

There Has Been A Wreck!

a sermon by Pastor D. Thomas Ford, Jr.
Salem Lutheran Church
Glendale, CA
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Philippians 2:

[5] Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,
[6] who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,
[7] but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.
[8] And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

John 19:

[17] So they took Jesus, and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called the place of a skull, which is called in Hebrew Gol'gotha.
[18] There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them.

Matthew 27:

[46] And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, la'ma sabach-tha'ni?" that is, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

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There has been a wreck!

It happened in a rain storm when I was 16. I had permission to drive the family car to pick up my date, take her to the confirmation banquet at my church and then take her to her home and then return to my home. "Don't go anywhere else," my Dad said. Well, instead of taking my date home, your future Interim Pastor and his date decided to drive 9 miles to a nearby town to visit a high school teacher who was close to having a baby. We wanted to take her a present. I drove; we delivered the present and then started home. It was raining very hard. I was in the far right lane of a 4-lane highway, two lanes in each direction. Up ahead in the inside lane going in my same southerly direction was a car, poking along. I decided to pass it on the right. I blew my horn and flicked my lights to let them know I was going to pass. All very legal. The wreck

occurred when, as I got just a foot ahead of the car's rear left side, the car's deaf driver made a sharp right turn in front of me. We collided mightily. Fortunately no one was hurt. I went to a nearby house to call the Highway Patrol. The officer came and did his thing – take everyone's version of what happened, measure and sweep glass and write everything up. My date and I were nervous wrecks. The car was drivable. No one got a ticket. I took my date to her home and started driving to mine. I worried. What is Dad going to say? I just knew he would kill me. He didn't. Nor did he scold me or preach to me. He said he was glad no one was hurt. He said I would have to pay for the repairs out of my college savings. I went to bed. I don't know, but I think Dad sat up half the night trying to calm down.

Have you ever been in a wreck? Many wrecks don't turn out as well as the ones I have been in. Often people are killed. Or in daylight you are driving along and you see a wreath placed where someone died. Or you come upon an accident at night and you see blue and red lights flashing and experience traffic backed up for miles and have to wait and inch along for what seems an eternity. And when you are finally up beside the crushed steel and see the blood on the road and the stretcher being lifted into the ambulance, you sigh, "I'm so glad it wasn't us."

Tonight we have come upon a wreck scene. We stretch our necks to see for ourselves what happened. At this Cross + roads. Whose fault was it? Could anything have been done to prevent it? Such a young, innocent Life cut down so senselessly!

The eyewitnesses all give us different kinds of details about the wreck of The Cross. All the witnesses agree Jesus died. They agree two other people died near the same time at the same wreck. They all saw a plate on Jesus' vehicle that read, "King of The Jews". They all agree bystanders divided up Jesus' clothing. They all agree someone offered Jesus some stale wine. They all agree Jesus died around 3 p.m. on the day before the Sabbath. Beyond these agreed-upon details, each eye witness has unique details to provide. For example, the witness Luke is the only one who tells us Jesus talks to the other two men dying at the scene. And only John says nothing at all about Simon of Cyrene. And there are many other unique statements given to the investigating officers.

Some people turned their heads away as the wreck was occurring and refused to watch. One woman told me when she watched Mel Gibson's movie she couldn't bare to watch the nails driven into him, so she covered her eyes until it was over.

When did you come upon the wreck scene? What did you see? What did you hear? When you come upon the wreck scene now these 2000 years later, what do you see? What do you hear?

We were told we could eat of any tree in the garden except the one named The Tree of The Knowledge of Good and Evil. We proceeded to drive to that tree and take a big bite. We can make it home in time. No one will ever find out. And we had a wreck. Oh yes, we do our best to explain what happened. But, I just know Dad is going to kill me. And we are nervous wrecks. Someone could have been killed and it could have been us!

When you come upon the wreck scene of The Cross now these 2000 years later, what do you see? What do you hear?

Yes, it was ugly alright. Obscene even. One Salem member asked me this week, “Pastor, why could God not have saved us without Jesus’ having to suffer and die?” In other words, why did this wreck occur in the way that it did? Did God program it this way into “the plan” so that it was unavoidable?

The greatest problem you and I will ever have to deal with in this life is our own mortality and the pain and suffering and death and grief that accompany it. If Jesus cannot identify with that by going through it himself and showing us it can be done with courage and hope and healing, I want no part of him.

You know, this humanity business we’re all involved in is so often a living wreck scene. Wars. Suicide bombers. Terrorist religious fanatics overseas and at home. Children murdering children. Epidemic methamphetamine labs. Crazy gunmen snuffing out lives at universities. Young children being kidnapped sexually abused and suffocated.

What kind of Savior-Redeemer do you think it takes to make it all better? One who has suffered the worst wreck of all time? Or one who is allergic to flesh and blood?

As Mother Taylor puts it, “Why him, why this, why today? I wish I knew. All I know is that, because of it, none of us ever has to feel what he felt again. Because he was all alone, and we have his company. At our most hurt, our most frightened, our most forsaken by God, we have this companion who has been there and will be there with us. Nothing we think or do in this state can shock him. Nothing we can say can make him turn away. If we say, ‘Where are you, God? I’m all alone here,’ he said it first. If all we can do is cry out, he cried out first.”

“It sounds for all the world like the end of faith. Instead, it is the beginning. This Jesus died talking to his Abba, who would not talk back to him. Is there any other definition of faith? In his suffering, he is the comfort of those who have no comfort. In his abandonment, he is the God of those who have no God. Hearing no voice of love, he cried out, making a sound that—for many—became the voice of love.”¹

I didn’t know what to think that night in 1963 when I got home. I expected Dad to explode. He came out to see the wrecked 1955 Ford with the hood all smashed in and the headlights knocked out. He spoke very softly. He was glad no one was hurt. And I would have to pay for the repairs out of my college savings. Then he became very quiet. And said nothing more. I would have felt relieved if he had exploded. He was silent. I just knew he was going to kill me. When I went to bed I saw him sitting in a rocking chair, rocking, chewing his tobacco.

¹ “The Voice of Love,” p. 85, in Home by Another Way, Barbara Brown Taylor, Cowley Publications, Boston, MA, 1999.

I couldn't figure him out. I had had a wreck. He was entitled to explode. He didn't.

God sent the Son. We ran into him and killed him in the worst wreck of all time. God was entitled to explode. God would have been justified to kill us all on the spot. God didn't. That Friday night God didn't say a thing. Nothing. God said nothing about who was going to pay for what. It was total silence.

Later a witness to The Wreck named Charles Wesley had this to say:

'Tis mystery all: th'Immortal dies:
 Who can explore His strange design?
 In vain the firstborn seraph tries
 To sound the depths of love divine.
 'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore,
 Let angel minds inquire no more.
 'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore;
 Let angel minds inquire no more.
 He left His Father's throne above
 So free, so infinite His grace—
 Emptied Himself of all but love,
 And bled for Adam's helpless race:
 'Tis mercy all, immense and free,
 For O my God, it found out me!
 'Tis mercy all, immense and free,
 For O my God, it found out me!²

² Words: *Charles Wesley, Psalms and Hymns, 1738.*