

“The Courage to Sink”  
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,  
concerning Matthew 14:22-33  
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,  
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Imagine for a moment that you are Peter. For the next little bit, you’ve got Peter’s feet, Peter’s beard, Peter’s fears. What I want to know, Peter, is after you had walked on water a bit as well as sunk a bit, after you climbed back into the boat, sopping wet, clothes heavy against your skin, what did you think about what had just happened? Did you feel as if you had failed by sinking?

It seems to me there are two versions of the story you, Peter, could tell yourself. One goes like this: “What a loser I am! I did it again. I spoke up before I knew what I was saying. Rushed in but couldn’t follow through. Started bold; got scared. Why am I always like this?”

Or Peter could tell this story: “Oh my stars! I just walked on water with the Son of God! What an experience, what a thrill, what a gift!”

I wonder if you were Peter, which version would you tell yourself? I can tell you that if I was Peter, I’d be playing story #1 in my head on repeat along with some added embellishments. “What a loser I am! Kyndall/Peter, who did you think you were, stepping out of the boat?! You never should have looked at all those waves—that’s what did you in. You should have resisted the fear, not to mention I think if you’d kept your legs bent and your feet shoulder-width apart, you would have had more stability out there. You probably stepped too fast . . . or maybe you were too slow! Maybe speed shows faith. Or maybe . . .”

I would be back in the boat, wringing out my sopping clothes and wringing my hands in worry, trying to figure out where I went wrong. I’d be replaying Jesus’ words in my head, “You of little faith!” as if it were God’s final judgment upon me, stamped forever upon my head.

In short, if I were Peter, Peter wouldn’t have made all those subsequent blunders we find in the Gospels because if I was Peter I wouldn’t be brave enough to try any more stunts.

The real Peter, as far as we can tell, didn’t give up on himself, no matter how many times he erred, although I think in this case we might challenge the assumption that he erred at all. Because perhaps the point isn’t that he sank but that he got out of the boat. I mean, that took some serious guts. You don’t see any of the other disciples clamoring for their turn. The story tells us that the wind was so strong they spent the whole night trying to cross the sea and they still hadn’t made it. This was the worst possible time to go for a stroll or a swim.

I think we tend to imagine Jesus stern and condescending when he says to Peter, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” But what if Jesus said it with a smile, with a touch of incredulous admiration, with a nod to the courage or the insanity it took for Peter to walk out there in the first place. “You of little faith, why did you doubt? You got this far, Peter! Did you really think I’d let you drown?”

Imagine Peter, a bit sheepish, grips Jesus by the hand and lifts his feet one at a time out of the water and places them back down on the water, and they walk hand in hand to the boat. Peter looks at the waves crashing into the sea all around him, only this time, he grins, because waves cannot get the best of him. Not anymore. Not right now.

Maybe, if I was Peter and I was that close to Jesus, I could change the narrative I tell about myself to myself. Instead of going over and over everything that went wrong and everything I could have done differently so I wouldn't have sunk, I could go over and over the relief of being rescued from drowning. I could relive the way water feels underneath my feet when I'm not sinking. I could remember again and again the feeling of defying the storm, of Jesus' hand holding me steady, of the sheer wonder of the miraculous. I could relive the amazement of experiencing something today that I never could have fathomed happening yesterday.

Growing up, I was a very timid little girl. I was scared of many things, including, but not limited to: anorexic women. I'd seen one on Oprah once as a small child—a woman so starved you could see all her bones. While most children cried about monsters under the bed, I had nightmares about skinny women hiding in my closet. There was some irony in that, I suppose, given that I was skin and bones myself, but fear is seldom rational. This was not a fleeting fear either—like a bad dream I had once and retold through the years. No, this was a reoccurring paranoia that haunted me for years.

I was also terrified of heaven. Forever sounded so, so long—like, frighteningly long. I assumed it was better than the alternative, but I couldn't think much about heaven without feeling rather squeamish. I wondered if God might let me skip the forever part, but it sorta sounded mandatory.

The point is, I wasn't the sort of person you'd call brave. I was good, but I wasn't brave. I was the child who never got in trouble, never got into mischief, never caused a scene. I always got gold stars, and I was never free from terror.

Most things were scary to me, especially if they involved other people. People are the worst with their scary questions and their weird expectations that you should talk to them and somehow you're just supposed to know what to say. It's all very uncomfortable.

Since my childhood, I wouldn't say that I've learned to conquer my fears. But I would say I've learned how to step out of the boat on occasion.

Part of learning how to step out of the boat has been expanding what I'm afraid of. Before I would have only been afraid of what would happen if I tried that thing. But now I'm also afraid of what I will miss if I don't try that thing. I'm afraid of what will happen if I don't do it. In the past I would only have been afraid of the consequences should I choose to challenge the status quo—people won't like me, I will upset my friends, I could lose my job. Now I am afraid of the consequences if I don't challenge the status quo—I will lose my integrity, I will have colluded with injustice, I will have denied those who are vulnerable.

It sounds counterintuitive to expand your fears, but when you survey all the fears that are available to you, suddenly the ones you were obsessing about get a whole lot smaller. I could

obsess about how scary forever in heaven sounds or I could be afraid of missing out on the life that is right in front of me. I could be scared of the storm or I could be afraid of wasting my whole life staying put on a boat.

Less than two weeks ago my friend Natalie and I started dreaming up a plot to celebrate women's voices in the pulpit. Natalie is one of my partners in courage, and we had been hearing from too many women that they weren't feeling heard and supported in their churches and seminaries. Let's do something about this, we said. So we put our feminist heads together and cooked up a women's preaching event, which we titled, *Unauthorized: Nevertheless She Preached*. At the time, it seemed brilliant and destined to succeed, but as soon as we launched and it went public, I looked up and saw the heavy winds of patriarchy and the storm gales of self-doubt and I began to sink. The event itself, mind you, is staying afloat just fine. We've attracted dynamic speakers, raised thousands of dollars, and gained attention from clergy across the country—all within days. But that didn't matter to me because suddenly all I could think about were all the things that could go wrong. I had gone leaping out of the boat gung-ho and zealous, but within seconds I was drowning in my own anxiety.

What if no one comes? What if it flops? What if no one understands why this is important? What if it's bad timing and people can't fit in their schedules? What if everyone ignores us, dismisses us as radical or reactive or emotional? What if, for the hundredth, millionth, billionth time the woman's voice goes unheeded? What if I'm just another sinking body in the countless merciless waves that topple women? What if I too am disposable? What if our work doesn't work? What if it is a lost cause? What if nothing ever changes?

I confided this panic in some friends and they all told me the same thing—that I was already brave. That even if nearly no one came, it mattered that I tried. People will come, they insisted, but that's not the only thing that matters here. What matters is that you had the courage to try it.

I wasn't so sure I believed them, but then I got to thinking about Peter and how he was like, the only guy ever to walk on water alongside Jesus, and I mean, who cares that he sunk?! The point is, he did it. Maybe it's all about which story you tell yourself once you get back in the boat—no matter what happened out there.

I get scared all the time; maybe you do too. But I keep telling myself over and over again I'm also scared of being stuck in a boat full of worries all my life. Even if I sink out there, at least I will have lived, have walked, have dared, have met with Jesus. At least I will have defied the storm rather than being defined by it. At least I will have told my own story in my own words—hopefully with a bit of Jesus' perspective woven in. At least if I sink, it will be because first I was brave. Amen?

Earlier in the week I thought the sermon would end here, but then the rains began to fall. Family of God, I want to talk to you about some very real and present storms. Maybe I'm not the only one who woke up to thunder yesterday afternoon. I know I'm not the only one who's been caught sleeping through the storms of racism. From the demonic gathering of white supremacists in Charlottesville, Virginia to the vandalism of Willow Grove Baptist Church not so far from

where we sit today, you might look out at our country and say a storm's a-brewin'. Or, if you are what they call woke, you might say storm's been raging a mighty long time.

The thing about *this* storm is, those of us who are white aren't even in the boat. We're grounded on land. We're on top of the mountain, praying to Jesus, and if we wanted to we could stay mostly oblivious to the storm clouds behind us, the people in peril beneath—after all, we're relatively safe up here where the winds of prejudice don't target. The thing about stepping out of the boat is, the choice is right in front of your face. The thing about being on land is you've got to follow Jesus out into the storm and give up your own security in order to do so. The thing about courage is, you don't wait around until you personally feel threatened. The thing about following Jesus is, Jesus walked into the storm. They call it following for a reason. You can't follow Jesus if you only ever pray from the mountain.

I don't know what courage is calling you to do in this hour, but I know that it is calling. In the midst of all the tumult, you may only catch a glimpse of that courage. You may doubt whether it really is Jesus. "Lord, if it is you, command me to come." And the ghost will reply, "I already did."

Honestly, there's no promising that you will be safe if you follow. But you will be brave, and brave is better than safe, the cross of Christ teaches us. Those who step out are never alone, for God does not remain aloof from the storm. If you want to meet God, don't stay in the boat. Walk out into the storm.

The boat is false peace. Fragile peace. Christ is real peace. Strong peace. And let there be no doubt about it, Christ is out in the storm. May we join him there and may we be brave. Amen.