

Shiloh United Methodist Church

John 5:5-9

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Unafraid: The Sky Is Falling

When we began our series on living Unafraid, I shared the story of the Israelites arriving at the promised land. As they arrived they sent 12 spies to see if they would head into the land God had promised them. Upon investigation 2 spies came back and described the land as being exactly what God had told them it was, a land filled with milk and honey to meet their ever need. The other 10 spies reported it was filled with giants who would crush them, because they appeared as small as grasshoppers to them. Two very different stories about the same event and place.

Due to the report of the 10 the Israelites would spend about 38 more years in the dessert, they found a place to settle, but by and large it was not the life they hoped to live. Later they would cross into the promised land, but not then. I believe it was all due to a bias toward fear.

Remember also I said, fear changes how we think. Fear takes us out of our outer and forward parts of our brain and to the more primal and inner parts of our brain. Therefore for a people who had been beaten and persecuted, this was not a wholly unlikely situation. It could be said they waited, so a generation could heal from trauma.

Nonetheless, fear kept them from God's promises for them.

The first week I also shared an acronym for fear:

Face your fears with faith.

Examine your assumptions in light for the facts.

Attack your anxieties with action.
Release your cares to God

I hope you have found time to include this acronym in your prayer life as you have journeyed with us, if you haven't I encourage you to use this as a prayer this week.

This week for our sermon we are examining the fears that happen when we think the sky is falling in our own lives or when we as a collective people believe the sky is falling.

How many of you remember the book *Henny Penny*? It is actually based on folktale that is much older than the book. If you don't know the story. Henny Penny, a chicken is under a tree when an acorn falls on her head. She assumes the "sky is falling." She rushes off to tell the king, and on her way meets up with other feathered animal friends, ducky lucky and more. Eventually they arrive at a rock where Foxy Loxy, the fox meets them. He listens as they tell him the sky is falling and then he lets them know he knows a shortcut to the king, excited they all follow him into a cave. None of them are ever seen again.

One of my favorite authors, Patricia Livingston, recalls sitting in a class on the Old Testament, or Hebrew Bible. During the time in her life she was going through some particularly difficult challenges, her family was fighting, and there were people she was being asked to care for. Then the professor started talking about the Psalms, saying, "The Psalms are often praise songs asking for deliverance from some kind of turmoil." Patricia says she perked up at "Deliverance from turmoil." Her life was chaotic, she wanted to listen.

The professor explained that in Genesis the term used for the world before God brought order and created things, was "Tohu Wa Bohu." The word is translated to chaos, but if you had something that sounds

like Tohu Wa Bohu, you know you have some kind of trouble, you know you want God to come and calm the Tohu Wa Bohu in your life.

In the gospel of John there is a story about a man who has been ill for 38 years, nearly the number of years the Israelites spent not going into the promised land. The man is sick and has been near the pool of Siloam, a healing pool, for a long time. Hear now the words from John's Gospel:

⁵ One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. ⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be made well?" ⁷ The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me." ⁸ Jesus said to him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." ⁹ At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

I often find myself really wondering if peoples' indifference kept the man there for a long time, waiting to be helped. I also ponder if the man chose to stay in his condition because it is what he knew.

Fear can do that, I have seen fear keep people ill or in one place a long time. It kept the Israelites from the promised land for a generation and it kept this man from being healed until Jesus came along. I have seen it keep people in bad marriages, bad jobs, in ill health, or in unfavorable circumstances.

We as humans are very averse to change, even if it not changing keeps us stuck where we are or traps others in painful situations. We like what we know and unknowns bring un-intended consequences. My favorite story is of a church who went from 2 services in the school season to one in the summer. In came the people during the people for

the one service and immediately there were arguments over who was to sit in what seat. "That is my seat" could be heard more than once being shouted like a toddler wanting their favorite reading corner. I have heard jokes told of this, but I promise the stories are all too persistent to be just rumors.

The ultimate change we hear about in our world is apocalypse. That very word often makes me feel like someone has climbed out and changed everything in my life. We hear stories of dystopian realities, humans living in wastelands, and the end of life as we know it. There has been movie after movie about how the world might end: famine, fire, flood, comet, super-villain.

And if you don't think these things capture our imagination and take advantage of our fears, consider that cults have formed digging underground bunkers, and that these movies consistently do well at the box office, even if the acting is awful.

Every year Chapman University in California does a study of Americans top 10 fears. In 2017 nuclear war, and climate change disasters dotted the list. The people who do the study say that they have noticed that news stories and the focus of the news has a direct impact on what the top 10 fears are. However, they say their bigger concern is that while people fear these things, they do little to inform themselves. For example, even though people fear nuclear war, none of them are learning how to understand fallout and rely on the "duck and cover" understanding of the mid-20th century to inform what they would do.

While we fear apocalypse, massive changes in how we live, and are drawn in by fictional interpretations, we really don't want to face what they mean. We get stuck where we are, in fear.

Apocalypse has been a part of Christian thought since the beginning. The apostle Paul believed God would return any moment, and would bring the end of this world. Paul believed it would happen in his lifetime, and you can see it in his writing.

However, Paul's understanding was that God would bring a new creation, not end all things. This can be seen in early Christian imagery. In ancient Christian churches before the cross was even the Christian symbol there are frescos and all sorts of art depicting paradise. One author, Rebecca Parker, describes walking into an ancient cathedral and as there is in many cathedrals it was adorned with images of the cross. However, when you walked behind the cross to the oldest parts of the church there were stunning images of water, baptism and paradise. A paradise depicted as something not future or past, but as something being sought for now.

Since our beginning as Christians we have been called to do what Adam Hamilton calls, "Start with a bias of hope."

As Christians if we think the sky is falling, our first reaction should not be to run and tell the king, it should not be follow the foxes into caves, our first response is to turn to God, examine our assumptions alongside what God reveals to us, to then walk in the world and do something about fear as Christ did, and finally trust that God has got this.

In February of 2017, I found myself facing what many thought was an apocalypse. Delta's entire computer system went down globally stalling flights and making for a harrowing journey home. However, despite all of this I had been with a Christian community and had somehow gotten from sharing with one another in prayer and worship a sense things would work out. As I sat in the airport facing a personal crisis and also the challenge of not getting home I found a bias of hope

in a story I had just heard from one of my favorite preachers, Brian McClaren.

While in Phoenix I attended a evangelical church, with a pastor educated at United Methodist Seminary, and they met in a trampoline park. Before you get jealous of their trampolines, they don't use them during worship. The church was a refuge for me, when it felt like my own sky was falling and before the trapped reality of not being able to fly home as planned. I drove up to this storefront church in Chandler, Arizona got, out of my car and not 10 seconds later they were showing me around their church. What an amazing group of people excited to share message of how Jesus loves everyone exactly as they are.

Preaching at that church just by chance that day was Brian McClaren, who shared this story:

It was after September 11th and Brian got what he calls a “nudge from God” that said, “Your neighbors are in danger, reach out.” Brian listened to that idea, wrote a letter, made copies and delivered them to the local Mosques in his community. The letters said, “We are a Christian Church in your community and we support you. If you need any support, of any kind, please let us know.”

After September 11th many Americans literally had seen the sky fall, and some of us were reacting in fear by harming brothers and sisters that were different than us. Especially Muslim brothers and sisters that many blamed for allowing the attacks, as if they had control.

Brian wanted to deliver the messages by hand, so he took a day to drive to stop by all the Mosques. Most of the mosques were locked up tight and Brian had to slip the letters in mailboxes or under heavy metal doors. As he approached one mosque he saw a TV truck, one with a big

satellite dish drive out of the sliding metal gate that surrounded the building. Brian slammed on the accelerator, which was less than dramatic in his Prius, and went flying in the gate before it closed. An Imam came running toward his car screaming and waving his arms, and Brian slammed on the brakes and got out of his car.

The Imam was still waving his arms as Brian walked up to the man apologizing profusely. Brian explained he was a pastor of a local church and wanted to share a letter with the Imam, and handed the Imam the letter. The Imam took the letter, and read it. Then looked up at Brian, and down at the letter. Then wrapped his arms around Brian and hugged him.

The Imam explained that the TV truck that had just left, was there to interview him because a woman who was a part of his mosque had just been assaulted and harassed. The Imam was wondering if anyone in his neighborhood actually cared about him or his people. The Imam and Brian became close friends after this. And Brian shared that while his church wasn't sure what to do with an Imam coming to visit Brian on a regular basis, they sure did learn to love the Pakistani food their friends from the mosque would bring to them.

Brian wrapped up his sermon with a scripture written by the Apostle Paul in Romans 12:

Common English Bible (CEB)

12 So, brothers and sisters, because of God's mercies, I encourage you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice that is holy and pleasing to God. This is your appropriate priestly service. **2** Don't be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you can figure out what God's will is—what is good and pleasing and mature.

As I was driving away from the service, I flipped on another church service livestream and heard the preacher say, "Never read Paul without having a Peanuts Cartoon right after it." All, I could think of was the image of Lucy pulling the football away from Charlie Brown, and the phrase, "Do not be conformed by this world."

Whether we are facing personal moments where our sky is falling, or community ones. We are a people who err on the side of hope, who let God take our scared feelings and make them sacred, and that we trust God will take the Tohu Wa Bohu, chaos, of this world and will make a new world in God's image.

In the book of revelations is one of my favorite images of God's new world. In the book there is a stream flowing from the throne of God, and two trees grow from either side of the river to form one tree. This tree produces food to feed the people one for each month of the year.

As you face your fears this week...trust that God is with you. And if you need a reminder, come back here or seek God in prayer. Find things to remind you that like Jesus you are called to err on the side of hope.

Shalom and Amen

Story of the Casino near our church....conversation for our neighborhood.