me the person you want me to be. Amen.