A few months ago I was flying into Seattle on my vacation. I don’t mind flying too much, and on this particular flight we were coming in to land at Sea Tac and we landed a little hard maybe, but totally normal in my experience. And for some reason I looked at the passenger next to me on the aisle. She was probably in her early 20’s. This shock ran through me. Because I don’t think I have ever seen a more terrified look in my life than the face of this poor girl. Her head was turned sideways and the look on her face was like a blood curdling scream without any noise. Holy Smokes, she was just absolutely terrified in a way that is hard to even imagine.

This the first reality of life that our text addresses today. It’s the reality of fear. This kind of fear that we normally can keep out of our conscious mind, but is an important part of daily living. Everyone has the potential for this kind of fear I think. That it’s extremely important to us is revealed in the way that we’re often entertained by it. Horror movies and movies that depict terrible events are pretty popular. The role of terrorism on the nightly news. This grabs our attention.

It’s probably the easiest way to get ratings. It’s why the big news is usually bad news. That which creates and foreboding. It’s in nature, it’s in our bodies, it’s cancer, it’s in the knowledge our of death. It’s the one thing that all the politicians are constantly using to develop followings. They want us to be afraid and terrified. We need to be terrified of the left. Or the right. Or covid 19. Or vaccines. Government control. Economic disaster. Global warming. Nuclear destruction. China. Huge portions of the population are just glued to these conspiracy theories, or some big threat that is going to take over and ruin us. There are people we can be terrified of meeting on the street. The knowledge of this fear and foreboding, is a huge part of our daily lives and conversation.

So how do we think about this side of life? How do we respond? I can only say a few things that I see. I think it’s behind a lot of this sort of arm yourself with weapons approach. Get a gun and get ready to use it. That’s huge. You can sort of try not to think about it. That’s close to a way of thinking that says, “Well, it can’t happen to me”. There’s a lot of passivity. Can’t do anything about it anyway, so just forget it. A huge response is to find someone to blame for it all. But in the case of our way of life, the awareness of this distress as our text today seems to creating a lot of stress. A stress that seems to be making us more frustrated, angry and hostile.

But our lesson today has a completely different interpretation of this reality. It’s prediction of the future and the future looks dreadful. People will faint from the fear of what is happening. And yet in our text the counsel is to look at this with hope. Stand up and raise you heads. It’s like this is what we’e been waiting for, not dreading. What? It’s a very strange text.

So now we move the next paragraph, which presents us with a completely different aspect or experience of life. The reality of springtime. It’s just the opposite experience of the realities of life that bring fear and dread. Anyone afraid of spring? It’s like that first first day that you can take off your coat as you walk across the street after a long winter. The oppressive cold suddenly lifts and you feel like you can relax maybe. If it’s hard to describe the reality of terror it’s hard to describe well what happens when you get it that it’s springtime. It’s a kind of relief, it’s time to get outside and enjoy life a little more. You hear the birds singing, and it’s time to sort clean things out and get going. It’s a time of optimism and uplifted spirits.

And something else happens of course. Things begin to grow, and people go to work in a little different way. You start cleaning the house. Spring clearning. Check the mower, start thinking about planting, getting the project done that was hard to do in the winter. Go on a picnic, yeah, life just seems a little better during the spring. It’s something that usually I think everyone looks forward to. I doubt that there is anyone who would be afraid of springtime. Springtime seems to push away the fear and forboding a little bit.

So it’s interesting isn’t that Jesus says that when all of these terrifying things are happening in the world, when fear and terror might come upon us, that it’s meant to be a sign of spring. That what we experience on the first day of spring is how we can react to all that is unsettling us and making us afraid. That covid 19, and the possibility of economic disaster, all these terrifying realities are a sign that God is near. That God is making an entrance. How do we prepare for God hear? By how we respond to what we fear. Stand up and lift up your heads. What you’ve been waiting for is coming in what up until now you have experienced with a kind of dread.

Anyone you know responding to all of this fear and foreboding and what you see in the news in that way? Like it’s the coming of spring? Is it possible that fear and dread doesn’t have to lead to irritation, anger, hostility, contempt or violence? But something like hope? Yeah, its’ like what you fear the most holds the best promise of God here. All that threatens us is a sign of spring. But It’s a kind crazy message isn’t it, such a different way to respond to all of this bad news. When the distress comes it’s a sign of spring? How can that be? How would you experience fear as something holding a gift?

It's a challenge today to offer such a message. I spoke of this on Thanksgiving, but we live in a religious world and culture that often deals with fear by trying to eliminate it. Fear is for the weak. We’ll read a verse like perfect love casts out fear. And I can see someone running with that and putting the triumphant message on the T shirt. Be not afraid! And often the idea presented is that if you believe in God or trust in God that you shouldn’t or won’t be afraid. Fear becomes a sign of a lack of faith somehow. Fear becomes bad. And if you have enough faith you shouldn’t feel the feeling. God will take away your fear. You’ll be fearless. And that sells doesn’t it. We’re fearless. That will get the crowd cheering for sure. And there is a kind of Christianity that likes to revel in this kind of triumphant approach to living as a Christian.

But that’s not the message of our lesson today. Our lesson today is not, when you’re afraid God is going to take it away. Oh God has everything under control, don’t be afraid, that’s not the message here. The message as I read it anyway is that as you can feel the fear, and experience the dread, we can respond differenty. Stand up, lift up your heads. God might be in this. Don’t try to push it away, or push it down. God lies hiding in what we fear and dread here. So Maybe we can respond to fear in some other way than getting all upset. It’s not don’t be afraid. God is hiding in the fear. That’s a pretty interesting message.

It's is interesting, we are in Luke today and when you read the Christmas story in the Gospel of Luke, how did each character experience God’s action in their lives when it happened? Yeah, they were absolutely terrified. So the angel or whatever spends half his time trying to calm them down. Zechariah the priest spent his whole life working in the church being the pastor. Yeah, God shows up and it says he was paralyzed with fear. Mary isn’t quite so bad, just deeply troubled. And the poor shepherds they’re just terrified. What if we took that and applied that to the issues that scare us today? That would radically how we hear the evening news. Jesus was scared to death of the cross to the point of sweating blood. But hiding in the reality was a gift. Right?

I’ve tried to think about how this plays out practically for daily living, and I can’t think through all the implications for what this means. But maybe this Advent Season, as we listen the news and see these signs that fill us with that fear about the future, what if we just practiced beginning to associate that feeling of fear as a sign of God’s coming to us? That God lies waiting for you, hidden in that feeling? That would make the evening news a whole different experience wouldn’t it? A whole different understanding about how God is with us.

I’ll have to experiment with a little more. God waits for me in what I fear. Helping me to face it and live it in way that brings life instead of anger, hostility, and division. That would be some gift. Amen.