

Shiloh United Methodist Church

Psalm 27:1,14
Romans 12:18-21

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Unafraid: Fearing the Other

Adam Hamilton, the author of our series tells this story:

When he and a group finished up a mission trip in South Africa, they took a few extra days to go on a safari to see animals and enjoy the beautiful vistas of Africa. One night they were able sleep in tents in a high fenced area, and awoke to find themselves near a watering hole with hundreds of animals around it.

One of the guides came over to Adam and said, “Do you see the Impala?” Adam is from Kansas City and admits looking for a nice Chevy at first, then noticed a beautiful tan colored animal with high horns. “Yes,” he said to his guide.

The guide then asked what letter do you see on the impalas rump.

(Show picture)

Adam said, “Well there is an M.” To which is guide responded, “That stands for McDonald’s.”

The impala is the easy snack for predators in the particular part of the world Adam found himself. He goes on to say, that the impala is a rather skittish animal. If you watch them by a watering hole, they are constantly taking notice of something and darting away. They are faster than the zebras, but not as smart. So the zebras tend to try to get a head start on the impala if a predator is near.¹

¹ Hamilton, A. (2018). *Unafraid Living With Courage and Hope*. Abingdon Pr. Pg 43

Like the impala, I have noticed how we as humans can get skittish if we are trying to constantly find the next threat.

I grew up here in Montana, I remember learning about the problems of slavery of African Americans, and the subsequent racism in the south. I fell in love at an early age with the words of Martin Luther King Jr. and the Christian principles he taught to help people overcome the horrible challenges of racism, that took an entire movement of people standing up for civil rights. By in large I was given an understanding that every human was my brother and sister, race should not matter, character mattered.

Then I was sitting in my sophomore level communications class in college. When our professor mentioned we might be biased based on the color of someone's skin. I thought to myself, really? Then from the back of the room a girl raised her hand, "I am not biased of peoples skin color, but if someone of a dark skin color showed up in my little town growing up, we would keep an on him."

Adam Hamilton in our study talks about growing up in Kansas city, learning about civil rights, and knowing his teachers were fans of Martin Luther King Jr.

At one point he was instructed by folks not to cross a certain street in town, it wasn't safe for him "down there." In Kansas City that street is Troost Avenue, but it goes by different names in different places, but I would guess every town in America has a Troost. Maybe you all can teach me the street name here in Billings.

Troost was street decided by a developer in Kansas City, named Jesse Clyde Nichols, to be the line dividing the races. Going so far as to include in the homeowner covenants, "None of the said lots shall be conveyed to, used, owned or occupied by Negroes as owners or tenants." Later in many US cities those covenants would go on to include Jewish

people.

Adam then shared that a few years ago he go to sit down with his friend Rev. Dr. Emanuel Cleaver III, another respected United Methodist pastor, who grew up on the other side of Troost Ave. from Adam. He shared that as an African American growing up in Kansas City he had been told that Adam's side of Troost was place where young black men could be arrested, beat, and even shot.²

Two very similar stories about fearing people across a line created by one man who wanted to sell his houses at a higher price. I can tell you this from my study of scripture, and God's kingdom, there will be no Troost Avenues in heaven.

Paul refers to this teaching of Christ in our scripture from Roman's today:

Romans 12:18-21 Common English Bible (CEB)

¹⁸ If possible, to the best of your ability, live at peace with all people. ¹⁹ Don't try to get revenge for yourselves, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath. It is written, *Revenge belongs to me; I will pay it back, says the Lord.* ²⁰ Instead, *If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink. By doing this, you will pile burning coals of fire upon his head.* ²¹ Don't be defeated by evil, but defeat evil with good.

Following this call to be less and Impala and more a human living without fear can be hard in our modern world though. A few years ago I got to watch a documentary called "Screenagers." The film touched on some powerful research that we need to know for our children's sake and our own.

² Hamilton, A. (2018). *Unafraid Living With Courage and Hope*. Abingdon Pr. Pg 58

Our culture is addicted to screens, and not just the small ones in our pockets, TV counts too. The research showed that every time you look at a screen there is small dopamine release in the brain. Dopamine is a healthy chemical that lets the brain sense pleasure. It is what allows us to know that human connection is good, that safe touch is good, and that positive experiences are things we should seek. There is a downside to dopamine too, it is addictive. Too much of dopamine is what leads addicts to keep seeking their next high.

The documentary clearly showed that each time you look at a screen you get a dopamine release, and our bodies are programmed to crave this because it comes from gathering new information. One of our primary survival techniques as humans has been outsmarting our predators. Therefore this craving new information isn't bad, but we have made addicts by letting ourselves and our children turn on a screen and just absorb new information.

Let me share how this plays out in the realm of fearing things in our world:

Last week Crystal came home and shared with me about her day. Then I said, "Did you hear the news?" She said, "No, what news?" I shared wither that my Facebook had exploded with some political news that was disturbing and how I couldn't believe she had missed it. After which I learned that Crystal has gone through and specifically set her Facebook, so she has to go and look at specific individuals if she wants to see what they post.

I on the other hand have my phone set the way Facebook wants it, and I get the information their algorithmic tells them will sell more products and get me to log back in.

This is problematic if we are addicted to screens especially when it comes to politics. I have shared these stats before, but I think they are poignant for understanding fear too.

There was a Pew Research Center study that compared statistics from 1994 and 2014 around political views. It shows that in 1994 Republicans and Democratic public officials were more similar in the voting 22 years ago than they were in 2014. Additionally, in the 1994 you would find that 16 % of Democrats and 17% of Republicans viewed their opponents unfavorably. Those numbers more than doubled 20 years later to 38 and 43 percent. Additionally the researches added a new category to reveal that 27% of Democrats and 36% of Republicans now view their opponents as a threat to the national well-being.³ (Finally, the report tells us something I have heard many people conjecture, but with numbers it demonstrates that people on the right and left rarely change their viewpoints or talk to people whose views differ from their own.

If we are addicted to screens, which is a multi-billion dollar industry of content and delivery, and we are polarized even more in our thinking than we have been in the past. We are literally being programmed to fear that which we might disagree with, and avoid it because we are addicted to feeling good looking at things we like.

This same reality crosses over into the fear we see in our culture around crime and violence. There have been spikes in security system purchases in our nation, and over the 8 years from 2008-2016 there was a 158% rise in the purchase of firearms. I have heard people say over and over, “Our world is more dangerous than it has ever been.”

(Graph)

Yet if you look at violent crime stats for the United States since 1990, the rate of violent crime has gone down dramatically to nearly half of what it was.

³ <http://www.people-press.org/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/>

15,000 murders are reported in the United States each year, which is a frightening statistic until you hear that 251,000 die in hospitals each year do to mistakes made by doctors, nurses and pharmacists. Context is key and we have political entities, and media machines who will send us fear because our brains love new information and our bodies are addicted to finding it.

The therapeutic treatment often used for helping with these challenges is called cognitive restructuring, in which we get adults to realize the irrational fears they have are not as real as they imagine. Let me say, having had anxiety in my own life, I encourage you that if you have deep fears about things to seek the help of a counselor who can work with you to help you see beyond your fears.

Sometimes we all need help determining what the real threats are in our lives.

From time to time as a pastor I get emails from folks who try to convince me of something that just isn't true. One example is an email a colleague told me about, in the email someone said that when President Obama was President he made it illegal for government employees to say the pledge of allegiance because it said "God" in it. My friend asked the parishioner to sit down with them and the researched it together to learn it was not true.

We laugh a little, but sometimes people don't receive that kind of help when faced with fear. "Fake news" is a term now tossed around in the world like a rag doll, but these are the things ramping many anxieties.

Take for example a man in North Carolina named Edgar Madison Welch, who took seriously a story that during the 2016 campaign Hillary Clinton staffers were abusing children in the back of Washington DC Pizzeria. Edgar found the story in multiple sources and felt moved to act on his concern for the children.

One day he rushed into the Pizza shop in Washington DC and discharged his gun into the ceiling claiming he was there to liberate the children. Fully believing he was there to liberate children being maliciously harmed.

Edgar Welch just received a 4 year prison term, after listening to friends who said, "If you were really concerned why did you not call the police."⁴

Friends, as people of Christ we are called to listen to our God, to consider where threats might be, and then trust God to protect us through the rest.

Today I want to leave you with a spiritual practice to help you calm your fears. It is called Lectio Divina, or divine reading. It is a practice of reading scripture that I used to calm my own mind, when it gets frenzied and challenged.

King David in the scriptures was the leader of Israel and during his rule there were constantly threats to the kingdom from outside. It is said he would take time write Psalms when the city was surrounded by invading armies.

Psalm 27:1 and 14

1 The Lord is my light and my salvation.

Should I fear anyone?

The Lord is a fortress protecting my life.

Should I be frightened of anything?

⁴ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/pizzagate-gunman-edgar-maddison-welch-sentenced-four-years-prison-n775621>

14 Hope in the Lord!

Be strong! Let your heart take courage!

Hope in the Lord!

Speak lord your servant is listening

Read scripture

Speak lord

Read out loud

Psalm 27:1 and 14

1 The Lord is my light and my salvation.

Should I fear anyone?

The Lord is a fortress protecting my life.

Should I be frightened of anything?

14 Hope in the Lord!

Be strong! Let your heart take courage!

Hope in the Lord!

Ponder

Speak lord

Underline

Then turn scripture into a prayer

I invite you now to say the scripture with me as a prayer.

Psalm 27:1 and 14

1 The Lord is my light and my salvation.
Should I fear anyone?
The Lord is a fortress protecting my life.
Should I be frightened of anything?
14 Hope in the Lord!
Be strong! Let your heart take courage!
Hope in the Lord!

We have a lot of fear of that which is outside us to overcome in this world, but we don't do it alone. We do together, and even more we have God. So may we not find ourselves acting like Impalas, but instead as people of God deeply rooted in scripture and hope for God's kingdom that draws us together in love.