

God meets us in our fear. It's been reported that the Bible says the phrase, "fear not" exactly 365 times, once for every day of the year. Have any of you heard that said before? Well, if it sounds a little too perfect to be true, that's because it is. Sorry to disappoint you, but Bible doesn't say "fear not" 365 times, but it does say it a lot, to a lot of different people, in a lot of circumstances, people who like us don't always know what to do with our fear. I'm glad the Bible doesn't say, "fear not" 365 times, because when you are afraid, being told to not be afraid isn't all that helpful, is it? When you are afraid, the problem isn't that you have simply forgotten to not be afraid, and all you need is a person or a Bible verse to come along and remind you of this most critical piece of information—don't be afraid, as if that will make everything OK. That's not how fear works. We don't simply need reminders when we are afraid, we need something deeper and more personal than that.

I've often said that my five months of working as a chaplain at Children's Hospital was every bit as transformative as four years of seminary education. As a chaplain, I had this knack for being on-call when the worst things happened. I went into the program assuming we would have lots of training on how to minister to people in crisis long before we were expected to actually do it. That was not the case. From the first week, I was thrown into situations I felt completely unprepared for.

My first night on call was non-stop tragedy, one after another. My second night it was pretty quiet, until about 3am when the pager went off. I went down to the emergency department, and there was a flurry of activity. I saw group of nurses who were frantically doing CPR on a young girl. I asked the social worker if a parent was present, and she pointed to the mother, whose name was Linda. She was in a chair looking at the wall, outside where her daughter was being treated. I was terrified. I didn't know what to do. What can you possibly say to a stranger that will be of any help in that situation? I don't think saying, "fear not" would help.

I remembered my supervisor Susan having told me that everyone in that room has a job to do. As a chaplain our job was simply to be with people—that's it. No more, no less. You don't offer to get them a drink of water. You don't make chit chat. My job was simply to be present and not leave. So, I took a deep breath, walked over to Linda, got down on one knee so I could be at eye level with her, and I said, "My name is Joel. I'm the chaplain, and I'm here to be with you." She turned to me with rage on her face, and she shouted, "You tell your God to get his hands off my little girl! I want her back in my arms, now!" I gulped, took another breath, and said, "OK, I will." I don't know how you respond when someone yells at you, but I'm not a fan of it. Everything in my body wanted to get up and leave, to give her some space, but instead, I just stayed there, next to Linda, whose little girl's life was slipping away. I determined that unless she told me to go away, I wasn't leaving.

God meets us in our fear, and Mary had good reason to be afraid. **[Annunciation Painting]** Here she was, engaged to be married, minding her own business, when out of nowhere an angel appears and says, "Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!" Now pretty much everybody in the Bible who meets an angel or has an encounter with God has exactly one response. Do you know what that response is? Fear. Humans seemingly have a universal fear of God. Why that is, I'm not entirely sure. Perhaps is as simple as we are afraid of what we do not know, and God is the great unknown. Startled by this unexpected appearance, the angel says, "Don't be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you. Look! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and

you will name him Jesus.” How do you process that? Though the angel says God favors Mary and is honoring her with this promised son, it isn’t clear Mary wants this or welcomes news. That rings true to me. The gospel says that God is on our side, but it doesn’t always feel that way, especially when we are faced with news we don’t want. Mary didn’t ask for this, and when it comes to pregnancy and giving birth, consent is of the utmost importance. This news clearly involves Mary’s bodily autonomy, and it seems she is simply told this is how it’s going to be. You should be honored, Mary.

News of pregnancy isn’t always welcomed, is it? How many women today will find out they are pregnant and fear, not joy, is their first response? Mary is afraid, and even though she’s told what an honor this unplanned pregnancy is, she doesn’t say, “OK, whatever you want, God!” She doesn’t immediately consent. First, she questions, “How can this be?” Fear often has a way of silencing us, and somehow in the presence of this powerful, male angel, Mary manages to question what’s she’s been told, before she agrees to participate, and I’m so glad she did. It may not seem like much, but she doesn’t simply submit. She asks her question and gets an answer. She is assured she’s not alone in this calling because her cousin Elizabeth is on the other end of this unlikely pregnancy path. Only then does Mary say, “I am the Lord’s servant. Let it be with me just as you have said.”

It’s not being told, “Don’t be afraid” that helps us in our fear. What helps is knowing that we are not alone. God meets us in our fear, and normally, the way God does that is through the people who walk through the dark night with us, refusing to leave us on our own. I didn’t leave Linda’s side that night at the hospital. Awkward and afraid, I stuck it out, and she never told me to leave, though she wasn’t quite done yelling at me just yet, and that was OK. Those brave nurses spent over two hours doing CPR on that six-year-old girl. They put her on ECMO, which is a heart and lung bypass machine, right there in the Emergency Department. They couldn’t risk moving her to the OR. I was sure she was going to die, but somehow, some way, she survived the night. Over the next week, we all feared that she would have severe brain and heart damage from all that strain, but eventually, she regained her functioning. Ten weeks later, she left the hospital, able to walk, talk normally. That was ten years ago, and today, she’s doing great. On their last day in the hospital, Linda apologized for yelling at me that night. She said she was just so mad at God, and she needed someone to yell at. I told her how honored I was to be there. To this day, it remains one of the great honors of my life. We were all afraid that night, and God met us in our fear, and God did so through the presence of each other.

When we are afraid, we don’t need to be cheered up or told how everything is going to be OK. Because the truth is, we don’t know that it will. Often times, there’s nothing to be done but wait, and God waits with us. God is not put off by our questions, or our anger, but quietly sits with us, for as long as is needed. The truth is God is with and favors us, even when we don’t feel or see it. Maybe the words, “Don’t be afraid” aren’t a command. Maybe they are an invitation to trust that in all things, we are loved, and we never walk alone.