

Don't be afraid to do this

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In the Bible, God--or sometimes God's messenger--often implores freaked-out men and women not to be afraid. It's a standard divine greeting, a nicety to allay the pulse-quickenning shock of receiving a message from heaven. Frequently the commandment stands alone: *Fear not*, period. Sometimes it's stitched to an object or person: *Do not be afraid of _____*.

Only twice is the would-be scaredy-cat encouraged not to be afraid to do some specific *action*. Following his family's near ruination by famine, Jacob sets out for Egypt to be reunited with his long-lost son, Joseph. God speaks to Jacob in a nighttime vision: "Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make of you a great nation there." The New Testament Joseph's message also comes by night, in the brume of a dream. "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife," the angel enjoins, and discloses the controversial mystery of the child's conception.

An aside: It's easy to get wrapped up in the whole virgin/young woman debate. But like Easter sermons that deliberate on whether the resurrection actually happened, Advent and Christmas sermons that obsess over Mary's sexual status are painfully boring. The only two places I've heard people gossip about someone's virginity are the pulpit and the high school girls' bathroom.

Back to Jacob and Joseph: Though the Genesis story is hardly an Advent text, it's astounding how distinctly it parallels the Matthew story; reading the two in tandem, if only in preparatory study, defines and magnifies Joseph's dream. Jacob shouldn't fear the journey to Egypt because God will make of him a great nation there, while Joseph shouldn't fear the shame of marrying a pregnant woman because the child is

of the Holy Spirit. Both are assurances of divinely inspired fruitfulness. Babies from God!

Jacob is also promised the favor of God's presence. "I myself will go down with you to Egypt," God whispers into the night air. Meanwhile, the angel explains that the holy child in Mary's womb fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah; this child is the Emmanuel, God with us. And there is truly no better reason than this to sacrifice our anxieties at the altar of faith. *We are not alone.*

The last parallel is slightly obscured. The vow God makes to Jacob employs language familiar to Christians: "I will go down with you, and I will also bring you up again." It's a movement echoed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Joseph's angel speaks of the salvation the Christ child will bring. It is in lowering himself--first to the realm of humanity, and ultimately to the grave--that this salvation is accomplished. And it is in his resurrection that all people are raised to a place where fear cannot afflict.

So many of the folks who shuffle into the pews on Sunday are afraid. Many do not recognize their fear, let alone know what it is they dread.

A lot of clergy think that the "Footprints in the Sand" poem is pretty schlocky, but there's a reason so many people prefer it to our most learned exegesis. People yearn to know that God is with them. The heart of Joseph's dream is the promise of divine presence: in Mary's womb, in Jesus's bloodstream, in a good man's shame. Fear and death and sin are trounced by love and life and salvation, all on account of the Emmanuel.

The text says that Joseph awoke and did as the angel told him. In time-management parlance, that's called "eating your frog"--taking on your hardest task first thing in the morning. I hope that as he quietly married his scandalous, sacred bride, he did so without an iota of fear--perhaps even with a tender heart. I hope, too, that we can encourage our parishioners to be so bold as they plumb their own dreams and confront their own trials, always and ever in the saving grasp of Christ.