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# Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Into the Storm”

The Reverend Amy Starr Redwine



The Church of the Covenant  
Presbyterian Church (USA)  
11205 Euclid Avenue  
Cleveland, Ohio 44106  
[CovenantWeb.org](http://CovenantWeb.org)

## Matthew 14:22–33

22 Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. <sup>23</sup>And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, <sup>24</sup>but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. <sup>25</sup>And early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake. <sup>26</sup>But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear. <sup>27</sup>But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'

28 Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' <sup>29</sup>He said, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus. <sup>30</sup>But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!' <sup>31</sup>Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?' <sup>32</sup>When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. <sup>33</sup>And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'

## **"Into the Storm"**

**Matthew 14:22-33**

Back in April, a raging debate played out online, in newspapers, and on talk shows when a couple with two daughters, ages one and three, had to be rescued by the Air National Guard, the Coast Guard, and the US Navy in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Eric and Charlotte Kaufman had prepared for years to sail their 36-foot boat, the Rebel Heart, from Mexico to New Zealand with their children aboard. The Rebel Heart wasn't just their boat, it was the only home they had. And Eric and Charlotte were very experienced sailors.

But out on open water, things went from bad to worse. First, a week into the trip, their one year-old daughter broke out in a full-body rash. Then, she started running a fever and acting lethargic. They called a doctor on their satellite phone, who told them to start an antibiotic. But after two days on the medicine, she hadn't improved. Then, they hit some bad weather, which is just a part of sailing and not necessarily a big deal, but in this case, the waves battering the boat caused some breaks in its hull and they began to take on water. Then, their satellite phone completely and inexplicably stopped working. Their long-range radio had been sitting in water for days and when they tried to send a signal with it, they heard nothing back — either because it wasn't working or because no one was close enough to hear. At this point, the only way they could get help was to push a button on a device that would send an emergency distress signal to maritime authorities who coordinate a rescue.

Pushing that button was a big deal, because it meant they would lose their boat, their only home. But after running through the details of their situation and making sure there was nothing else they could do to turn things around, Eric and Charlotte made the most difficult decision of their lives. They called for help. It was a devastating decision to make, but it was the only decision they could make, because they knew their daughter needed medical attention. She's fine now, by the way. What the Kaufmans didn't anticipate was the criticism that was unleashed upon them when they returned to dry land. People all over the country lambasted their choice to take such young children on an expedition where so many things could go wrong. It was one

thing for Eric and Charlotte to take such a risk for themselves, but how dare they put their kids at risk!<sup>1</sup>

It's a good thing that there was no internet, no Facebook, no Twitter, no blogs, no smart phones, and no tablets in Jesus' day. Imagine the criticism he would have been subjected to. Just last week we heard that he kept thousands of people out in the wilderness at dinnertime with no plan to feed them. If he hadn't worked that miracle the criticism would have been intense. In today's story, right after that incident, Jesus sends everyone away. The English says he "made" the disciples get into their boat and leave, but the original Greek is even stronger, more along the lines of compelling them, commanding them, demanding that they go. If the crowds who watched him send the disciples away had had smart phones, I can't help but think at least some of them would have immediately been tweeting about the incident with more than a little suspicion: "All this healing makes Jesus cranky. #worklifebalance." What does Jesus think he's doing? #somesavior." "@Jesus, next time, read the weather report. #stormcoming."

Indeed, the disciples, out on the boat as the evening turns to night, end up in a raging windstorm. When the fog begins to lift in the early morning light, they see something. Everyone is sure it must be a ghost, since it appears to be a man walking toward them on the water. When the apparition speaks, they realize it's not a ghost, it's Jesus. Peter — always the challenger — wants to try that walking on water trick, and Jesus agrees. "Come on in," he says. Peter puts one foot down, then another, his heart pounding, his mind racing — how can this be? how is this possible? I'm doing it, I'm actually walking on the water! — until a gust of wind blows and he realizes how crazy this is and the moment is lost and he sinks.

He sinks, but those few improbable steps on the water change everything.

In her book on contemplative spirituality, Phileena Heuertz writes that "at the time of conversion [to Christianity] we orient our lives by the question 'What can I do for God?'" No matter how mundane or dramatic our faith

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<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Medina, "2 Tots, a Sailboat and a Storm over Parenting," *The New York Times*, April 7, 2014. Hear the Kaufmans' side of the story here: <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/525/call-for-help>

journey has been, there is a moment in the life of nearly every Christian when we claim our faith as our own and declare our willingness to live in a whole new way, to live for God. And when that happens, we naturally ask “What can I do for God?”

That is the question we ask when we claim our faith for our own. But at some point, Heuertz goes one to say, the question changes. As we move forward in our life with God, as we follow the path of our spiritual journey, then our lives begin to orient around a different question: “What can God do for me?”

This may sound selfish, but that’s not how Heuertz means it. This question is not about what we can get from God, it’s about how God can completely transform our lives. Heuertz writes, “This is the central question of a humble person who has awakened to her true self and to the awe-inspiring adoration of an extraordinary God.”<sup>2</sup>

What can God do for me?

In truth, this is a question few of us ever ask in all seriousness. Why? Well, first of all, because when things are going well for us, we think we can handle our lives just fine ourselves, thank you very much. Let’s face it: like the Kaufmans, who did everything they possibly could to avoid sending that emergency distress signal, we don’t want to ask for help from anyone, and perhaps especially from God, unless we are truly desperate. But the second reason we don’t want to ask the question “what can God do for me” is because it reminds us that we are not the self-sufficient people we like to think we are. We are fallible, fragile and *vulnerable*. To ask what God can do for me is to expose my vulnerability and admit my need for God. To ask what can God do for me is to risk being completely transformed.

And let’s face it: few of us actually want that.

After a scary night on a boat in a storm, Peter sees Jesus walking on the water. In a moment of vulnerability, he decides to try it himself. This is Peter’s shift from asking “What can I do for God?” to asking “What can God do for me?” And for those few steps, until what he’s doing sinks in, he defies reason and physics, and discovers that with God, he can do incredible things.

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<sup>2</sup> Phileena Heuertz, *Pilgrimage of a Soul*, InterVarsity Press, 2010, p. 14.

But first, of course, he had to step out of the boat and onto the water. First, he had to take a risk.

If you've seen a playground lately, especially one built in the last twenty-five years, you know that we have gone to great lengths to reduce the risks to which our children are exposed. These days, playground structures are made of thick rubbery material that has some give to it. This includes the ground, which could barely skin a knee. Gone are the days of aluminum slides which got so hot in the sun you had to fly down them as fast as possible. And when is the last time you saw a see-saw, the ones that could cause you to practically bite your tongue off if your partner got off unexpectedly and you went flying? Don't get me wrong: keeping our kids safe is a good thing and playgrounds have been subjected to strict safety standards for good reason. But it's come at a cost. Science has shown us that children have a biological, evolutionary need to take risks and feel fear. When children take a risk, feel fear, and get through it, they learn what they are capable of and they often overcome their fears...even to the degree that children who face fears early on tend to be less fearful as adults than children who never take risks.

Think of the kinds of risks it might actually be beneficial for children to take and begin to overcome their fears of: heights, speed, water, fire, handling tools, and exploring on their own — yes, even at the risk of getting lost.

Speaking as a parent here, I can hardly think of the last time I let my children take those kinds of risks — at least not when I wasn't standing right there in case something went wrong. Aren't we supposed to ensure our children's safety at all cost? But one researcher reminds us that "When children are left alone and can take full responsibility for their actions, and the consequences of their decisions, it's a thrilling experience." And apparently not only thrilling, but actually character-building in a way that will serve them well later in life.<sup>3</sup>

Maybe Jesus knew what he was doing after all when he compelled his followers to get into that little boat and sent them out into a storm. Yes, they had to fight hard all night long to keep their boat afloat. Yes, it was an

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<sup>3</sup> Hannah Rosin, "The Overprotected Kid." *The Atlantic*, March 19, 2014. Online: <http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2014/03/hey-parents-leave-those-kids-alone/358631/>

exhausting and terrifying experience. But when morning came and they saw Jesus walking on the water toward them, Peter had gained the confidence to try walking on water too.

Our life of faith is not supposed to be free of hardship and suffering, and it is certainly not meant to be free of risk. Jesus does not call us to come in out of the storm and sit down to rest by a warm and cozy fire; he sends us into the storm to face the wind and the waves — all the challenges of our lives and the terrible injustices of our world. You can spend your faith journey simply asking what you can do for God, and that journey can be just fine. You can measure it by how often you attend worship or the amount of money you give away or the number of committees you serve on. But I don't think God cares much about those things. God is more interested in what God can do for you — where God can send you that you never imagined you'd go; what task God can give you that you didn't in a million years think you could do; who God can call you to stand up for that you never thought you'd defend.

After Eric and Charlotte Kaufmans' dramatic rescue at sea, as the debate about their choices raged in the media, a parenting blogger for the *New York Times* reflected on how this story had profoundly affected her. "I'm far too anxious," she wrote, "...to ever make the kinds of choices that the Kaufmans have made, but when I read about their journey, and even about its ending, I envy them all the things that let them do it, from the courage to take physical risks and defy expectations...to the skill, confidence and sheer willingness to work and endure... Those are the parents [their children] have; those are qualities [their children] will gain. If blind optimism and a certain sense of hubris are also part of the package, well, there are worse faults, and maybe one of them is spending more time dreaming of adventure than experiencing it, particularly if it includes sheltering our children from experiencing any risk at all."<sup>4</sup>

Fortunately for us, we do not worship a God who shelters us or prevents us from taking risks. To the contrary, our God invites — sometimes even compels — each one of us into the storm. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> KJ Dell'Antonia, "Judge the 'Rebel Heart' Sailboat Parents, or Envy Them?" *The New York Times*, April 7, 2014.



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Cleveland, Ohio 44106  
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