Sermon 02-09-20

The Sky Is Falling

UnAfraid: Living with Courage and Hope

**Sermon Starter**

Do you remember the little book called *Henny Penny*? I not only remember the book, but I also remember reading it to my children. The fact that I remember the book after all these years tells me I must have read it a lot, and it left a great impression on me. Some of you may remember the story by an early name, *Chicken Little, or The Sky is Falling.* **PHOTO: HENNY PENNY/CHICKEN LITTLE COVER**. Anyone else remember this book? How about the Disney remake? Here’s how Disney portrayed Chicken Little.

To refresh our memories, Henny Penny was a hen who was scratching at the ground one day when an acorn fell upon her head. Startled, she declared, “The sky is FALLING!” and she ran off to tell the king. Along the way, she meets her friends, a rooster, a goose, a duck and a turkey, and she tells them all, and they, in their fright, cry out, “The sky is falling!” A kind of animal hysteria breaks loose. The moral of the story is how easily we become afraid, then catastrophize – we imagine the worst possible outcome, and then we rally others to our cause. Interestingly, the story of Henny Penny was not written in 1968 like Google says. Prior to that Henny Penny was known as Chicken Little and Chicken Licken (but not related to Colonel Sanders fame). The earliest telling of the story wasn’t a chicken, but a rabbit that believed the world was collapsing and it was told 2,500 years ago, by the Buddha. In every age, human beings have struggled with fear.

Today we continue in our series of sermons called UnAfraid: Living with Courage and Hope. Last week we considered the fear of other. This week, among other things, we’ll consider the top fear of those over 50: fear related to the direction of our country and we’ll see what our scripture might say to us about fear.

**I. Fear of the Direction of Our Country**

One of the reasons I dread election season is that so much of the rhetoric and the advertising, is spent conjuring up fear in people. It points to possible threats and makes them seem more likely than they are. We don’t even realize it’s happening to us. I mentioned a couple of weeks ago the issue of violence. A Gallup poll last year found that almost two thirds of Americans were fearful of being victims of a violent crime – higher than at any time in the last fifteen years, **GRAPHIC: yet violent crime rates have dropped in half since the early 1990’s and are know where they were in the mid 1960’s.[[1]](#footnote-1)** Fear of terrorism **GRAPHIC: has risen in the last year to a level not seen since just after 9/11**. Fear of immigrants and refugees has risen in the last two years as well.

Rick Wilson is a Republican political strategist and media consultant. He noted, **GRAPHIC:** **“Fear is the simplest emotion to tweak in a campaign ad. You associate your opponent with terror, with fear, with crime, with causing pain and uncertainty”** and you have a strong chance of winning an election. When people are afraid, they want protection. They want strong borders and walls.

It’s not just politicians who play to our fears. Dr. Shana Gadarian, Assistant Professor of Sociology at Syracuse University and co-author of *Anxious Politics: Democratic Citizenship in a Threatening World* notes that her research shows that when people are anxious, then tend towards seeking out information from sources that actually reinforce their anxiety. We have 24-hour news where we can see the terrorist act over and over and over again. We don’t tend to look for the sources that say, “The chances of this happening in your community are one in 3.6 billion.”

I want to pause here to recognize that not only is our country divided, but our congregation is divided. I’ve heard people voicing their concerns because they are so divided over President Trump or the policies he’s proposing. Some who are supportive and feel safer, and others who are really upset and believe these things are wrong. I have also heard people voicing their concerns about the future of the United Methodist Church, the one stable place they have grown up in all these years. Some of you ask, “Please don’t talk about politics in sermons,” while others comment, “Why aren’t you speaking out more!” It would be much easier, but far less fun, pastoring a church where everyone believed the same thing and held the same political views. But can I tell you that this is part of what I love about this church.

Yet, look to Jesus for a moment. Among the men Jesus called to be his disciples were **Matthew the Tax Collector and Simon the Zealot**. Just to remind you, the tax collectors worked for the Romans and believed that the best way for the Jews to survive was to accept Roman rule and to get along with them. The Zealots were a political movement committed to the overthrow and defeat of the Romans. Talk about political adversaries – the Zealots hated the tax collectors and vice versa. Yet Jesus called them both, loved them both, and I suspect both of these men saw their political views changed by being with the Master. Jesus seemed to call both liberals and conservatives to follow him and to love one another.

If I am asked whether I am liberal or conservative, my answer is always, Yes. We must be liberal in some things and conservative in others. When it comes to the historic doctrines of the Christian faith, I lead to the conservative or right of center. When it comes to many social issues I move left. However, I wasn’t always that way. I’m almost always going to come out on the side of compassion and mercy and a concern for the vulnerable and the weak.

Two final words about this – how we act and how we treat people with whom we disagree when we disagree is both a test of our faith and a demonstration of it. One conservative woman in our congregation noted that it felt to her that liberals welcome and love everyone – LGBT, Muslims, Jews, everyone, except conservatives. Liberals are not the enemy, conservatives are not the enemy, and we actually need each other. **GRAPHIC:** **The defining mark of the Christian life is not being right, it is love.**

**II. Refugees**

Let’s return to fear and the direction of our country. President Trump promised his supporters that he would deploy extreme vetting, he would build a wall, and he would make America safer. This appealed to his voters who felt anxious about these things. I don’t agree with him, but he is doing precisely what he promised as he continues the process of building a wall.

You’ve no doubt heard during all the talk over refugees that in the last 36 years there’s been only one terrorist attack in the US conducted by a refugee. He stabbed 9 people, though all survived. They’ve noted that the likelihood of you getting hit by lightning in the US is 1 in 900,000 while the chances of you being harmed in a terrorist attack carried out by refugees is something like 1 in 3.6 billion. You are 4,000 times more likely to be struck by lightning in your lifetime than to be killed by a terrorist attack conducted by a refugee.

When I was serving on the protection detail for then California Governor Pete Wilson, one of our many trips to Washington, D.C., included a visit to the Holocaust Museum. Among the moving exhibits is one that shows how in 1938 when fears of Hitler’s plans began to spread across parts of Europe, Jews from Germany and Austria sought to emigrate to the US. At the time 67% of Americans opposed allowing them to enter the US. The ocean liner *St. Louis* **PHOTO: SS ST. LOUIS** arrived in Miami in 1939 with 900 Jews who were not allowed to disembark. **GRAPHIC: They were returned to Europe where many died in Hitler’s camps.** After World War II, when hundreds of thousands of Jews were seeking refuge, President Eisenhower proposed receiving 250,000 of them in the US. Even after knowing the horrors they had endured during the Holocaust, 59% of Americans opposed accepting them.

After Japan bombed [Pearl Harbor](http://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/pearl-harbor) in December 1941, rumors spread, fueled by race prejudice, of a plot among Japanese-Americans to sabotage the war effort. On February 19, 1942, Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which forced all Japanese-Americans, two-thirds of whom were native-born citizens of the United States, to evacuate the West Coast and resettled them in internment camps. **GRAPHIC: One was in Tule Lake, CA, in Modoc County and the other was Manzanar, outside Independence, CA, in Inyo County**. No comparable order applied to [Hawaii](http://www.history.com/topics/us-states/hawaii), one-third of whose population was Japanese-American, or to Americans of German and Italian ancestry. Many were forced to sell their property at a severe loss before departure. 5,589 Nisei, second generation or native-born persons, renounced their American citizenship, although a federal judge later ruled that renunciations made behind barbed wire were void.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In 1975, with the fall of Saigon and the US exit from Vietnam there were hundreds of thousands of refugees who fled for their lives. Some will recall these were called the “Boat People.” There have been others. The impulse to receive these persons has always been America’s compassion. Yet Americans were afraid to let them in – it required a president and Congress who had the courage to push it through.

So, the question is what would the Lord have Christians think about these refugees? We know that scripture calls us to demonstrate compassion and mercy for those in distress. God speaks through Jeremiah saying, **GRAPHIC: The LORD proclaims: Do what is just and right; rescue the oppressed from the power of the oppressor. Don’t exploit or mistreat the refugee, the orphan, and the widow** (**Jeremiah 22:3).** Jesus speaks of the Last Judgment noting that he welcomes those in heaven who welcomed the stranger, and clothed and fed the naked and hungry. Through Moses God calls Israel to care for the “alien in your midst.” And so, God says to us as he said to Joshua, be strong and courageous. I am with you!

Yes, ensure the screening process is as good as it can be. But at some point, we take a leap of faith – we say, we’ve got to do something. God knows that we are fearful – we watched the twin towers fall. We’ve seen extremists kill innocent people. Yet when we ignore the plight of the suffering because we are afraid, we’ve forgotten what it means to be human. Maybe this is what is meant in scripture when we’re told that perfect love casts out fear – that is, sacrificial love chooses to over-ride fear. And do you know what we call that when love leads us to overcome our fear and to do what is right? We call it courage.

**GRAPHIC: Courage is the willingness to do what you know is right even if it makes you afraid.** When we give in to fear we call that cowardice. When we face our fears, and do what is right anyway, we call that courage. We sing of that courage in the second verse of Harry Emerson Fosdick’s hymn, *God of Grace and God of Glory*,

**From the fears that long have bound us**

**free our hearts to faith and praise.**

**Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,**

**for the living of these days (UMH 577).**

So, we need discern what are the things we must do to keep our nation safe, and when must we have courage to do what is right even if there is a chance, a risk, that something could go wrong? People of faith are routinely called upon by God to take risks in order to do what is right. We don’t have to agree about everything as Christians. We may not see eye to eye on how we balance security and compassion. But I hope we live up to being the land of the free and the home of the brave, not giving in to fear, but being people of courage.

**III. God is Our Refuge and Strength**

That takes us back to our fear for the future of our country and the world around us. When the world seems to be coming apart at the seams and the sky seems to be falling, my peace never comes from the President of the United States or the United States Congress, although these men and women are important. My peace in the midst of the storms of life or in the face of political firestorms is found in God. Listen again to our reading from Psalm 46 this morning **GRAPHIC:**

**God is our refuge and strength, a help always near in times of great trouble.**

**That’s why we won’t be afraid when the world falls apart, when the mountains crumble into the center of the sea…**

**Nations roar; kingdoms crumble. God utters his voice; the earth melts.**

**The LORD of heavenly forces is with us! The God of Jacob is our place of safety…Be still, and know that I am God!**

It is God that is our refuge and strength, not the President and Congress. We trust in God and that is why we won’t be afraid when the world seems to fall apart. **GRAPHIC: I love the picture of God uttering his voice and the earth melting**. So be still and know that he is God. Breathe deep. Don’t panic. The sky is not falling. But do continue to speak up for those who cannot speak up for themselves. It is our faith that allows us to have courage, and that courage calls us to speak up *and* to love.

Do you remember how *Henny Penny* ends? Afraid they are no longer thinking straight, the Henny and her friends, the goose, the duck, the turkey and the rooster meet up with a fox, who offers to show them the shortcut to the king’s house so they might tell the king that the sky is falling. Only the shortcut leads straight to the fox’s den, where he and his family have a marvelous dinner, and Henny Penny is never heard from again! What kind of message is that for children?! But the moral is good – when we’re led by fear we often make dreadful mistakes.

Let us remember that the Lord of heavenly forces is with us; we need not be afraid. Instead we can be people of courage because we know **GRAPHIC: Christ is beside us, Christ is before us, Christ is behind us, Christ is within us, Christ is within us, Christ is above us.** Christ is with us always.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Scripture for Sunday, 02-12-17

Psalm 46 (selected verses)

God is our refuge and strength,

a help always near in times of great trouble.

That’s why we won’t be afraid when the world falls apart,

when the mountains crumble into the center of the sea…

Nations roar; kingdoms crumble.

God utters his voice; the earth melts.

The LORD of heavenly forces is with us!

The God of Jacob is our place of safety…

Be still, and know that I am God!

1. See my first sermon for justice department numbers. The Gallup Poll info comes from this article: <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/09/donald-trump-and-the-politics-of-fear/498116/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Reader’s Companion to American History. Eric Foner and John A. Garraty, Editors. Copyright © 1991 by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)