

Do not be afraid

By [Erin Martin](#)

December 7, 2007

We don't ordinarily associate fear with Christmas, and yet throughout the accounts of the Incarnation, everyone is afraid. Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, even King Herod is terrified upon hearing the news that a child will be born in Bethlehem. What's so scary about a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger?

Everything, if you are Joseph.

Joseph is a bit bewildered by the news of Mary's pregnancy. He should not have been the last one to know. Joseph finds himself in a precarious position: he's involved in Mary's pregnancy, but not "involved" in the normal way. Legally, the baby is his, but he is not the father. He is betrothed to Mary, but she is not his wife. If Joseph makes public Mary's act of adultery, she could rightfully be stoned to death. It's situations like these that can keep a man awake at night.

I imagine Joseph lying in his bed wondering where things went wrong. Life wasn't supposed to happen this way. He was a good man. He thought he had chosen a capable woman for a wife. Now, everything's a disaster. How can he escape the incredible shame of his situation while at the same time spare Mary's life? It is into this nightmare that a messenger of God comes to speak a word of grace and peace to Joseph. "Do not be afraid." While Joseph dreams fitfully, the angel explains that the child Mary carries is more than a child. He is Emmanuel, "God with us." The uncertainties of Mary and Joseph's future remain, but the promise is that they are not alone in them. God is sending into the world a savior. The child will be a sign to the world that God is near. When Joseph awakes, his fear is gone, and he can step into his future in faith.

I remember the time when I was most afraid. I was eight years old, and lost in the darkness of the finished basement where my bedroom was. I awoke needing to go to

the bathroom, and the impenetrable darkness of the basement meant that I had to feel my way along my bedroom wall then, at the door, turn and head straight along the wall into the bathroom. Somewhere along the way I wandered away from the wall and found myself standing in the darkness frantically waving my arms, hoping for something firm to hold onto. Tremendous fear washed over me, and I could not move. I did the only thing that a child can do—I called out for my mother who was sleeping upstairs. She came to the top of the stairs. “It’s okay,” she reassured me, “I am with you now.” When at last she turned on the light, there I was—standing in the bathroom.

The holidays are the perfect reminder that our lives don’t resemble Hallmark cards. Like Mary and Joseph, we’re part of relationships that are complicated, messy. When our big dreams of family harmony and happiness lie broken all around us, it’s natural to wonder where things went wrong. It is into this darkness that the light of Christ shines, into this fear that the angel reassures us, “Do not be afraid.” God has sent a savior, “Emmanuel.” We are not alone.