

Shiloh United Methodist Church

Matthew 8:23-27

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Unafraid: Anxiety and Growing Old

One of my favorite movies is Patch Adams. The main character played by Robin Williams is an unconventional doctor that lives by the motto, “Our job is not to prevent death, but to increase the quality of life.”

In the movie Patch Adams is consistently sneaking into the hospital and developing relationships with the patients, especially the ones who are struggling. One patient in particular he has tried to help is Bill, Bill is dying from terminal cancer. Bill has thrown bed pans at him, cussed him out, and said he does not want a “do gooder” trying to make him feel better.

Patch is committed to making the quality of life of everyone better, so in a last ditch effort Patch shows up in Bill’s room fully dressed as an angel. Bill tries to find his nurse call button, but Patch immediately says, “Preview of coming attraction.”

Before Bill can get a nurse Patch begins reading names for death:

Patch: Death.

To die.

To expire.

To pass on.

To perish.

To peg out.

To push up daisies.

To push up posies.

To become extinct.
Curtains, deceased, Demised, departed And
defunct.

Dead as a doornail.
Dead as a herring.
Dead as a mutton.
Dead as nits.
The last breath.
Paying a debt to nature.
The big sleep.
God's way of saying, "Slow down."

Bill: To check out.

Patch: To shuffle off this mortal coil.

Bill: To head for the happy hunting ground.

Patch: To blink for an exceptionally long period of time.

Bill: To find oneself without breath.

Patch: To be the incredible decaying man.

Bill: Worm buffet.

Patch: Kick the bucket.

Bill: Buy the farm.

Patch: Take the cab.

Bill: Cash in your chips.

Patch: And if we bury you up, I have got a place to park my bike.

The next thing you see is Bill laughing and Patch Adams wheeling Bill down the hall, the nurses shocked that Bill has allowed Patch to befriend him.

This is our last week of living Unafraid, well I hope it isn't actually. I hope that all of us have learned that God, our tradition, especially Jesus, and the Holy Spirit call to us to live life Unafraid. This isn't living fearless, but living knowing that we will

have fear and it is our role as people of God to create space for God to help us live through our fear.

This week in particular we are focusing on fears of illness, growing old, and death. These topics are unique in that we will all experience each of these things in our life. I believe I have heard a quote that the only things certain in life are death and taxes. Unfortunately we will not be addressing the fear of taxes in this series at all.

Our culture is obsessed with illness. I love in the book we are using for this study Adam Hamilton says his favorite quote for this is, "Google making hypochondriacs since 1998." One of the blessings of our modern world is the yearly physicals and the ability to often find diseases earlier. We know this is true because people on average are living longer lives than previous generations.

Living longer brings more opportunity to be ill, and advertisers know this. I am old enough to remember TV before prescription drug companies knew how to advertise. In fact I remember one of the early prescription drug commercial in the United States. It was this fluffy commercial with someone running through a field of daisies. With the regulations you couldn't even tell what it was for, just said ask your doctor about such and such. The restrictions were soon removed and drug companies now advertise non-stop to ask your doctor about every drug to cure every ailment.

Now Drug companies spend 5.2 Billion dollars on advertising annually, and Nielsen ratings organization estimates that 80 commercials of this nature run every hour. If you run these videos side by side, it sounds like your body will fall apart if you

don't ask your doctor soon.¹ We are creating a high anxiety about what illnesses we will get and many of us live with that fear.

Anxiety itself is on the rise along with this. Being a person who struggles personally with anxiety I think it is important to pause for a moment and remind us of our acronym we have been using for this series:

Face your fears with faith.

Examine your assumptions in light for the facts.

Attack your anxieties with action.

Release your cares to God

Anxiety is a real problem in our culture and it is important to understand that some anxiety is natural. We talked early on in this series about two small parts of your brain called the amygdala. These are the primal centers of your brain and they help us detect threats. Which for most of our history has been good. However, they can be activated in our modern world too, for things that just appear to be threats. When it comes to our bodies, these centers are designed to detect when it seems like our body has problems too. When things are not right and we feel discomfort, these centers rise the level of a need to respond. If they work right then if the problem is serious enough we take action, if it is life threatening we go to the Emergency Room, if not we schedule an appointment with our doctor.

That is if everything goes right. However, we are bombarded with the commercials we talked about before, and now we have access to all the horror stories of when that early warning system didn't work right and people died due to inaction. Even if these

¹ Hamilton, A. (2018). *Unafraid Living With Courage and Hope*. Abingdon Pr. Pg 192.

are a small percentage, we have more access to these stories than ever before, and our brains are trying to figure out what threats exist and prepare us.

Let's give an example of how this works. I had a sister who died from a rare form of cancer, so I have constantly been wondering about this since my teenage years. Will I die from a rare form of cancer and at times it has been persistent, especially when my body doesn't feel in perfect working order. Then you read the American Cancer Society statistic that 1 in 4 men will die from cancer, and 1 in 5 women. Which now puts me to wondering what I need to do to watch out for cancer. However, if we are to step back and break down the stat, we learn the real percentage of men who will die from cancer is 22 percent. If you take out smokers, it drops to 15 percent. As non-smoking male my rates just dropped from 1 in 4 to 1 in 6.5. Or to put in in better context I now have an 85% of not having cancer. Now this next stat is not fair to most of our church audience, but it is a reminder of how to get perspective. Cancer afflicts folks who are older more than younger. If we take into account age, if I am under 60 years of age my risk of dying from cancer drops to .5%. So in reality I have only a 99.5% of living without fear of dying of cancer.² Let's also remember that cancer does not run primarily on my side of the family, see my sister was a half-sister and cancer was prevalent in her mom's family.

This is all to say that Jesus was perhaps on to something in Matthew 6:27 when he offered that God will take your worry, because worry has not gained a single moment for anyone.

² Hamilton, A. (2018). *Unafraid Living With Courage and Hope*. Abingdon Pr. Pg 193.

Talking to professionals who help deal with anxiety, the word mindfulness comes up a lot. They invite their clients to seek mindfulness through meditation, prayer, exercise. In a world when we are constantly tracking how we are doing health wise, mindfulness to just being alive becomes so important. I have even begun doing a breath prayer when my fitness tracker goes off every hour to remind me to move. “God help me be in this moment” and a deep breath can go a long way in our days to help us live in God’s light, and not get pulled into the anxiety of this world. All this being said, if you find your anxiety controls your life and you only focus on the things that scare you, please talk to a counselor or find some help.

Some people will face illness in your life, and while I could take a whole sermon to deal with this, I am simply going to name that terminal illness is something that many of us fear and that some of us will find ourselves facing this reality. Having walked with many people as a pastor in their walks with terminal illness, I can tell you the ones who have the best quality of life are the ones who turn to God in prayer, and take the time to offer insight and express what they are experiencing to others not going through it. I have received faith and inspiration in companioning people as they walk through terminal illness. If you ever face a terminal illness I invite you to find someone to be a prayer partner, and listening companion on your journey.

Growing old is a fear in our culture too. In fact it is a multi-billion dollar industry to help us stay young, feel young, look young, but none of us really gets to remain young. We all hope to be fortunate enough to grow old, is perhaps how we should start to think of this. Now, I have been at the church I currently serve for about a year now, and I think this is the third sermon I have given including aging. Here is what we need to know about aging.

There are 6 generations of people currently living now, millennials are no longer the youngest generation, and we are at our best when people of all ages interact with one another.

However, our fear of growing old is one of the biggest segregating forces in our world today. I believe vehemently that the fear of growing old is more about the fear of being insignificant or not having things to contribute than actually getting closer to death. The primary fear I hear in our congregation is getting Alzheimer's. Did you know that .24 percent of people actually get early onset Alzheimer's. Dementia rates are slightly higher, but living with different forms of dementia is not a sentence to lose your mind, and in fact many people can now take steps to keep their brain healthy and sharp. Stigma about the disease of dementia has actually kept us from helping people who have it.

Forgetting things is a part of growing old, just to remind us all. The brain loses plasticity, but what is interesting about that is that by and large people over the age of 60 by and large rank their happiness much higher than people younger than them.³ Perhaps we should rethink aging entirely as a new stage in life, a time to do the things one cares about. Additionally, people in the later years are more spiritual they prayer more, read the Bible more, and have relationships that talk about God more. If the later years of life are when people are more happy, I think it exemplifies what older churches could offer our communities. We offer them perspective about what matters, we offer them hope for times to come. Also, older adults have less responsibility, so if our world is getting busier what might we do as a church to offer relief and support to young people. Who do

³ Hamilton, A. (2018). *Unafraid Living With Courage and Hope*. Abingdon Pr. Pg 180.

not rate their lives as happy or fulfilling the way the older generation does.

There is a 108 year old man in Adam Hamilton's church, and he says the only thing he changed at his age was that he doesn't buy green bananas anymore. I think this is good advice for all as we age, to know that we always have something to offer and God even promises this. Take note of significant biblical characters Elijah, Moses, Noah, Sarah, Elizabeth. They are not young when God calls them to their biggest life purpose.

The gospel reading for today comes from Matthew 8. It is the story of Jesus and his disciples crossing the Sea of Galilee.

Matthew 8:23-27 Common English Bible (CEB)

²³ When Jesus got into a boat, his disciples followed him. ²⁴ A huge storm arose on the lake so that waves were sloshing over the boat. But Jesus was asleep. ²⁵ They came and woke him, saying, "Lord, rescue us! We're going to drown!"

²⁶ He said to them, "Why are you afraid, you people of weak faith?" Then he got up and gave orders to the winds and the lake, and there was a great calm.

²⁷ The people were amazed and said, "What kind of person is this? Even the winds and the lake obey him!"

There are several scriptures on where we go when we die, I didn't choose those today. One of the promises of the Christian faith is that this life is just the prelude, or the introduction to a life with God that we cannot even imagine. We can try, but the promise is we will not come close to even the dimmest reflection. When we consider death this is the most helpful to me, this idea that I will not ever totally comprehend the role my life plays in God's larger vision.

This used to be termed “fear of the Lord,” but then fear of the Lord began to be used to scare people into religion. I do not believe our ancestors in the faith intended us to be scared of God. Instead I believe they were hoping we would be awestruck, so that we remember we are a part of the universe, not the center of it.

The scripture today has Jesus helping his disciples overcome their fear of death through faith. Here are the disciples floating in a boat, a storm comes up and they fear drowning and fear death. Jesus practically rebukes them, and I think it was mostly to get their attention, about their low faith. Then he stops a storm, to give them awe.

Prayer, breathing, breath prayers, scripture reading, lectio divina, and more practices have been named as we have studied prayer. These practices are meant to give us “fear of God” or “awe of God” to help us recognize we play a small part and we are called to be a part of God’s creation to hopefully be vessels of the Good News of the resurrection, that life is not the whole thing, but that beyond death there is more.

The awe of God is meant to deepen our relationship with a God that makes up our universe, by making God personal and God’s love close like a parent’s love.

It reminds me of a story by Author Hallie Lord:

Hallie Lord is a Catholic author who shares this story: Hallie found herself struggling with some big challenges in her life, things were not working out great. Our story finds her in a small 4 door Saturn Car with 4 kids taking the on ramp for a mini-reprieve from the chaos of life she is struggling to figure out. As she began to speed up, she felt this urge to slow down and saw some figures on the side of the road. There standing in the hot sun were 3 robed figures.

She got out and through some quick conversation found out they were 3 Dominican monks traveling to Kansas City to help some of the sisters in their order to build a monastery. These monks could not accept plane tickets, rental cars, or money. They could only accept the kindness of strangers in the form a lift to travel a short distance, a roof over their head, or food.

Hallie heard them tell a story of how they ended up in Alabama and then said to them, “Well I think I am traveling in the opposite direction of Kansas City.” To which they replied, “That's ok our next ride is waiting on the opposite side of wherever we are now.”

Hallie then looked at her tiny car and looked at the monks. They said, “We can make it work.” All the kids got out, the monks piled in and the kids got on their laps, like some holy clown car.

Hallie explains that from the moment they started driving this feeling started to increase in her heart, of peace and comfort. The hard parts of her life, did not seem so hard.

When they arrived at the monk's drop off point she got out. She tried to offer them cash, but they said they could not take it. Then she ran to her car and pulled out a half-eaten bag of trail mix and said, “How about some trail mix?”

They said, “Does it have M&Ms?”

She replied, “Yes.”

“We will take it.”

Then she hugged each of them goodbye and before they left they gathered round her 4 door Saturn and sang, “May the Lord Bless Your and Keep.” Hallie describes that moment as one in which she was sure

that no matter what, God was with her.⁴ It gave her the strength to carry on and to find hope amidst the challenges of her life.

This week as you go out I invite you to carry one spiritual practice we have learned this series with you. I pray that you know that you do not overcome fear, but instead you let God walk with you through fear in life. Living unafraid is about living with the love of God like a cloak and the hope of God embroidered on the front.

May you know that God has a place for you in this life and the next, that worry will not gain you a day in your life, that God will send you stories to remind you your place in the universe and that you need never fear, because your life matters. You matter to God.

Shalom and Amen.

Oh and by the way, growing old is a gift, so enjoy it.

⁴ <https://soundcloud.com/catholicspeakers/fear-is-joys-kryptonite>