

Title: I Quit Playing Safe
Text: Matthew 14: 24-32
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Preacher: Rev Stu Cameron

Last November I sat in the board room with most of the ministry team. We were meeting with our insurers who had requested that we go through a risk profiling exercise for the various ministries of our church. This was one of those meetings you dream of when you are preparing for ministry.

Over the course of a few hours we shared with them about the many and varied activities of our community. At various points their eyes widened as we shared about Rahab, where volunteers enter brothels to minister to girls, or how we prepare more than 300 meals every week on our Crossroads ministry. They wrote and typed even more furiously when we confessed – shock-horror - that we've had skateboard ramps and jumping castles at Youthstreet every Friday night. Now don't get me wrong; as a church we take managing risk seriously – and after the exercise I mentioned our insurers commended us for the care we take.

But I came away lamenting that we live in a safety obsessed, risk adverse society where we try to bubble wrap and cotton wool all the adventure out of life.

This obsession with safety has led to some quite bizarre warnings on every day products, like this one:

Photo of Microwave

Here are some other actual warning labels that in stating the bleeding obvious also reveal our obsession with safety above all else:

Hairdryer: Do not use while sleeping.

iPod Shuffle: Do not eat iPod Shuffle.

Clothes Iron: Do not direct steam at animals or people or iron clothes while they are being worn.

Superman Costume: Wearing of this garment does not enable you to fly.

This obsession with safety in the broader community has infected the church. Too many of us have a 'safety first' approach to our relationship with God.

We never take a God-inspired risk in any area of life – our finances, relationships, service, career – whatever. We bubble wrap our lives into a safe and secure cocoon.

But Jesus came that we might experience life in all its fullness. Jesus offered his life so we could experience abundant life in all its Technicolor, surround sound, multi-sensory fullness. Jesus says this of his own mission:

I came that they may have *and* enjoy life, and have it in abundance (to the full, till it overflows).
(John 10:10 Amplified)

We're not to wait for this life until after death, but to experience it in the here and now, in the everyday stuff of everyday life.

We don't experience life after death so much as life that leads to life.

This abundant life Jesus promises is found on the other side of faith where daily we place our lives in the hands of Jesus as our Lord and Saviour and as we seek to do his will.

There is a paradoxical danger in playing it safe in life. To illustrate, I want you to answer a hypothetical question for me. Imagine for a moment I asked you to travel from here down to the beach, a distance of a few kilometers, and do this every

day for the foreseeable future. For this hypothetical journey you have three travel choices; driving a car, riding a bike with a helmet on, or riding a bike with no helmet. Here is my question; which of those three choices would be the safest?

If your answer was that the safest way to get to the beach was to ride a bike without a helmet, you would be right. No kidding!

This week I read a fascinating book, 'How to Live Dangerously.' At one point the author summarizes extensive research that tells us what we already know:

Cycling in traffic carries a risk of death and serious injury eleven times greater than making the same journey by car.

So why would riding your bike to the beach every day be safer than driving your car? That's because people who cycle every day halve their risk of heart disease. In fact, studies show that far more cyclists live and are extended by exercise than are lost through accidents. The research shows:

The years of life gained through improved fitness due to regular cycling outweigh the years lost in cycling accidents by twenty to one.

Wow! But what about the helmet; surely wearing one makes your trip safer. Again, the research shows that when cyclists wear helmets, motorists drive much, much closer to them – having more collisions. And cyclists themselves when they wear helmets, take far more risks, thinking that the helmet will protect them. With a helmet, some cyclists think they are in control of their environment. Cyclists without a helmet on ride more defensively, and motorists take more care around them. They take more care; they have less accidents.

The safest way to get from here to Mermaid Beach is riding a bike. In traffic. Without a helmet.

What's my point? It's this; there is something inherently dangerous about playing it safe. Some of us have taken a 'safety first' approach to our relationship with God. We put our helmet on, trying to control our environment, never taking a risk, never stepping out in faith, never exercising ourselves spiritually. And the result is sad and tragic; weak, anemic and malnourished faith. Many of us are spiritually frustrated; sensing that the abundant life Jesus promised is always just out of reach.

Life is not a risk to be managed but an adventure to be lived. So as we enter this New Year continuing our I Quit series, perhaps God is calling some of us at least to Quit Playing Safe. Perhaps God is calling us to let go of any obsession with safety, comfort or security in order that we might embrace the adventurous and full life that is the promise of faith. Perhaps God is calling us to take off our helmets and live dangerously.

To explore how this might be possible we are going to dig into a well known story from Matthew's Gospel. Let me set the scene for you. Jesus and his disciples are in the middle of an amazing ministry journey in the region of Galilee in northern Israel. Thousands are flocking to hear Jesus teach. Hundreds have been miraculously healed. Jesus is a sensation. Just before we take up the story, after teaching all day, Jesus miraculously feeds 5000 men and thousands of women and children with five loaves and two fish. Afterwards he draws aside for prayer, sending the disciples to the other side of the lake in a boat. Darkness descends and the disciples find themselves in a small boat in the middle of the lake being buffeted by the wind and waves of one of the many stormy squalls that sweep across the water. Let's read what happens:

The boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear.

But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

"Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water."

"Come," he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!"

Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?"

And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."
(Matthew 14:24-32)

There are a number of things we can learn from this passage. Let's work through it from start to finish. First, as for the disciples on the lake, in life we can:

Expect storms

The Sea of Galilee is actually a moderately sized lake with mountains to the north and hills to the east and west. It sits in a basin where it was common for squalls and storms to roll in off the slopes, often with little warning. Matthew tells us the disciples were rowing against the wind, and had been doing so for nine hours or so and had made little progress. The Greek word translated as buffeted literally means harassed; the disciples were harassed by the waves.

Let's get the bad news on the table right up front. Like the disciples, we will often find ourselves rowing against the wind, harassed by the waves. This is true for all of us:

You are in a storm, just come out of a storm, or are about to enter a storm.

We should expect storms for two reasons. One, we live in a world marred by brokenness and sin; ours and others. The storms we suffer are the consequences of our sin, the sin of others or the brokenness of our world.

Two, Jesus says that if we are serious about following him, we should expect even more violent storms than normal. In John's gospel he tells his followers that in this world they will have trouble – that they will experience storms. You see, as Christians, we march to the beat of a different drum – we listen for and obey the voice of a different master – and this will increasingly put us at odds with the world we live in. We are in this world, but we are not of it. Christians – perhaps more than anyone else - should expect storms.

It's just before dawn, sometime between 3am and 6am. After hours of rowing against the wind and with waves washing over the bow of their boat, the disciples are cold, wet and exhausted. It's then that they see what at first they think is an apparition – a ghost coming to them across the water. It made sense; the common belief was that the sea was home to a myriad of evil spirits.

But it's not a ghost; it's Jesus. Here's the thing:

Jesus does not abandon us to the storm; he comes to us in the midst of it.

Some of you are right in the middle of a storm right now. You don't know where the money is going to come from to pay the bills. You're not sure whether the marriage will survive, or if your health will ever recover. No matter what storm you may find yourself in, more than anything else this morning you need to hear this:

Jesus has not abandoned you to the storm; he walks through the wind and the waves just to be with you in the midst of it. And as he said to the disciples, he says to you:

Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid.

If we have ears to hear:

Jesus' voice can always be heard above the fury of the wind and the waves.

Peter hears Jesus' voice, but he is still unsure that it's really him. And so he responds to Jesus' call to take courage by throwing out the crazy-brave challenge for Jesus to invite him out on the water with him. And Jesus simply says, 'Come'.

Now in my mind's eye I have always pictured this scene with Peter tentatively getting out of the boat, taking that first hesitant step and then gently splashing across millpond still water – a bit like a barefoot skier. But that's not how it happened. The sea was not glass; it was a surging, unpredictable crucible of wind and waves. The sea was dangerous enough inside a boat, let alone out in the open water. But with the wind howling and the waves crashing, crazy-brave Peter stepped out towards Jesus into the teeth of storm.

The conditions are never right to step out of the boat.

Just after we were married Sue and I led a youth group in the suburbs of Adelaide. It was such a rich time for us as we saw the group grow and grow and dozens of kids, mostly from non-Christian homes, come to faith. A couple of times a year we would have a pool party. We would take 50-60 kids to someone's home and have a swim. Nathaniel Stone was one of those kids. Nathaniel would always be one of the first to jump in the water, but only after he did one thing. Fifteen year old Nathaniel would always bring a pool thermometer with him, dangling on the end of a string. Before he jumped in, he would drop it in the water, take a reading – and if it was above 20 degrees Celsius, then – and only then – he would jump in. The conditions had to be just right before we would jump.

Many of us have heard Jesus call us to take a step of faith, but tragically have not responded, often with the excuse 'The conditions aren't right – it's not the right time.' We put off taking that first step onto the water to 'some day' when the temperature is right.

'Some day I will trust God with my finances by giving him first and my best, but first I need to pay off the mortgage, or top up my super or have that holiday, or...'

'Some day I will forgive that person who hurt me so badly, but first I am going to make them sweat a little, to pay...'

'Some day I will invite my friend to church, but what if they say no? I don't want to risk our friendship...'

If we wait for the right time, for perfect conditions we will never trust God with our finances, forgive those who hurt us or share Jesus with a friend, or take any other step of faith he calls us to take. In Ecclesiastes, Solomon says this:

Whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap.
(Ecclesiastes 11:4)

The Living Bible translates the same verse succinctly and to the point:

If you wait for perfect conditions, you will never get anything done.
(The Living Bible)

Many of us here this morning are suffering from malnourished faith; faith that hasn't been adequately exercised or fed for a long, long time. We have been obsessed with playing it safe, with never taking a risk that may lead to failure, but also may lead to a grace-fuelled adventure. It's only as we step out of the safety and comfort of the boat onto the uncertainty of the

waves that we will ever have the chance to cry out in praise, 'Only God!' George Muller was one of the greatest men of faith of the 19th century. He said this:

Faith does not operate in the realm of the possible. Faith begins where man's power ends.
(George Muller)

When did you last have an 'only God' experience? If you can't remember when, or even if you've had one at all, then it's time to quit playing safe and step out of the boat. Our lives should drip with 'only God' testimonies. And they will if, and only if, we allow for 'only God' opportunities.

Today is the day to quit playing safe. Today is the day to:

Smash the Thermometer.

Today is the day to obsessing about the right conditions and instead listen for the Right Voice. Mike Pilivachi puts it this way:

Jesus called out to the disciples from the water, not the safety of the boat. We don't wait for perfect conditions. We wait for his voice.
(Mike Pilivachi)

The Apostle Paul, whose story was an incredible example of the abundant, adventurous life Jesus promises his followers, put it simply this way:

We walk by faith, not by sight.
(2 Corinthians 5:7)

It's time to quit playing safe. It's time to smash our thermometers, take off our helmets, lift our eyes, open our ears and listen for his voice. As we do, we must remember this:

The boat will always look better than the water.

No matter how cold, wet and tired Peter was, there were far more reasons for him to stay in the boat than there were to step out. And that is often the way. Often we will here God call us into a new adventure, but when we look around at where we are already we can name plenty of reasons not to move.

On New Year's Eve I visited the Pilinaros family. On New Year's day Bill and Olga and the kids flew out to Hawaii for six months training before, God willing, beginning long term ministry as a missionary family somewhere in the developing world. We go together to pray on the decking at the back of their house, the pool below and water beyond that. It was a Gold Coast perfect scene. Before we prayed Bill told me that his accountant had said to him a few weeks earlier, 'Bill, you have just had your most successful year ever in business. Why would you leave all this behind?' The German theologian Karl Barth said that:

Comfort is one of the great siren calls of our age.
(Karl Barth)

Adventurous faith is shipwrecked on the rocks of comfort.

The boat Bill and Olga and the kids have just left behind is very, very comfortable and secure. But still they stepped out.

Why, because they chose to trust and obey the voice of Jesus. They have trusted an unknown future to a known God.

Even after sensing God call us, some of us fail to take a step of faith because we grieve what we might lose in the process – friends, finances, position – whatever. More often than not when we hear the call of the God, the boat will be far more attractive than the water. In those moments may this reminder of CS Lewis resound in our hearts:

There are far better things ahead than any we leave behind.
(CS Lewis)

Bill and Olga stepped out of the boat, and so did Peter. In one, life-defining moment Peter decided to abandon all other securities other than God. As he stepped out of the boat, he would have known this could all end badly. But still he put one foot after the other into the water.

Faith risks failure.

Perhaps even more radically, faith embraces the likelihood of failure. But faith sees beyond failure to the victories and miracles possible only when we step out of the boat.

Can you imagine the terrified exhilaration that Peter would have felt as he felt his feet splash across the surface of the water? Only God!

Someone put it this way:

Faith is like this: First you put your foot, then God sets the floor.

God set the floor for Peter, and as a result his feet splashed across the waves. But then in the middle of the miracle Peter takes his eyes off Jesus and his senses are overwhelmed by the roar of the wind and the spray of the waves.

The moment Peter's vision was filled with his circumstances rather than Jesus he began to sink. If you are going to walk on water:

Don't look down; look up.

For who we look is more important than where we look. Peter's one and only mistake was to take his eyes off Jesus.

After offering a roll call of Old Testament characters - like Rahab, Noah and Abraham - who in their own way stepped out of the boat in faith, the writer of Hebrews challenges us this way:

Therefore...let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.
(Hebrews 12:1-2)

As we keep our eyes steadfastly fixed on Jesus, we will not sink. The wind may howl, the waves may crash, but our God is greater than the wind and the waves; our God is greater than our circumstances and as we fix our eyes on him we have victory over all circumstances - every storm. Hallelujah!

Matthew tells us that Peter's eyes drifted from Jesus and he became transfixed by the power and fury of the wind, and began to sink beneath the waves. He cries out in desperation, 'Jesus, save me!'

Immediately, straight away and without hesitation that is what Jesus does. He stretches out a hand of rescue to Peter and lifts him back into the boat. Quoting the prophet Joel, Paul reminds us in Romans:

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.
(Romans 10:13)

Jesus does not abandon Peter to his failure, instead by grace he saves him.

As we risk a life of adventurous faith, we face the likelihood of times of drowning under the weight of external circumstances and/or our personal failures. But while:

Failure is inevitable; Grace even more so.

The prophet Isaiah promises this:

Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear.
(Isaiah 59:1)

Grace is the underserved, unearned, unmerited favour of God.

Grace is God extending his arm again and again to save us as we sink beneath the weight of our own failure.

It's grace that enables us to step out of the boat in the first place.

It's grace that empowers us to walk on water.

And it's grace that rescues us when we fail – again and again and again.

God's grace is a well that never runs dry.

The great reformer Martin Luther said this:

Faith is a living, daring, confidence in God's grace.
(Martin Luther)

Peter failed when he took his eye off Jesus and began to sink under the waves. But Jesus rescues him from his failure. This was not the first, nor would it be the last time. Between Jesus' arrest and crucifixion, Peter denies Jesus three times and begins to drown in a sea of shame and guilt. But Jesus rescues him with words of grace and forgiveness. Peter failed again and again. You could say he was a spectacular failure. But he was also an exemplar of faith. This water walking failure was the rock on which Jesus built this, and every church. Commenting on Peter's story, John Ortberg says this:

The worst failure is not to sink beneath the waves. The worst failure is to never get out of the boat.
(John Ortberg)

God's grace transformed Peter's tests into triumphs; his trials into testimonies. Winston Churchill said that:

Success is stumbling from failure to failure with no loss of enthusiasm.
(Winston Churchill)

Peter was a successful failure all because – only because – of the grace of God.

Jesus walks on water, calms the storm and rescues the drowning. He is the Son of God.

Jesus has power over all that we fear.