I should have titled this morning’s sermon “faith and fear,” not “faith versus fear.” I don’t think it’s helpful to set up the relationship between faith and fear as if it were a battle, as if one contender will win and the other will lose. In my experience the relationship between faith and fear is much more complicated than that.

Fear is natural. Fear serves a useful function – it is designed to keep us safe. We actually don’t want to get rid of fear.

But we also do not want to allow fear to rule our lives. We cannot allow fear to dictate our actions and choices – not if we want to be faithful.

Our Psalm this morning repeats this dance between fear and faith, over and over again. The writer affirms his or her faith in God over and over again. The writer affirms his desire to be close to God, to know God’s ways. The writer affirms her desire to live with God, to commune with God in the temple. And the writer also names many reasons to fear: evildoers. Adversaries. Foes. An army against me. Being forsaken by family. False witnesses, and violence.

The picture the writer paints of life is that there are dangers all around – so many things to be afraid of. But all these things are balanced by the steadfast presence of God – God who is our light and our salvation. God who shelters us. God who teaches and leads us. God whose goodness is visible in the land of the living.

Back and forth between fear and faith, between dangers around us and the reassurance of God’s presence – this is the rhythm of our Psalm this morning. It is a very human picture of a very human experience.

I am actually a fairly fearful person by nature. I have struggled my whole life with being afraid of all kinds of things. If I were to avoid everything I am or have been afraid of, I would have had a very narrow life indeed. And God does not call us to narrow lives.

Our theme in this season of Lent is the theme of turning toward God, of re-turning to God. I am convinced that fear is one of the biggest threats to faithful living. Again, fear is natural and necessary. I don’t think humans will ever free ourselves of fear, nor should we. But when we allow fear to dictate our decisions, I am convinced those decisions will turn us away from God. I also believe that facing our fears can be a powerful tool for turning or re-turning to God.

Lent is a season of introspection; a time of self-examination. So I think it is helpful for our own spiritual growth if we approach the question of fear and faith in a personal and introspective way.
What are some of the things you are afraid of?

[pause]

What or who do you avoid, as a result of your fears?

[pause]

In my own life, I have experienced this interplay of faith and fear. I have experienced this particularly when I have done things that scared me and discovered that a bigger life is available to me on the other side of that fear. Where fear might separate me from people, faith calls me to seek relationships with all kinds of people.

In seminary I took a class on ministry with the incarcerated. As a part of the class, just one time I went with classmates to offer a Bible study for women in the West County Detention Center in Richmond. I was a little bit scared to go into the jail. And as we sat in a small group and talked about the Bible and shared our perspectives, of course I discovered that it was so easy to recognize our common humanity. Really. And my picture of who I could relate to expanded just a bit. My fear of people who I saw as different shrunk just a little bit.

When I worked as a hospital chaplain, I was assigned to the psychiatric hospital. Part of my reason for choosing this was to challenge my fear of people with severe mental illness. And again – of course I discovered that people are people.

I am oversimplifying this too much, and the stories from experiences like working in a psychiatric hospital are many and diverse. But my experience has strengthened my conviction that faith often calls us to move toward what we fear – and that the reward for doing so can be tremendous. For me it has felt as if the space for me to move in grew a little bit bigger, and my fear became just a little bit smaller.

I think it is helpful for our own spiritual growth if we approach the question of fear and faith in a personal and introspective way. Lent is a season of self-examination. But having said that, the real cost of allowing fear, rather than faith, to dictate our choices, is sometimes most obvious on a national scale.

I have a strong conviction that our fears often tempt us to turn away from God. And I believe that this truth is behind Pope Francis’ statement about Donald Trump on Thursday. In response to statements Trump has made, Pope Francis stated this week that to build a wall between the United States and Mexico is not Christian. Building a wall is an action born of fear. Faith teaches us to welcome the stranger.

Our nation marked an anniversary of fear this week. On February 19th, 1942, Franklin D. Roosevelt signed executive order 9066 – the executive order that paved the way for deporting Japanese Americans in internment camps. Our nation acted out of fear. The impact on Japanese Americans was devastating. And the way that period demonstrated and shaped the character of
This nation is shameful. Faith is the voice that moves us to say, “never again.” And even today voices of fear suggest that we as a nation could do something similar again.

Fear builds walls – it separates us from others. Faith builds bridges – it draws us into relationships. And this dynamic plays out at the national level, and for us as individuals.

Fear moves us to protect ourselves. Our world is full of real dangers – as was the world of the psalmist. But the nature of fear is that it sometimes provokes us to believe that minimal threats are overwhelming – to overreact. And whether the danger is real or exaggerated or even imaginary, the Christian life calls us live fully. The Christian life calls us to live fully even at great cost; to give of ourselves, even when this involves great risk.

This desire, or even need, to protect ourselves is what some people claim as the rationale for having guns. Jerry Falwell Jr. is the president of Liberty University. In December he called for students at that Christian University to arm themselves. He was referring to the shootings in San Bernardino, and said “If more good people had concealed-carry permits, then we could end those Muslims before they walked in and killed them.” Jerry Falwell Jr. would never admit it, but this is the voice of fear, not the voice of faith.

I was reading some comments back and forth online in response to Falwell’s statement. People were talking specifically about how calling for guns represented or didn’t represent a Christian perspective. One self-identified Christian was writing in support of Falwell’s statement, supporting the call for Christians to arm themselves. In a final statement intended to drive home his point, he asked, in a tone of outrage: “What do you think Jesus would do – do you really think Jesus would just let someone kill him?”

[pause]

Do you really think Jesus would just let someone kill him?

[pause]

He did.

Jesus did let someone kill him – let a whole system of someones kill him. Jesus understood that the cost of protecting himself was too high a price to pay. Jesus understood that to prioritize protecting himself over doing the work he was called to do would interfere with path God called him to.

Was Jesus afraid of death? We cannot know. What we do know is that the Christian tradition tells us that Jesus had the power and freedom to choose another path if he had wanted to. But Jesus freely chose the way of the cross. Jesus freely chose to live fully in the face of a dangerous world. Jesus chose a ministry of justice for the poor and hungry and outcast in the face of a political system that harshly punished anyone who challenged the system.
In this season of Lent, we are moving steadily toward that event of Jesus dying on a cross. We are moving toward something terrifying – something that merits being afraid. And we move toward this event because living fully means facing our fears. Living fully means choosing to continue along the journey despite the risks – to follow Christ, not counting the cost.

Our faith calls us to turn toward God – over and over again. Fear might tempt us to turn away from God – especially when fear moves us away from our brothers and sisters, moves us away from other children of God who seem somehow frightening because they are so different from us. But that moving away from those others is also a way to turn away from God. Because faith always calls us to embrace the stranger – to draw closer to our brothers and sisters who seem so different from us. Faith reminds us of our common humanity.

Our trust in God will wax and wane. We will all know times of turning away from God, even unintentionally. But in Lent we hear again the call to turn toward God, even in the face of our fears. We walk this journey together, hoping to live our faith – hoping to turn and re-turn toward God. Amen.