

Fear is a powerful emotion. It's so powerful we don't always even realize we're feeling it. Talk to people who have been in truly terrifying situations – soldiers, police officers, disaster survivors – and many of them will tell you the same thing.

Somebody asks them, “Were you afraid?” And they have to stop and think about it. That's what fear does. It makes us react before we've even had a chance to process the emotion we're feeling. Fight or flight kicks in. You don't think. You don't feel. Things just start happening.

And so it's not surprising that when angels appear in the Bible, the very first thing out of their mouths is almost always, “Don't be afraid.” Because when a person is afraid, it simply overwhelms them. Stops them in their tracks. Clears their mind of everything except the fear they're feeling.

And sometimes that fear is a good thing. God occasionally uses our fear for his purposes. He uses it to get our attention. He uses it to stop us from doing whatever it was that we were doing before.

When God sends deadly snakes into the camp of the Israelites, the people are terrified. When Elijah brings fire down from heaven to burn up an altar, the people are overwhelmed with fear. When Judah is taken into exile in Babylon, they couldn't be more afraid.

God uses fear. But he only uses it to stop people in the midst of their sin. God sent those deadly snakes because they were rebelling against him in the face of adversity. God sent that fire from heaven because the people had been led astray by idolatry. God let the people be taken into exile because they were completely ignoring his Word.

By and large, God would prefer not to terrify us. It's part of his alien work. Part of his wrath. Part of his Law. And he only uses it as long as is necessary to get our attention. Thus, the angels who say, “Don't be afraid.”

Satan, on the other hand, loves fear. He uses it constantly. Because we're sinners, after all. We have a natural inclination to do evil. We like sinning. It feels good.

And doing anything other than sinning is like running up a down escalator. It's slow and exhausting and often it doesn't get us anywhere at all. Resisting the temptation to sin requires constant vigilance on our part.

Which means if Satan can scare us, he's already won. If he can terrify us into distraction. Make us react without thinking, without considering God's Law. Then his work is done.

If he can simply run up behind us and yell, “Boo!” So that we stop running up the down escalator. Well then our own sinfulness will drag us right down to the bottom before we even know it.

So all Satan has to do is make us afraid. Afraid of the future. Afraid of the unknown. Afraid that there won't be enough money. Afraid of other people's opinions of us. Afraid of death. All he has to do is make us afraid. And, very often, his job is done.

Today, we read in our Gospel lesson about a man who's afraid. His name is Joseph. We don't know a lot about him. He's a pretty important person in the Bible. But oddly enough, we never hear him speak. Not once.

We know he was from an obscure branch of the royal family. So far from the throne that pretty much everybody had forgotten that David was one of his ancestors. We know he was born in Bethlehem. A tiny town outside of Jerusalem. We know he lived in Nazareth. A tiny town in a backwater part of Galilee.

We know he was a builder of some sort. Calling him a carpenter is probably an exaggeration. "Carpenter" implies a skilled tradesman in our culture. The word that's used to describe him means something closer to "day laborer."

Simply put, Joseph is nobody special. And when he finds out that his fiancée, who he's never slept with, is pregnant, he reacts like many of us would. He's angry. He's heartbroken. He's frustrated. He's disappointed. But most of all... he's afraid.

Afraid that he doesn't know this woman that he's supposed to marry. Afraid that he's marrying an adulterer. Someone who is not trustworthy. Afraid of what other people will think. Afraid to be the father of another man's child. There is so much fear.

And it overwhelms him. Stops him in his tracks. Stops his love. Stops his wedding to Mary. Stops his life. Joseph is terrified. And he simply reacts. Fight or flight kicks. I don't want to hurt this woman. But I can't marry her. Of course I can't marry her. She's pregnant with another man's child. I have to run.

Joseph is afraid. And in the midst of this fear, God doesn't pile on more fear by sending an angel to stand right before him. No, he delivers the message far more gently, in a dream. "*Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife.*"

And that's all it takes. One little message of comfort from the Lord. One little reassurance that this is all in God's plan. One little dream to take away the fear. And Joseph takes Mary as his wife.

Fear is easy. And sinning because we're afraid is easy. It's easy to get caught up in a culture of sinfulness. Because it's scary to give up the sins we love. It's easy to say nothing in the face of sin. Because it's scary to be disliked for what you believe. It's easy to hold back your faith. Because it's scary to be rejected by friends and family.

Fear is at the root of so many sins and mistakes, like Joseph's. But God comes to us at the root of our fears. He comes to us with a word of comfort and reassurance. A message, like the one he gave to Joseph. That tells us that everything we're experiencing is worth it. That there's a savior at the end of all this. Immanuel. God with us.

Who has felt our fear. Felt our pain. Felt the rejection of friends and family and the entire world. Felt it all and still went to the cross for us. So that we might know that there is something more than death at the end of this life.

And so that even when we feel fear – even when we give in to fear – there is still forgiveness. That this escalator of sin dragging us down doesn't lead into hell. But into the arms of our savior. Who died and descended into hell. Not because he was a captive of hell. But so that he would always be there to catch us. And lift us back to eternal life.

You see, the greatest fear that anyone can feel is not of the future or the unknown or death or anything else in this entire world. The greatest fear is the fear of being rejected by God. And that's a fear that none of us ever have to feel.

That fear has already been conquered on the cross. By a man who cried out, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.*" He was rejected so that we may live without fear. He was rejected so that Joseph could take Mary as his wife. And so that we could face temptation. And we could stand up for God's Law. And so that we could share our faith.

Because whether we succeed or fail, we need not fear. For Jesus has already saved his people from their sins. Immanuel, God with us, has come. And he will continue to be with us. To the very end of the age. Amen.