



## Small Group Discussion Guide – January 8, 2016

### *“An Age of High Anxiety”*

#### **From Pastor Hamilton’s sermon:**

I want to share with you the results of the Christmas Eve offering. We’ll give away every cent to help children in Aleppo, mission partners in Haiti, and young people in Kansas City. We hoped we could raise one million dollars. In fact, you gave \$1,142,775!

In 1948 W.H. Auden penned his Pulitzer Prize Winning book, *The Age of Anxiety*. If the 1940’s and 1950’s were an age of anxiety, then today we live in an age of high anxiety: stress, anxiety and worry are at an all-time high.

There seems so much to fear: terrorism, global warming, mounting deficits, school shootings, and identity thefts. We see dramatic social and technological change that adds to our anxiety. 24-hour news comes to our phones and those with smart watches. We feel a vibration every time the stock market declines, or news breaks of a terrible accident, an earthquake, or a mass shooting. How can we not feel a level of anxiety?

Most of us wrestle with some combination of fear, worry or anxiety from time to time. My stress relates to my job, as is the case with many of us. Hardly a day goes by that I don’t feel tightness in my chest thinking about the weekend’s sermon, the next capital campaign, or the people in the congregation who are struggling.... I wonder what you worry about? What makes you fearful? What gives you anxiety?

My stress is nothing compared with the 57 million Americans, more than one in six, who suffer from anxiety disorders. These folks have moments that feel like they are having a heart attack. Palms get sweaty, skin clammy, feelings of dread, the fight or flight mechanism kicks in full force. This is the most common mental illness in America.

What’s puzzling about the high level of anxiety and fear today is that by all outward measures, we have less to fear today than ever in the history of the human race. We’re living longer than any previous generation. Our standard of living is higher. We’ve defeated most of the terrible childhood diseases of the past. Crime rates are down dramatically in the last twenty years. Daniel Gardner begins his fine book, *The Science of Fear* by noting, “We are the healthiest, wealthiest, and longest-lived people in history. And we are increasingly afraid. This is one of the great paradoxes of our time.”

- What makes you fearful? What gives you anxiety? As you watch, listen to or read news, do you tend to focus more on the bad news or the good news? Have you or someone close to you ever struggled with an anxiety disorder?

### From Pastor Hamilton's sermon:

Much of our worry, anxiety and fear comes from two of our brain's systems that are designed for our protection and self-preservation. One of these we know of as the "fight or flight mechanism." It is the body's smoke detector. When it detects a potential threat, before your conscious brain even processes the threat your early warning system has already sounded the alarm. Hormones are released triggering a cascading series of effects in your body: your heart rate increases, blood is shut down to unnecessary functions in your body and diverted to the muscles, your blood pressure increases, your pupils dilate, all as your brain prepares your body for the imminent threat....

There's a second mechanism built into your brain that is intended to anticipate future events, particularly needs like food or water or shelter but also threats. This system doesn't respond to current threats, but it prepares you for things in the future. This system anticipates and brings to mind things that are potential threats or simply things critical for you to be mindful of. It might snow—take your gloves. It's cold—have the kids wear their coats. Wear your seat belt—you could be in an accident.

The problem with this system is your imagination. Your imagination, coupled with the data you receive from others, from the news, from the old tapes that play in your head, can lead you to anticipate threats that are not real, or which are real but whose chance of affecting you are minimal. The imagination can inflate threats and lead you to catastrophize—to assume the worst possible things are going to happen....

I love the acronym one of you shared with me about fear. Much fear is the result of  
**F**alse  
**E**vents  
**A**ppearing  
**R**eal

One key approach to unhealthy fear from the field of therapy is sometimes called Exposure Therapy. It's a common-sense approach you know as simply Confronting Your Fears.

Often when we feel anxious about something we avoid it, and the worry, anxiety or fear remains. Exposure helps you clearly identify the source of your fear or anxiety, and then to slowly face your fear by exposing yourself to it, usually starting with small steps and gradually increasing the level of exposure. Since our fears are typically unfounded, when we confront them we find they no longer control us. Instead we conquer them.

- Can you recall a time when some event or interaction triggered your flight or fight response, even though when you were able to look at it more analytically you realized the threat was mild or non-existent? How can you maximize the good effects of this brain mechanism, without always overreacting?
- Have you ever spent hours figuring out one or more ways of dealing with a disaster you anticipate might happen—only to realize that it never happened? How would you distinguish between wise planning and needless fearful anticipation?

### From Pastor Hamilton's sermon:

While the psychological and medical practices to address worry, anxiety and fear are important, for the last three thousand years humans have coped with worry, anxiety and fear with the help of their faith. They didn't have Xanax or Zoloft, or psychotherapists to talk to. The words "fear" or "afraid" appear over 400 times in Scripture. The people of biblical times had a lot to be afraid of. Wild animals in the wilderness, illness, enemies, wars and destruction, the occasional earthquake, floods, droughts, famine, dying in childbirth, death by disease, as well as a world that felt more dangerous in part because it was not completely understood.

The most often repeated refrain in Scripture is found on the lips of God, or an angel, or Jesus over 100 times. God says to his people, "DO NOT BE AFRAID." Your GPS readings over the next few weeks include many of these, like this passage from Isaiah:

Don't fear, because I am with you;

don't be afraid, for I am your God.

I will strengthen you,

I will surely help you;

I will hold you

with my righteous strong hand. (Isaiah 41:10)

When I read texts like this, I read them as though God were speaking directly to me. I may even respond to each line: "Thank you, Lord, that you are with me. Help me not to be afraid. You are my God. I trust that you will strengthen me and help me and hold me by your mighty hand."

Instead of imagining that I'll die of cancer, or that my future is grim, or that my enemies will defeat me, or that the world is on the verge of falling apart, in prayer and praise and singing I imagine and trust that God is with me, that he will strengthen me, help me and hold me by his mighty right hand....

Don't give in to False Events Appearing Real. Try facing your fears. And put your trust in God, praying and even singing to him, imagining the very things he promises, and you will find a peace that passes understanding, that will guard your heart and mind.

- Read Psalm 56:3-4. Then respond to the words of the passage, in the way Pastor Hamilton modeled with his response to Isaiah 41:10. Have you ever "prayed the Scriptures" in that way before? How can this approach, consistently practiced, help to give you inner peace?
- Which "False Events" (that is, events that haven't happened, and may never happen) appear most real to you right now? How can your faith help to prevent you from unhealthy worry while the events remain in your imagination? How do you believe your faith will support and sustain you even if the event(s) you imagine DO happen?