

UNAFRAID

LIVING WITH COURAGE AND HOPE
IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

ADAM HAMILTON



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To LaVon,
*whose courage in the face of fear
inspired me to write this book*

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Part One

UNDERSTANDING AND
COUNTERING FEAR

Afraid

*There are two basic motivating forces: fear and love . . .
all hopes for a better world rest in the fearlessness and
open-hearted vision of people who embrace life.*

—JOHN LENNON

IN 1947, W. H. AUDEN PUBLISHED HIS PULITZER PRIZE-winning book, *The Age of Anxiety*. If the postwar 1940s and 1950s was the age of anxiety, ours might be appropriately deemed the age of *high* anxiety.

We can hardly overstate the extent to which worry, anxiety, and fear permeate our lives. We worry about the future, about politics, and about our health. We fear violent crime, racial divisions, and the future of the economy. Deep rifts in our nation leave us with an increasing sense of uncertainty. Fear in the financial markets can wipe out billions of dollars of wealth in a single day. Our fears, in the form of insecurity, often wreak havoc on our lives and personal relationships. Google *fear* and you'll find over six hundred million websites in 0.98 second.

My phone (and watch) vibrate multiple times each day with “breaking news,” most of it bad. Today alone I've been notified of a subway bombing in Russia, continued conflict in Congress, a constable shot in Texas, and three people killed in St. Louis when a boiler exploded, and it's only noon. Stories from parts

of the world we'd be hard-pressed to find on a map show up in our newsfeeds in close to real time. Put enough of those stories together and it seems as if the world is going to the proverbial "hell in a handbasket." Molly Ball, writing in *The Atlantic*, notes, "Fear is in the air, and fear is surging. Americans are more afraid today than they have been in a long time."^{*}

In preparation for a sermon series, I recently conducted a survey of the congregation at The United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, because I wanted to know how fear might be shaping the lives of my congregation. Of the 2,400 people who took the survey, nearly half reported living with a moderate level of fear, while 35 percent reported living with a *significant* amount of fear. *Eighty percent lived with moderate or significant levels of fear.* Those under age fifty experienced more fear than those over fifty. The greatest fear of those over fifty was the direction of our country. Fears of failure and of disappointing others topped the list for those younger than fifty.

Nearly two decades after 9/11, religious extremists continue to spread fear by committing occasional but highly publicized acts of violence. We're still recovering from the 2008 economic crisis that left millions unemployed and slashed the value of Americans' retirement savings by trillions. Many people live with the awareness of how quickly our economy and livelihoods can falter. We're polarized politically, with each side crying wolf on a daily basis. And then there are the universal worries people have felt in every age—concerns for our children, fear of failure, anxiety about death and dying and so much more.

^{*} Molly Ball, "Donald Trump and the Politics of Fear," *The Atlantic*, September 2, 2016.

WHAT FEAR LOOKS LIKE FROM HERE

I've seen this climate of fear up close, as a long-time pastor of a large congregation planted squarely in mid-America. I've noticed that men are often hesitant to admit that they feel fearful because it seems to be a sign of weakness. Instead we talk about being "stressed." But if you poke around our stress a bit to look for what's driving us, you'll find worry and anxiety—sometimes outright panic.

Years ago, I went to my internist because I was experiencing tightness in my chest. I dismissed the chest pains at first, but my wife, LaVon, asked me to please go to the doctor. After a series of tests, he told me my heart was fine, but he asked about my stress level. It was at an all-time high. I was leading a capital campaign at the church raising funds to construct the church's sanctuary. I hadn't had a day off in ages, and I was working sixty-plus hours a week. I admitted to the doctor that there were times I felt that the success or failure of the entire effort rested on me.

My doctor said, "No wonder you're having chest pains! Listen, your heart is okay for now, but if you don't figure out how to deal with this stress, it might well eventually affect your heart."

Both men and women wrestle with insecurities, one of fear's many faces. Like most people, I've learned to put a good face on my insecurities and (mostly) keep them to myself. But I'm surprised by how often this fear gnaws at me. Each week I stand before my congregation to deliver a thirty-minute message intended to teach, encourage, and inspire them. I've delivered thousands of messages in weekend worship, as well as at funerals, college baccalaureate services and commencement ceremonies, even the National Prayer Service for President

Obama's second inauguration. Yet, starting every Tuesday and continuing until I've preached the last of five weekend services on Sunday, I feel a persistent, gnawing anxiety that stems from my fear of failure—failing God, failing my congregation, and embarrassing myself. (I believe the fear of humiliation is the reason why public speaking consistently ranks among people's top fears.)

My anxiety about failing in the pulpit occasionally shows up in my dreams, or nightmares, sometimes in humorous ways. From time to time I have a dream that the phone is ringing. Someone is calling from the church wondering why I'm still in bed when it's Sunday morning and service has begun. I frantically get ready, drive to the church, and run to the pulpit just in time to deliver the message. But there is no manuscript waiting for me—nothing to say. Just then I hear people laughing. I glance down and see that I've forgotten to get completely dressed. I'm standing in front of the congregation in my boxers!

The fear of preaching in my boxers rates pretty low among things that worry me, but it represents, in my subconscious, the fear of public humiliation.

THE EMOTION THAT PROFOUNDLY SHAPES US

The reality is everyone worries about something. We all have things we fear. And most of us will have seasons when anxieties and fear simply overwhelm us. Fear is a powerful emotion that shapes all of us in profound ways we often don't fully understand. Look behind depression's door and you'll often find fear. Addictions too. Peer beneath broken marriages and friendships, beneath prejudice and hate, and you'll find fear. And look behind the causes of most wars throughout human history and you'll find lurking behind all of the other reasons,

fear, often manufactured by the leaders who led their people to wage war.

Often we fear things that will never happen; yet real or imagined, these fears have power. Sometimes our battles with fear take a more serious turn, becoming a debilitating struggle with panic attacks or anxiety disorders. There are other times when fear is well placed, and people have good reason to be afraid: they are facing life-threatening illnesses, the impending death of a loved one, potentially devastating legal conflicts, or significant economic distress.

Fear isn't simply an American phenomenon: it is universal. My ministry has taken me around the world. I've found that people living in villages in Zimbabwe and Malawi, with none of our modern technology or first-world problems, struggle with fear. People in Haiti and Honduras have described for me their struggle with fear. And no religion or philosophy relieves us entirely of fear: Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, atheists, and agnostics, along with Christians, struggle with fear.

I've seen firsthand in the lives of people I love how fear can imprison us, paralyze us, and keep us from experiencing a fulfilling and joyful life. It was during a conversation with a friend that I first realized how much I needed to study and write about fear—both for myself and for others. I'll tell you my friend's story later, but as he described what it was like to feel completely overwhelmed by the fear of failure, stories of others who had conveyed similar struggles flooded my mind and reminded me of the very real scope of the problem. Before long, I was reading the work of experts in the field of fear. I spent time with people in my own congregation who have suffered terribly from anxiety, worry, and other kinds of fear. In addition to the survey I conducted with my congregation, I analyzed the latest national polls to see what people across the country rank as

their top fears. I studied the many passages of scripture related to fear, and the way in which faith and spiritual disciplines have played a key role in helping people I know to find peace in the face of their fears. The book you're holding is the result.

No, I don't have the silver bullet that will keep you from ever feeling fear again (no one else does, either). For reasons we'll see in the next chapter, you can never fully eliminate fear from your life (and that's actually a good thing). The battle with fear is not a one-and-done kind of battle; rather, it is a regular part of our lives. But while fear is a persistent companion, we don't have to be controlled by it. We can learn to address our fears, control them, learn from them, even use them, and we can press through them.

THE PRACTICAL PROMISE OF *UNAFRAID*

In the pages ahead we'll look at both what the experts can teach us about overcoming fear and how people from time immemorial have addressed their fears. Modern psychology has drawn from this ancient wisdom and often improved upon it with new insights from science coupled with clinical experience on how to cope with fear. I'll share with you some of the most helpful approaches for dealing with worry, fear, and anxiety.

I've spent the last thirty years shepherding my congregation and in the process becoming deeply involved with their struggles with fear of failure, irrelevance, illness, growing old, and death, to name a few that we'll consider in this book. I've had the privilege of walking with them through economic downturns, two wars, terrorist attacks, and more personal tragedies than I can count. Together we've found consistent insight and comfort from the Christian faith we share and a variety of spiritual practices. I'll share those with you too.

One of the most repeated instructions in the Bible is “Don’t be afraid.” These words, in one form or another, appear over 140 times in scripture. They remind us that ordinary women and men from the age of Israel’s patriarchs to first-century Christians struggled with fear. But they also show us that faith can be pivotal to overcoming fear and finding peace in uncertain times. In this book, we’ll consider scripture passages about fear and the spiritual practices that can bring real peace. If you’re not a particularly religious person, that’s okay—you’ll still find plenty of helpful material here. But if you are open to insights from Jewish and Christian scriptures and practices, I think you’ll see how the spiritual dimension of life holds a particularly potent key to overcoming fear.

Most of us have known times when fear, worry, or anxiety has robbed us of the life we wanted. At times it has led us to make bad decisions. Sometimes it has kept us from taking risks or doing things that would have brought great meaning, fulfillment, and joy to our lives. You can never completely eradicate fear—you need it. But fear doesn’t have to control you. As we’ll consider later in the book, courage is not the absence of fear; instead, it is doing what you feel you should do, or what you long to do, despite the fear. As you press through your fear, you live a life of courage and hope.

About the Author



REVEREND ADAM HAMILTON is senior pastor of the 20,000-member Church of the Resurrection outside Kansas City, the largest and most influential United Methodist congregation in the United States. He is a leading voice for reconciliation and church renewal in mainstream Christianity, and the author of twenty-five books, which together have sold more than two million copies. His recent releases prior to *Unafraid* include *Making Sense of the Bible* (HarperOne), *Creed: What Christians Believe and Why*, and *Moses: In the Footsteps of the Reluctant Prophet* (both from Abingdon Press).

The recipient of numerous awards and honorary degrees, Adam earned his master of divinity degree at Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University, where he received the B'nai B'rith Award in Social Ethics. He graduated with honors from Oral Roberts University with a degree in pastoral ministry. Since 2010, he has spoken to more than 70,000 Christian leaders in 40 states on leadership and strategies for missional outreach.

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