

It has been over a year since we first encountered the coronavirus and our lives were thrown into uncertainty and fear. Over the past year, we have gone through lockdowns, restricted travel, wearing masks, social-distancing, online schools, shortage of toilet paper and changes in our daily routines and worship; to name a few. And even with the distribution of the vaccine, there is still some uncertainty and fear. So this morning, I want us to see what encouragement we can find in the Bible for living in times such as these. As a reference, I will be using a book by Adam Hamilton entitled *Unafraid, Living with Courage and Hope in Uncertain Times*.

I first read this book while on a vacation trip to South Carolina in October 2018, just after I was appointed here at High Desert. Little did I know the uncertain times that were ahead of us as individuals, a nation and a church. So during Lent this year, I re-read this book to see what insight I could gain and hopefully pass on to you for dealing with our current situation.

We can hardly overstate the extent to which worry, anxiety, and fear permeate our lives. We worry about the future, about politics, about our country, about our health, about our families and about the coronavirus. We fear violent crime, racial divisions, and the future of the economy. The current deep rifts in our nation leave us with an increased sense of uncertainty. Our fears, in the form of insecurity, often wreak havoc on our lives and personal relationships. Google the word “fear” and you’ll find hundreds of websites.

The fact is that everyone worries about something. We all have things to fear. And most of us will have seasons when anxieties and fear simply overwhelm us. Fear is a powerful emotion that shapes all of us in profound ways we don’t fully understand. Often, we fear things that will never happen; yet real or imagined, these fears have power. Sometimes our battles with fear take a more serious turn, becoming a debilitating struggle with panic attacks or anxiety disorders. However, it is important to note that I am not saying that we should be careless and not take some things in life seriously. There are some times when fear is well placed, and people have good reason to be afraid such as those facing life-threatening illnesses, the impending death of a loved one, potentially devastating legal conflicts, or significant economic distress.

One of our fears is going to the doctor, especially at our age; you rarely get good news, they always seem to find something wrong. A woman went to her doctor’s office for a routine checkup. She was seen by one of the new young doctors, but after about 4 minutes in the examination room, she burst out, screaming as she ran down the hall. An older doctor stopped her and asked what the problem was. She explained and he had her sit down and relax in another room. The older doctor marched back to the first doctor and demanded: “What’s the matter with you? Mrs. Terry is 68 years old; she has four grown children and seven grandchildren, and you told her she was pregnant. The young doctor smiled smugly as he continued to write on his clipboard. “Cured her hiccups, didn’t it?”

While we can never fully eliminate fear from our life, we can learn to address our fears, control them, learn from them, and even use them. One of the most repeated instructions in the Bible is: “Do not be afraid.” These words, in one form or another, appear over 140 times in scripture. While these words remind us that people have been struggling with fear ever since Biblical times, it also shows us that faith can help us overcome our fears and give us peace in uncertain times. In his book, Adam Hamilton points out that 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. As you press through your fear, you can live a life of courage and hope.

The Bible is filled with stories of people whose fears got the best of them. One of these stories is found in the thirteenth chapter of the Book of Numbers. In this story, the Israelites have escaped from slavery in Egypt and crossed the wilderness and are now standing at the doorstep of the Promised Land. Moses sent twelve spies to scout out the land of Canaan before beginning the conquest. After forty days, they returned; listen to their report as recorded in verses 25 through 33 in the thirteenth chapter of Numbers.

Read Numbers 13:25-33

In the next chapter, out of fear the people rebelled against God and refused to enter the Promised Land and instead, decided to return to slavery in Egypt. This of course, angered God and He said to Moses: “How long will this people despise me? And how long will they refuse to believe in me in spite of all the signs that I have done among them.” God had had it with the Israelites and was ready to destroy them; however, Moses intervened to save them. God forgave them, but said that none of the adults, except Joshua and Caleb, would ever enter the Promised Land. They would be destined to wander in the wilderness for forty years until all the other adults had died. Thus, in a sense, the people got what they wanted – no entry into the lands of the giants that they feared.

Can you relate to the Israelites in this story? Have you ever found yourself terrified of some kind of “giants” that seem insurmountable; facing a situation where you were ready to give up before you even started? Can you see yourself in this story? When you think about it, the coronavirus has been the “giant” for many people and our nation.

Think about this story. For two years, the Israelites had traveled across the wilderness, enduring many hardships with the vision of the Promised Land ever before them. But as soon as they see some obstacles, risks and dangers, they freeze in their tracks. How many of us live our entire lives paralyzed by fear, just a mile from the Promised Land, refusing to live the abundant life that Jesus promised to those who believe and follow Him.

In reality, we spend a lot of time and emotional energy worrying about and fearing things that will never happen. Have you ever heard the acronym for the term “Fear:” F stands for false, E for expectations, A for appearing and R for real? Thus, fear can be defined as “False Expectations Appearing Real.” Now one of the ways that we can overcome our fears, or at least control them is through faith, trusting that God will see us through whatever is confronting us

at the time. God never abandons us in our darkest hour. Instead, God has a mysterious way of working through even the tragedies of life to accomplish His purposes. Based on this, Adam Hamilton in his book proposes another acronym for the letters of fear: F stands for “Face your fears with faith; E stands for “Examine your assumptions in light of the facts;” A stands for “Attack your anxieties with action;” and R stands for “Release your cares to God.”

As long as humans have walked the face of the earth, they have used what scientists call “exposure therapy” to combat fear; we know it as “facing our fears.” When we feel anxious about something, we tend to avoid it. We try not to think about it; however, this just results in the anxiety and worry continuing to build up. Exposure therapy breaks this cycle by calling on us to clearly identify the source of our fear or anxiety, and then slowly face our fears by exposing ourselves to them – at first small steps, then gradually increasing the experience through exposure.

Most of the things we’re afraid of are not nearly as frightening as they seem, but the only way we’ll learn this is to face our fears with faith. Now I know that this is not always the case. I would not want to address my fear of rattlesnakes with exposure therapy. But for many of our fears, facing them liberates us, which is what Ralph Waldo Emerson meant when he said: “Do the thing we fear, and death of fear is certain.”

Fear and finding peace in the face of it is one of the major themes of the Bible. The words “fear” or “afraid” appear over four hundred times in scripture. And when you think about it, the people in biblical times had just as much or more to fear as we do today. Yet, in over a hundred times in the Bible, God tells them “Do not be afraid.” And He normally followed this up with “for I am with you.” Listen to what He tells Joshua as he takes over for Moses as the leader of the Israelites: “Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”

Our feelings often begin with our thoughts, and those thoughts are sometimes distorted, based on inaccurate information, biased media reports, faulty assumptions, overly negative views of oneself or the world, or mistaken beliefs. This kind of thinking leads to worry, fear, anxiety, and a host of other misplaced feelings. We can address this by not only facing our fears with faith, but also by examining our assumptions in the light of the facts. Some people try to control us with fear by distorting the facts. One cable TV news executive recently said: “Fear sells!”

Facts can liberate us from faulty assumptions and misinformation and in the process free us from fear. In John 8:32, Jesus said: “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” Since we have access to more information today than ever before, we simply have to be careful and do our homework, which often means looking at the perspectives on both sides of an issue or debate. In other words, don’t believe everything you hear on television! When we seek out the facts, we often learn that the world is not nearly as scary as we fear!

After we have faced our fears, and examined the facts, we need to release our cares to God. Remember, God tells us to not be afraid and that He is with us. And nothing is impossible for

God. I know that you are probably tired of hearing me say it, but this is why your daily quiet time is so important. Spending time alone each day with God in prayer and reading His Word, allows God to speak to you in the quiet of the moment and the passages that you read. Time and time again, I am amazed that when I am worried or concerned about something, and when I finally stop and spend time alone with God things start clearing up. I may not get the answer that I am looking for right away, but I have a calming assurance that everything will be alright. In Psalm 46:10, God says: "Be still and know that I am God." It's like the old signs that used to be on the railroad crossings: "Stop, look and listen."

When we are fearful, we can find a great sense of peace by slowing down, meditating upon the scripture, and listening for God to speak. King David understood this when he was fleeing from those who wanted to kill him. In Psalm 27, David wrote this: "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? ... Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!" It's one thing to simply read this scripture text, but it's quite another thing to put our trust in these words and the God of whom they speak and then to make them your own. The aim of this practice is not to deny the thing you are afraid of or the difficult situation you might find yourself in; rather, it is to be aware of God's presence as you walk through it.

The key is to find a quiet place and a time when you will not be interrupted. Now I am a morning person and my best time is early in the morning before I start any work or turn the computer on. Over the years, I have found that I can't start my day without my quiet time. Now if you are a night owl like my wife Judy, your best time may be before bed. Then there's the question of what to read. I use four devotionals as my guide. You can also take a book in the Bible and read it. It's amazing how when you are facing a problem or decision, God leads you to the right scripture text. Before you begin reading and as you read, ask God to speak to you, give you insight. You could pray as the prophet Samuel did: "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening."

I hope that this discussion has helped you see that the truth can set us free, and that when it comes to addressing our fears, facts are our friends. In addition, being quiet and listening for God to speak can be a key to overcoming our fears. With God's help we can discover the confident, hope-filled life God wants us to have. In John 10:10, Jesus said: "The thief enters only to steal, kill, and destroy, I came so that they could have life – indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest." In other words, life beyond anything we can imagine, life with hope and without fear.

You and I are going to experience fear, but we don't have to be oppressed, defeated, or controlled by it. We can face our fears with faith, examine our assumptions in light of facts, attack our anxieties with action, and release our cares to God. And in doing this we will discover the "peace of God that exceeds all understanding." This peace allows us to live unafraid with courage and hope. Amen