

Shiloh United Methodist Church

Numbers 13:32-33
Phillipians 4:5b-7

Rev. Tyler Amundson

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Unafraid: Understanding and Counter Fear

There is a story about God's people that comes from the book of Numbers. In the story the people of God send 12 spies into the promised land to decide whether it is time to enter the land God has promised, or whether they should wait. The story goes that 2 of the spies returned with favorable reports. Reporting the land is exactly what God had shared, a land flowing with milk and honey, a place where God's people would live bountiful lives.

The people of God we are talking about are the Israelites who under Moses' leadership had followed God out of Egypt and the oppression of Pharaoh in hopes of a better land. After all of their work they find themselves within a mile of the promise of a new life and land, and guess what happens.

Here now our reading today from Numbers;

Numbers 13:32-33 Common English Bible (CEB)

³² They (the spies) started a rumor about the land that they had explored, telling the Israelites, "The land that we crossed over to explore is a land that devours its residents. All the people we saw in it are huge men. ³³ We saw there the Nephilim (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We saw ourselves as grasshoppers, and that's how we appeared to them."

In other translations "huge men" are referred to as "giants." Despite the positive reports of two spies, 10 others reported the giants. The people of God would spend another 38 years in the wilderness after coming within a mile of the promise land, due to fear.

Over the next 5 weeks we are going to be journeying through *Unafraid: Living with Courage and Hope in Uncertain Times*. This sermon series based on Rev. Adam Hamilton's work will help us understand what fear is, the things causing fear in our lives, and our call as people of God to step through our fears knowing God is with us as we journey ahead.

This journey we are on together will not be easy. Fear is something that has gripped humanity for a very long time, however as we will learn people of God have found ways to overcome fear to achieve great things with God's guidance. It is hard to see beyond fear on our own, but with God's loving support we are capable of stepping through it with faith.

For today, I would invite us to consider what fear is and the tools available to us as Christians to overcome fear.

To begin, I would like to give you a pastor's theological attempt at understanding neuroscience. There is a part of your brain called the amygdala, it is part of the limbic system in the brain. This part of the brain is the primary center responsible for your primal responses to fear. Fight, flight or freeze. This part of the brain has been incredibly important to our biological ancestors and to us. It is the part of the brain that allows us to detect threats and to respond immediately to keep us safe.

Let me give you an example of how the amygdala has and still does help us respond to fear.

When Crystal and I lived in Denver her parents were visiting. We went up to see Red Rocks Park just outside of Denver. If you have never been there, Red Rocks is home to a huge outdoor amphitheater that is used for major concerts in the summer, and also filled with hiking paths. We decided we would do some hiking while we were there.

Hiking in Red Rocks is fun because of the natural formation of rocks all around and you can guess this piles and spires are...red. As we were walking, I found myself out in the lead of our group. Suddenly in front of me was a flash of green, and I looked one more time and jumped in the air, a height which my father-in-law says was about 3 feet. I then turned in mid-air back toward my family and ran.

My father-in-law when telling the story reminds me that the scariest thing for him, was the site of his son in law that has at least 50 pounds on him turning so fast that he was afraid I would knock him over.

The green flash on the trail was a rattle snake who slithered across the trail quickly and wanted less to do with us, than my brain thought.

Now I need to say here and now, “I have mentally prepped for years to run into a rattle snake hiking.” I know running is not the best idea. However, what happened was my brain saw the green slithering thing and my limbic system, specifically my amygdala, a small part of what is sometimes called the primitive brain kicked into gear. This is the fear center of your brain and it told my body to get the hell out there, flight.

Fear has an ability to override the rest of our brain, the parts more outer and forward than the limbic system are the reasoning and empathy centers. These outer and, lets say, “wiser” parts of the brain can get overridden if the amygdala can gain control with fear response

Now, that snake had nothing doing with humans and was not planning to stay anywhere near us to attack. My brain didn't rationalize that until after I jumped, turned and ran over my father-in-law.

You see my brain released a massive dose of cortisol, the stress hormone. This rapid release of this hormone shut down my more logical centers in my brain momentarily.

I have a friend who was a classroom support staff at an elementary school. She shared that during a training for active shooters, the trainer explained you will have a fear based response: fight, flight, or freeze. This will be your immediate reaction to any high fear situation. The response will happen and the trick is after that initial response breathing and listening to the training you are offered. My friend shared her first response was to “freeze” and not move. Then she was trained to use that to gain awareness and then move quickly to get kids to safety.

Fear moments also come in more subtle ways in our modern world too. Worry is a fear we experience each day. I know I worry about things I shouldn't. “What do they think of me?” “Did I do that thing right?” “Did I skip or forget the thing I should have done?” The challenging thing is these little fears actually produce the same chemical in our brains and bigger fears, and what is interesting from research on people who experience long term trauma is this prolonged cortisol release actually begins to destroy neurons ability to communicate in the brain. For children who experience a lot of trauma in early life, the way to bring healing is to allow the brain to work around damaged areas of the brain shredded (for a lack of a better term) by overdoses of cortisol due to trauma. Worry can release cortisol and over worrying can keep cortisol levels high. It changes how we think.

Take a man named Jeff, a corporate executive, who recently lost his job. You see due to a merger of two companies, Jeff's job had become redundant. So, the company gave him a modest severance and laid him off. Worry and fear began to creep into his life immediately. “Had they figured out he was not competent to hold the position he was in.” “He would never find a job that would pay that much again.” “His family would not be able to afford their house.” These things began to be all Jeff could handle. His giants were getting bigger in his head. He was becoming a smaller and smaller grasshopper.

To counter this Jeff began to figure out where he could find his faith in himself again. He looked over old performance reviews to see positive

remarks from his boss. Considered the good work he had done, and slowly he felt the worries began to drift away. Then he made a list of skills and passions that would help him explore new work. He took time to look at his positives and his skills to help him ward off worry fear, that had overwhelmed him at first.

As you can see with Jeff's story, we can use tools of faith, meditation, prayer, and other exercises to develop skills to overcome fear, to face our giants. This however takes practice, and work sometimes. Facing our fears can be hard and the path is not always clear. For example, to face my fears of rattle snakes, I am not going to use exposure therapy necessarily. We are not going to start bringing rattle snakes into worship. However, what I might do is consider prayerfully my response next time I come across one, and know my initial response will be to run, faster than a marathon runner.

Fear is a powerful emotion that keeps us safe in moments of danger, but it also can cause us to react to our world in a way that makes us nearly run others over. If we pay attention to the life of Jesus, we know we are called to not run others over, but help them. Meaning if we are to be a people of God, to care for those hungry, poor, and hurting near us, we must find ways to overcome our fear, so it doesn't activate us into a frenzy and cause us to run over our neighbors.

In scripture from Paul to the Philippians we find a passage describing Christ's path of living and how to live unafraid-

Philippians 4:5-7 Common English Bible (CEB)

⁵Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people. The Lord is near. ⁶Don't be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. ⁷Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.

Being in prayer each day, practicing the practices of Christ will keep us in touch with God's love and the higher functioning parts of our brain that allow us to care for others. While the lower functions of the brain keep us informed of where danger still exists, and work to keep us safe. It is all a balance and it is a balance that God calls us to, to keep fear in check.

I know this because it says almost 100 times in the bible, "Fear not, for I am with you." When angels show up from God, it is the first thing they say to the people they share news with.

Based on this I want you to use an acronym for fear that I found useful from Adam Hamilton's study,¹

Face your fears with faith.

Examine your assumptions in light for the facts.

Attack your anxieties with action.

Release your cares to God

Over the next 5 weeks we will come back to this acronym as we grow in this faith journey together. I would invite you to take this home with you, to use it in prayer over these 5 weeks. See what reading it each day does to help you understand where fear has control in your life, and where God is calling you to overcome the giants.

God's people did not enter the promised land and would have wait an entire generation to be ready, all due to fear. Now this is not meant to judge them, especially now that we understand fear. Fear changes how we think and the people of God had been beaten up and oppressed for over a generation. Fear controlled their thinking. Instead it is to remind us that fear can keep us from what God desires for us.

¹ Hamilton, A. (2018). *Unafraid Living With Courage and Hope*. Abingdon Pr. Pg 27

In that hope I leave us with a quote from the silent film actress Dorothy Bernard, “Courage is fear that has said its prayers.”

May you go this week, and begin the call from Jesus, to live unafraid.

Amen