

1 For several years now, Chapman University has been surveying random samples of Americans to create a snapshot of how afraid we are and what it is that we're afraid of.¹ Fear of government corruption has topped the list for the last three years. Other top ten items have included: air and water pollution; not having enough money for retirement; terrorism; people we love becoming seriously ill and/or dying; privacy and identity theft; global warming; nuclear war; extinction of plants and animals; white supremacists; drunk driving; biological warfare; mass shootings; unemployment; gang violence- the list goes on and on, with 94 unique fears reported for 2018 alone. What would you add to the list of fears? Rejection, fear of failure, uncertainty about the future, aging, insignificance? Something else? We all have something, or more likely, some things that we tend to fear and worry about.

Many of our fears are rooted in the realities we observe in the lives of our friends, families, co-workers, and the nation. Not all fear is irrational, even if our worry and other responses to our fears are often unfruitful. At the same time, we know that God's desire for us is that faith and love become so central to our way of living, that they temper even the scariest facts of living in the modern age. We are told over and over again in the Bible that we don't have to live in fear. Is it possible to live with courage and hope without ignoring the real struggles of living in a broken world?

For the next month and a half, we'll explore some of the vexing fears we face in America, ending, appropriately enough, with sickness, growing old, and dying. The series is inspired by the series and book of the same title by Adam Hamilton, pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection.² Whatever fears and worries you're facing, hear the good news: God is well aware of what you're going through. God loves you, and God is offering you wisdom and strength for the times you feel scared, scattered, and weak.

2 Fear is an emotion that seems to be designed into the biology of the brain. Why would God make us that way? Perhaps because there are some situations in life that call for an immediate, decisive response rather than a well-thought-out deliberation. When you burn your hand by touching something hot, the reason you get burned is that it takes a while for

¹ <https://blogs.chapman.edu/wilkinson/2018/10/16/americas-top-fears-2018/>

² Adam Hamilton. *Unafraid: Living with Courage and Hope in Uncertain Times*. New York: Convergent.

the biochemical signals from the sensor in your hand to get to your brain, more time for the brain to interpret the message and issue an appropriate command, and then even more time for the command to be relayed to the muscles of the arm and the muscles to respond- Get that hand away from the heat! Since our nervous system doesn't respond quickly enough, a certain amount of fear regarding hot objects, often learned from painful experience, reminds us to be more careful and helps us avoid getting burned!

3 Sometimes fear helps us imagine what could come to pass even when we haven't experienced it. I remember travelling with my family as a child to the home of my grandparents in Austin, Minnesota, when my father suddenly pulled the station wagon over to the side of the road. Why? There was a tornado passing over the highway just up ahead of us. I wasn't even in the driver's seat, and I experienced a fair dose of fear. I can well imagine that my dad's heart rate and blood pressure had gotten a boost from fear that allowed him to act quickly and shield his family from danger. Not all fear is bad. Fear can actually be a blessing when it helps us to avoid getting hurt.

4 On the other hand, fear becomes a problem when: we become afraid of things that don't really pose any harm to us; we greatly exaggerate the magnitude of the danger or the likelihood that it will happen; our fear produces fruitless worry; and/or we let our fear dictate actions that run contrary to our broader values and goals. I always think of the movie *Jaws* when I think of counterproductive fear. Living in Minnesota, there is absolutely zero chance of being attacked by a Great White Shark while swimming in one of our lakes or municipal swimming pools. And yet the fear in that movie was so palpable that I, like many other seemingly rational people, experienced a heightened fear of sharks and a reluctance for some time afterwards to swim in a lake or a pool. It turns out that what we should have been afraid of is those flesh-eating bacteria in the water. But that's another story...

The media we consume have a power effect on our whole bodies, with the images we see and the sounds we hear setting off complicated biochemical events in our brains and bodies. The sheer number of news and multimedia streams we expose ourselves to daily has grown dramatically, as has the ubiquity of our exposure. Smart phones, watches, and speakers follow us wherever we go and bombard us with personalized notifications of

breaking news of the world as well as our personal biometrics and social history. No wonder we feel more fearful and worried than ever.

5 In his book, Adam Hamilton describes the reality-distorting power of fear with an acronym: False Events Appearing Real. That's not to say that scary things don't happen, only that we tend to distort them beyond reality. For example, how many of you flew in an airplane this year? Some people are afraid to fly in an airplane because they're afraid they'll die in a plane crash. I'm not saying that airplanes don't crash, but I am saying that in 2017, your lifetime odds of dying as a passenger in an airplane were only 1 in 188,000, just slightly more than getting struck and killed by lightening, while your odds of dying from heart disease were 1 in 6³. Just for comparison, your odds of dying in a car crash are only 1 in 103. Most of us, it turns out, will live full lives until eventually these bodies will succumb to one of a variety of diseases. Most of us know that, but still the fears persist. Why do we let our fears fester and our worries waylay us?

The story of the Exodus of the Hebrew people from slavery into the promised land is filled with examples of just that, people letting their fears get the better of them. Fear of the Pharaoh; Fear of hunger and thirst in the desert; Fear of the Caananite "Giants" in the promised land. So it turns out that worry isn't exactly a modern invention. Is there anything we can do to put a stop to our fear hijacking our thoughts and actions?

6 Hamilton suggests we counter the reality-warping power of fear with this four-pronged response. Face fears with faith; Examine our assumptions with facts; Attack our anxiety with a plan of action; and Release our fears to God. Fear, worry, and anxiety are obviously more complicated than any four-point preaching plan. Many of us do or would benefit from the professional help of physicians, psychologists, or psychiatrists. But perhaps this simple tool is one more resource to help us face down a fear or worry in a new way this week.

Facing your fears with faith includes reminding yourself of the most basic of premises in the Christian life: God loves you, God is present, and God has a plan and desire for good. Way back in Genesis, God spoke to Abraham, saying, "Do not be afraid, for I am

³ <https://injuryfacts.nsc.org/all-injuries/preventable-death-overview/odds-of-dying/>

with you and will bless you.”⁴ That promise is echoed over and over again in the Scriptures, including this one from Jesus: “And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”⁵ When you feel afraid or worried, try reading, or better yet, praying through these Bible passages. Make them your own by reading them into your own situation. As you read them, ask God for the faith to believe them.

Examining your assumptions with facts is hard. We’re often not fully aware of our assumptions. Do you remember me saying in a previous message that we tend to “horribilize” people we don’t like, magnifying their faults to larger-than life sized proportions? We sometimes do that with our fears and worries, what Adam Hamilton calls “catastrophizing,” which in a way is a kind of faith in reverse, a steadfast belief that things are worse than they really are and that things can never get better. The problem is that we all have selective attention, ignoring facts that don’t confirm our view of the world and inflating those that do. Sometimes our negative assumptions are driving our analysis of the facts, rather than the other way around. Checking the facts can often short-circuit our worries and return us to a more hopeful reality.

Attacking anxiety with a plan of action means identifying small steps that you can take to effect a change in your circumstances. One of the daunting aspects of our worries is the way they tend to seem so insurmountably large and out of our control. A to-do list to combat anxiety reminds us that although we often can’t control our circumstances, we can always control our responses to them.

The last item is perhaps the hardest. How do we release our cares to God? One thing that helps me is to imagine that I’m wrapping up my worries into a bundle and setting them down at the cross where Jesus was crucified. It reminds me that Jesus died to set me free. Another thing I find helpful is to sing or repeat short passages of Scripture. One of my favorites to sing is Psalm 46:10- “Be still and know that I am God.” Or how about this one from Psalm 56: 3- “But when I am afraid, I will put my trust in you.” It’s surprising how comforting and calming it can be to simply recite scriptures like this.

⁴ Genesis 26:24, New Living Translation, 2nd Edition.

⁵ Matthew 28:20, Ibid.

7 Everybody has fears and worries. Sometimes our fears are healthy, other times they've multiplied beyond our control, and we need some help wrangling them back to manageable proportions. All of us wrestle with the in-between times, when our worries keep us up tossing and turning at night or wringing our hands during the day. God never promised that we'd have smooth sailing in this life, but God did promise that we can trust God to be present with us in the midst of the storms.

I invite you to take a minute now to simply be still and know that God is God...



Buffalo United Methodist Church

...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!

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