

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“We Make the Road by Walking: Train Wrecks”
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Genesis 3:1-13

Philippians 2:3-11

I can see a train wreck coming a hundred miles away. It's just how my mind works. I'm on the lookout for opposing forces, objects on a collision course. In my childhood, the train wrecks were often between my parents and one of my siblings. Or between friends. As I got older, I predicted relationship wrecks and watched out for the speeding trains of world forces.

When you see the world this way, you can't help but react to it. Sometimes I would duck for cover and hide my eyes until the wreck was cleared away. Sometimes I'd breathe a sigh of relief if the trains happened to miss each other or change course. But much of the time, I'd try to head off the wreck. Which is why I wish I could have been there in the Garden of Eden. We've read this story so many times, it's become so familiar. I know Cindy Judson's favorite lines.

The train wreck seems almost inevitable. The crafty serpent putting poisonous possibilities into Eve's mind. Sharing the fruit like a drug dealer offering a free first hit. And the terrible knowledge, the hiding and shame. Then train number two comes walking in the garden, expecting to see open rails ahead. Instead, BAM, it collides with a train made of fig leaves and snake skin and there's blood and toil and dust all over the place.

But maybe I could have headed off the wreck, talked Eve and Adam out of this disastrous mistake with such long-standing consequences. Intervened before the snake got his slick ideas into Eve's head. Defended the fruit of the tree with walls or weapons. Don't we all wish we could stop the train wrecks? The collision of warring factions. The disaster of a friend and an abusive partner. The impact of our son and heroin. We wish we could intervene, put on the breaks, even jump in front of the train to stop it sometimes.

Ultimately, the train wreck we most want to stop is the one we are about to be a part of. The forces within us that drive us on toward disaster, toward self-destruction. All that fuel that we keep piling on, going faster, heating up the engine, shearing off the breaks; all the blind turns we take; all the signals we miss. Most of us know, on some level or at some time, that we are trains on a collision course with despair, loneliness, meaninglessness, fear, anger, and self-hatred. And boy, do we wish we could head off that wreck.

Much as I'd like to think I have the power to stop the train, change the course, even sacrifice myself to stop the wreck, I learn time and time again, crash after crash, that I don't have that power. I can't stop the serpent, or Eve and Adam, or God. I can't stop time or age or disease. I can't stop anger or fear or hatred or greed. But how can I stand idly by watching the trains, hearing the whistles blow as they barrel down the tracks toward each other? It seems like there must be something I can do, some intervention, some force I can apply to change the disastrous course we call life. It seems like it's something I should do. After all, Jesus conducted the diseased onto the track of healing, the outcast onto the track of community, the whole of creation onto the track of salvation. It seems like that's what we should be about.

But then we look at what happened to his own train. Jesus, who was in the form of God, who had all the power to halt the forces of geopolitics and religious fanaticism and mob mentality and violent brutality, chose not to. The only one, really, who had the ability to stop the train, change the track, even suspend the natural forces of

physics – that one decided not to. He wasn't impotent, like you and me. He chose to empty out the luggage car, throw out the emergency break, take off all the safety controls and ride that train right into the cross.

Jesus had no interest in preventing a wreck. In fact, there was no greater wreck in history. If you read the gospels, you can see the wreck coming. Jewish zealot, getting people excited with healing and miracles and even resurrecting the dead. Train #1. Roman empire, beleaguered by uprisings while trying to move forward with plans for expansion and building, bringing law and order and civilized society to barbaric lands and people. The Pax Romana. Train #2.

But Jesus sees it coming the whole time. He keeps telling his disciples, this train is coming. This wreck is going to be messy. But if they see it, they ignore it. Or they try to stop it. Change the track. Put the breaks on the Jesus movement. Or jump off the train. They do all these things. And so do we. We pretend we don't see our neighbor's suspicious black eye. We re-rout our Google map to avoid that neighborhood we'd rather not drive through. We pencil things in so we can erase our commitments without guilt, choose another track or hop another train if this one looks like it's in trouble. We do everything we can to avoid the train wreck that is our lives, our neighborhoods, our world.

Why doesn't Jesus?

Because his wreck destroys the train barreling down the track toward each of us. The power of sin and death, the power of broken desires and broken relationships, the power of forbidden fruit and sinister suggestions collides with the power of love and goodness and righteousness. And the wreck is ugly and awful. Twisted scraps of a failed uprising. Mangled pieces of messianic hope. Dreams charred beyond recognition. The howl of forsakenness. Metal piercing flesh. The impact is nothing short of catastrophic.

Those who tried to stop the wreck or jump overboard didn't fare too much better. Perhaps they avoided that wreck of the cross, but they hopped on trains of self-loathing, regret, and despair. More wrecks in the making. Judas collided with his greed, Pilot with his unanswered questions, Peter with his self-recrimination.

And yet...

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Jesus somehow walks away from the wreck. He is not unscathed. No, he is scarred. He is transformed. He is sometimes unrecognizable. But he walks away from the wreck of the cross and gets on the train to glory with that wreck still smoking on the tracks. And this is our impossible hope. Hope that, out of a wreck of a marriage, walks a new love that lasts a lifetime. That out of the wreck of a job loss comes the finding of a meaningful vocation. That out of the wreckage of a miscarriage comes a family that exceeds any possible expectations.

We hold onto this hope because the truth is, no matter how we try, we can't avoid train wrecks. We can't head them off for those we love. And what Jesus came to show us is that he is there in the wreck with us. He is on the train, and he will ride it into whatever wrecks we encounter. And with the help of God, we will walk away from those wrecks. Not unscathed. Probably transformed. Perhaps even unrecognizable. But in all the smoke and rubble, Jesus is there, and with him, there is hope we will walk away from the wreck.

And that is what we are called to do for others as well. Use that judgement of good and evil we so tragically gained in the garden of Eden to decide which trains could use another passenger. Instead of avoiding those

trains we judge to be on a collision course, perhaps we are called to hop on board. Perhaps we are called to be the Body of Christ heading into those wrecks.

Instead of dodging that train carrying our neighbor with the black eye, maybe we need to hop on board. She may not listen to you when you tell her she ought to leave, pull the break on this situation. But she may let you loan her an ice pack, and listen to her story, and maybe even be there when he gets home from work, just in case it's been a bad day. And when the train wreck comes, you might be the one she runs to, the one who helps her find her way on her own, put the pieces of her life back together. You may be the one to help her walk away from that wreck.

Instead of choosing the rout that avoids the crime-ridden neighborhood, maybe we need to buy a ticket strait into the heart of it. Not so we can ferry in the crews to clean it up for our comfort, but so we can ride alongside the residents, hear their stories and challenges and ideas for solutions. It may need us drive in and bring our business rather than going around it and avoiding it. And when the train wreck comes, we might be the ones who understand the dynamics and know the people and can help bring healing and reconciliation and constructive dialogue. We may be the ones to help them walk away from that wreck.

Those penciled-in commitments and hop-on-hop-off trains are not what we're called to. We are called to stay on the train. Whether that train belongs to us, our neighbor, our community, or our world, we are called to ride it straight into whatever wrecks are ahead, whether we see them coming or not, trusting that the God who desires to create and bless and bring life, the God who brought life out of death in Jesus Christ, will be at the very center of each of those wrecks and will walk with us, scarred and transformed, away from them. To God be the glory forever and ever. Amen.