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One week before Alec graduated from flight school in Oklahoma, I got a phone call from him. It's not often that I hear from him because he honestly doesn't like to talk on the phone, but it is always a welcome surprise to hear his voice.

After the initial catching up on what we have both been doing, the weather, and other general topics, there was a long pause, and I could tell that something was very wrong. I have learned over the years to wait until he brings up what is bothering him, because often my asking doesn't bring forth the conversation that we are both hoping to have. Finally, he was able to share what he had called to tell me:

"Things are really weird here this week."

"What you mean by "weird", I asked."

There was a long pause on the phone, and I got that sinking feeling in my stomach and my breath caught. I was running through at least 5 horrific scenarios in my head, each one worse than the last until he finally answered.

"One of my flight instructors crashed today and died."

There is was. Reality. It was the worst case scenario for someone's family, even if it wasn't for mine – not this time. It was a reality check for me, but it was really a reality check for Alec. He had been so focused on the act of flying, the classes, the learning, the tests, and the scores, that he had not thought about the danger and the possibility of losing someone that he cared about. He was on the brink of obtaining his wings and becoming a full-fledged pilot and he had to face this first loss head on.

For me, that reality brought fear. Most of the time, I have been able to push this reality to the far corners of my mind, and not think about it. I have been able to focus on what is in front of me day to day, and not think about his flying, his training, or the end game. I have focused on memories of the two kids growing up – the years of trips and school, laughter and tears, and I have tried to stay focused on the present. It is only when it is right in front of me that I have had to face it head on and address it.

That night, I didn't sleep well. As I lay in bed, I asked myself (as I have many times over the past couple of years); where was God? Where was God in this random death? The instructor, who died, was 25 (one year older than Alec). He had just gotten married and by all accounts was a "great guy". He didn't die flying a mission, he didn't die while performing his duty; he died as a passenger of an airplane that was preparing for an exhibition the next day. So, I asked myself again; where was God?

This has been a year of events that justify being afraid. There have been many random acts of violence, political chaos, horrific accidents, racial tension, etc.... If you are to believe the media, there is very little going on in the world that is good and beautiful. There is anger bombarding us from all sides, to the point where it is noise, distraction, and has become imbedded in how we talk to each other, how we act around each other and there is a danger of it becoming who we are in this world. This death was a tipping point for me and I spent the night thinking – what if it had been Alec? What would I do if it were Alec? I lay there for hours and replayed this same tape over and over.

It is difficult to find any joy when you live in fear, because it isn't living; it's just existing. It is waiting for the other shoe to drop, for the next violent act, the next disappointing event. It can literally paralyze you from making decisions, moving forward, or finding happiness in everyday life.

Finally, I did what I do whenever I reach this place of fear – I drew on my faith. I prayed. I asked God to wrap Alec and his other friends in a bubble of safety. I prayed for him to put this death into perspective and to not let it erode his confidence or his resolve. I prayed for the first significant loss of many that he would experience, and I let God take the pain and the grieving about how each event would change him going forward. I finally found a place where I was less afraid, and fell into peaceful sleep.

According to Hebrew 11: verse 1 from our scripture lesson this morning; "Faith is the substance of things hoped for; the evidence of things not seen". I think that one of the key words in this lesson is hope. I think that those two ideals – faith and hope go hand in hand and both together help us to push through the noise and chaos that surrounds us. As I listen to the political landscape – the anger, the lies, the media spin on all candidates, it strikes me that many people are in a place where they have no hope.

Much of the anger that has risen to the surface is due to this lack of hope and without it, the fear takes over and we begin to have an sense that there is nothing that we can do to change the tide of ugliness that threatens to overwhelm us.

Many of us at times feel small and insignificant in the face of some of the things we've faced and we feel as if there is nowhere that we can make a difference. But I think that this is wrong. We can make a very significant difference; each of us every day in small but significant ways.

The second line of the scripture is also very significant: the evidence of things not seen. Faith is not something that you can touch. It is not tangible. It is not seeds that can be scattered onto soil that will either produce fruit, or it won't. It is the feeling that there is something greater than ourselves that we can lean on, draw from and turn to when fear and anger threaten to overtake us. The Christian church has been built upon this foundation of faith, and we have been encouraged to reach out to others, to aid them in finding God and that intangible feeling through being kind and thoughtful to other people. It is through this kindness, by being thoughtful and mindful, that we can bring hope to those who need it.

During the time with the children, I talked about random acts of kindness. There are countless places in the bible and in our own faith journeys, where we have been asked to be kind. We are asked to be kind to strangers, to those who are in pain, to those who need comfort, and for those who may be afraid. By drawing on our own faith, we can do something kind for someone who isn't expecting it and as a result, we can all benefit.

I spent two months in Atlanta last year and every night I walked through downtown looking for dinner. Atlanta in the summer is bustling, hot, full of tourist and business people, and I always enjoyed looking for new restaurants. One night I went about five blocks to an old diner that I had been to many times. As I was leaving, I noticed a pile of what looked like rags lying next to the curb. As I got closer, I saw that it was a man, obviously homeless, who didn't appear to have enough energy to even sit up, much less walk. I watched as people walked around him, crossed the street to avoid him and generally overlooked him. So, I stopped. I divided the food that I had, put his in half my container and took it over to him.

When I offered it to him, he didn't say anything, but his eyes softened, teared up and he nodded. I nodded back. It was a shared moment, a random act that made my night the best night there. I hope it was one of his best nights too.

Here at Edina Morningside Church I have been the recipient of many random acts of kindness. I was going through a closet last year and I came across a bunch of cards that people in the church sent to me several years ago right before I was going to have surgery. I read through every one of those cards and felt wrapped in the warmth and the caring that they conveyed. And last Christmas I went to a party at someone's house and a very special person from here came up to me, hugged me and told me how much I was missed and asked when was I coming back to church. At that time, I felt particularly lonely, and that bit of kindness was enough to make me feel much better. We never know if that bit of kindness will benefit someone at exactly the right moment and in exactly the right way.

I do try to be kind – kind to the homeless people asking for food or money on the on-ramps. Bringing cookies to work when they aren't expected. Finding someone I don't know crying in the rest room and taking the time to ask if that person is ok. I try to find those moments when I can draw on my own faith and my own hope and pass that on to someone else. After either giving or receiving kindness, I feel that surge of happiness, that belief in something greater than myself, and I have a renewed faith in myself and the world in general.

I think that the challenge right now is to look for the kindness and look for the hope. We have to try and understand both sides of some of these charged situations, draw on our values and our beliefs, and remember that every interaction, every moment is an opportunity to make things just a bit better.

So, where is God? God is in all of us and all around us. God can be found in the big gestures – like donating an organ, building a house, taking care of someone in their home, or in the small random acts – of a hug, a card, or a meal. God is in our pain – when we lose someone we love, or when we witness senseless acts of violence. Because in that pain, we remember that we feel that pain because we have the capacity to love and to feel compassion. And God can be found in our fear. When we are afraid, we

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are being called to action. We are called to do something to pass through that fear, to replenish that hope and faith and to remember that no matter how bad things were yesterday, they will be better tomorrow. And God is in hope. It is what drives us to give; to be kind and to know that after all this rain... there will be a rainbow.

So, as you move through your week, think about how you can perform random acts of kindness. Look for those opportunities to bring hope to someone who may be feeling hopeless. Be mindful of not getting swept up in the negative chaos and the fear. Chose to scatter those seeds on fertile ground and to allow God to grow healthy blooms of faith and hope within you and through you.

Amen