

TRAIN FOR THE KINGDOM

SHERARD EDINGTON

Mark 4:35-41

Vacation Bible School kicks off tomorrow. All this week, dedicated volunteers have spent hour after hour decorating and planning and getting everything ready for when the kids arrive tomorrow night. The theme for this year's VBS is **Rocky Railway**, and through the week we are going to explore the different ways that Jesus watches out for us. We are going to look at the story of how Ananias helped Paul even though Paul was an enemy of all Christians. We will explore the story of Paul surviving a shipwreck by calling on his faith. We will examine the account of Peter and John healing a man and then teaching the people about Christ. It will be a powerful week.

I will ask that through the week that you keep us all in your prayers—prayers of thanksgiving for the adults who have brought all of this together, prayers for the children that this VBS will be meaningful and fun, and prayers that everyone stays safe.

The theme for VBS—Rocky Railway—has got me to thinking about trains and especially songs about trains. Our American culture has carved out a unique niche in the realm of music with its train songs.

There are, of course, the classic country songs such as *Waiting for a Train* by Jimmie Rodgers, and *Wabash Cannonball* sung by the Carter Family, and Flatt and Scruggs' *Orange Blossom Special*. I dare you to listen to that one and not tap your feet. And you can't list train songs without mentioning Johnny Cash's *Folsom Prison Blues*—"I hear the train a comin', it's rolling round the bend." Bluegrass and Country don't have a monopoly on train songs. We can find them in every genre. There's *Peace Train* by Cat Stevens, *Last Train to Clarksville* sung by The Monkees. One of you suggested *City of New Orleans*, and another of you mentioned *Night Train*.

When I was a kid, my dad would sing to me the old song *I've Been Working on the Railroad*. Here in Tennessee, we can dance to the *Chattanooga Choo-Choo*. There are literally thousands of train songs.

But, without a doubt, one of the greatest of the train songs is the one known as *The Ballad of Casey Jones*. This song tells the tale of a brave train engineer who died saving his passengers and crew. Now, many people might think that Casey Jones is a made-up figure like Paul Bunyan. But he's not. He was quite real and lived here in Tennessee.

Casey Jones was born John Luther Jones in 1863 in the town of Cayce, Kentucky. His hometown became his nickname. Jones started work with the Mobile & Ohio Railroad and quickly moved up the ranks as brakeman, to fireman, and then, finally, to his dream job of being an engineer with the Illinois Central Railroad. Along the way he got married and he and his wife settled in Jackson, Tennessee.

As an engineer, Jones was recognized by his peers as being one of the best. He possessed an instinctive feel for each locomotive, and he possessed a strong drive to get where he supposed to be on time. He was so punctual, it was said that people along his route could set their watches by what time his train passed.

In 1900, Jones was transferred to Memphis to drive the massive locomotive numbered 382, also known as the Cannonball. He made the passenger run between Memphis and Canton, Mississippi, a run known for its high speeds.

On April 29, 1900, Jones showed up for his regular run out of Memphis. His departure was delayed 75 minutes because the previous train had been late. Jones, along with his fireman Simeon Webb, pulled out of the station at 12:50 a.m. The train was light since it was pulling only six cars. Despite the rain and fog, Jones was confident that he could make up the lost time.

Jones drove the first hundred miles to Granada, Mississippi, hitting speeds of 80 mph. He arrived at Granada having made up 55 of the 75 delayed minutes. He made up 15 more minutes in the next leg. He was confident his train would arrive in Canton on schedule.

To get to Canton, he had to pass through the small town of Vaughn, Mississippi. He knows there will be trains there, but because his is a passenger train carrying the mail, his train will have priority. The other trains should be on sidings. However, unknown to Jones, in Vaughn that night, a freight train is stuck on a siding with its four rear-most cars out on the mainline. An air hose had broken and its brakes were locked.

Jones approaches Vaughn at 75 mph. As he rounds a curve his fireman can see the lights on a caboose up ahead. Jones realizes they are going to crash so he orders Webb to jump. Then, with one hand he begins pulling on the whistle to warn his crew, and with the other he applies the brakes. Jones remains in the cab as his train collides with the freight train. He plows through the four cars of the other train. His locomotive is derailed and slams into an embankment. Casey Jones is killed. However, because he had managed to slow the train from 75 mpg to 35 mph, none of the passenger cars derail and no one else is seriously injured.

The newspapers reported the story with Jones as a hero staying at his post at the cost of his life. Jones was buried back in Jackson, Tennessee. He was 37 years old.

Train wrecks are not uncommon, so how did Casey Jones become such a legend and part of the American consciousness? Well, it started with a song. Casey Jones became a legend largely due to that ballad written by Wallace Saunders, a fellow railman with the Illinois Central. Saunders had always admired Jones and composed the lyrics telling the story of his heroic death. The song was quickly picked up by other railmen and spread across the country. It has been adapted and recorded dozens of times by various artists, including Johnny Cash. Casey Jones' sacrifice has been memorialized not just in song, but in movies, TV programs, a Broadway production, and more.

Our scripture reading for today is the familiar story of Jesus calming the storm. Jesus had been preaching and teaching to large crowds on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Late in the afternoon, Jesus says to his disciples, *Let us go across to the other side*. They leave the crowd on the shore and climb into a boat. They begin sailing across the lake toward the opposite shore. During the night, however, as they travel, a storm appears and crashing waves threaten to sink their boat. Despite the chaos of the storm, Jesus sleeps soundly in the stern of the boat. At the height of the storm, the disciples go to him and shake him awake saying, *Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?*

This is the part of the story where I get confused. Most of Jesus' disciples were fishermen. That would make them experienced sailors. I, myself, grew up on the Gulf Coast and have spent a large part of my life on boats. Weather is a crucial part of boating. You need constantly to keep an eye on the horizon for storms.

On the Sea of Galilee, the western side is lined with hills. Behind these hills lies the Mediterranean Ocean. It is entirely possible for a storm to develop over the Mediterranean and then without warning blow across the hills onto the Sea of Galilee. I imagine that is what happened that night as Jesus and his disciples were crossing the lake. But still, why were the disciples so *afraid*? Why did they wake Jesus saying, *Do you not care that we are perishing?*

It must have been an exceptional storm for these fishermen to get as rattled as they were. I can tell you from experience, that getting caught in a squall can be unnerving. The whole world is moving every which way. All you can do is fight for control. I don't believe that when the disciples woke Jesus that they were seeking supernatural intervention. No. This was an 'all hands on deck' moment. They needed everyone. They needed to row to keep the bow headed into the waves; they needed to hold the sails down; they needed to bail water. They needed everyone working. They couldn't afford to let Jesus just sleep.

So Jesus wakes up. He doesn't grab a bucket or a paddle. Instead, he confronts the source of their problem. He speaks to the wind; he commands the waves, *Peace! Be still!* And, there is calm. The wind dies; the seas settle. Mark used the Greek word *mega* to describe this storm. He calls it a *mega* storm. He describes the calm that follows in the same way—a *mega* calm. In a matter of moments we've gone from a great storm to a great calm all because of a few words from Jesus. He then turns to the disciples in the boat and asks them, *Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?* Despite their time with him, they still don't understand him. And they wonder among themselves, *Who is this that even the wind and the sea listen to him?*

Casey Jones did not have to die that night. He ordered his fireman to jump and Webb did and he lived. Jones could have jumped as well. But he refused. As engineer, he felt a responsibility for his passengers. They were souls in his care. When those people boarded his train, they did so with the faith that they would be kept safe. Jones wasn't going to break that sacred covenant.

Despite the storm, the disciples on Jesus' boat were always safe. But they didn't realize it. Their faith was thin. They saw the storm, not the savior.

This week, we will be teaching the kids a lesson that should be the heart of our of our faith—that we should trust in Christ. Whether we are in a boat sailing to the other side or on a train bound for the kingdom, we should go confident that our Lord will always be with us. As we sing in the words of the familiar hymn, "Through the storm, through the night, Lead me on to the light, Take my hand, precious Lord, Lead me home."

We tend to go through life like the disciples in a boat worried about our fate and ignoring the fact that our savior is always with us. And even if he is right there in front of us, we still lack the confidence that he can do anything to bring us to our destination. To have faith is to have the confidence that Christ will deliver us to our salvation.

May our faith be strong.