

The Journey: "Sorrow and Salvation"

[Genesis 6:6-8, 8:1-5](#)

[John 11:30-44](#)

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The story of Lazarus has more weeping than any story in the New Testament. Mary weeps at Jesus' feet when he arrives. The others with Mary are already weeping. And then Jesus himself begins to weep (35).

Weeping is what we do when someone dies. It is the normal thing to do. Nothing is more sorrowful than the death of a loved one. Most of us know about death. It grips hold of us with heartache and with tears and with sobbing. Sorrow can be inconsolable. It is automatic and simply human.

Even thinking of a death may bring tears to your eyes—when you lost a pet, a spouse, a parent, a child, or a friend.

The story of Lazarus is the story in the bible where we see Jesus' own grief most vividly. A dear friend, Lazarus, has died, but Jesus doesn't cry until he finally arrives at his friend's home. He doesn't cry until he embraces Lazarus' sister, Mary. Then he weeps. (Of course, he's human.)

Ministers have the very precious honor of being present when there has been a death. As hard as it is emotionally, I consider such sacred times as the greatest privilege in ministry. And then after the initial visit after a death, the minister listens to the story of the person's life and prepares for the memorial service. It is such an intimate and sacred time.

One time I conducted a memorial service for a young woman who had taken her own life. She was recently separated from her husband and had been treated for depression. I met with the woman's parents and her siblings. When the family came together for the memorial service, emotions were very raw, and having both sides of the family there was very awkward. In addition to sorrow, there was a great deal of anger between the woman's family and the husband's family. I suggested we meet privately before the service and that the two sides of the family greet each other the way they normally would have the last time they were together. And so, when the husband and his family walked in tentatively, the wife's family went to them and embraced them. We all wept. It was necessary. Tears of sorrow brought the family together. Even in the depth of darkness, there was a ray of light.

Out of the darkness comes the light at the dawn of Creation, but soon things go sour. Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit, and God expels them from the garden. East of Eden, Eve gives birth to Cain and then to Abel. The boys grow up. Cain brings to God an offering from his field, and Abel brings a first lamb from his flock. God likes Abel's offering better than Cain's. (The reader thinks, "That's totally unfair! What does God have against Cain?") Cain

gets Abel to go out into the field with him, and while they are there, Cain kills Abel. God then puts a curse on Cain that sends him away to wander the earth.

Talk about sorrow! What happened to the goodness and light? First Cain is sorrowful that God does not favor him. (I would be.) That makes his parents are full of sorrow! Why can't our sons get along? And then one kills the other! They lose a child! And then Cain, their only remaining child, leaves too. Both sons are gone! The text doesn't tell us that Adam and Eve wept, but I'm sure they did.

Even if Adam and Eve are archetypal characters, they demonstrate truths that we can all relate to. In fact, they have something to teach us about resilience. Adam and Eve manage to survive their separation from God after eating the forbidden fruit, and they manage to survive the death of their son Abel and the departure of their son Cain. They stay together through the sorrows of life. Bruce Feiler talks about how couples who experience grief can craft together a new life narrative. Adam and Eve decide to stay together and have another child, Seth, who grows up and populates the world (*The First Love Story: Adam, Eve, and Us*, 203-204). Adam had more children with Eve and lived to be 930 years old.

It almost seems in this story that Adam and Eve survive their sorrow in spite of God. We ask ourselves, why does the early writer make God banish Adam and Eve from the garden? And why is God unfairly partial to one child? Is God not a loving God? A just God?

God seems to have created a world that includes evil. God tries to teach the first humans to choose good over evil, but they fail the test. They have the ability to choose. And God sets up a situation where God favors Abel over Cain—we'll see this again in other biblical families where the second child is favored over the first. Is this not the human writer putting unfairness into the story because everybody knows, life is not fair! Some do have it easier than others! Life is full of sorrow!

And the sorrow is not only personal. In Genesis, sorrow becomes global with the flood. The writer tells us, "The Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart...I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them" (Genesis 6:6-7).

It appears that God feels emotions as we do. God weeps over the sin of humanity and causes a flood to destroy the world—God destroys all but Noah, whom God favors. And after 150 days, the waters abated. God saved the world. It's a story about God's faithfulness and care. But what about all the people and animals that died in the flood?

The past weeks there has been devastating flooding in Peru. Today the water has abated—at least for now. But more rains may come. The capital city of Lima and half the country are in a state of emergency, reeling from the extreme condition of flood and mudslides. 100 have died; more than a hundred thousand are homeless. 200 bridges have collapsed. The rains and mudslides have dragged plastic waste into the river, clogging the water filters. No drinking water is available now in Lima. Stores have run out of bottled water

(<http://www.dw.com/en/lima-struggles-with-flooding-aftermath/a-38066531>,
<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-peru-floods-idUSKBN17335F>). It's a disaster.

Can we blame the flooding on God? I don't think so. But perhaps, in part, on human sin. Officials are pointing to climate change due to industrialization. But there has always been flooding. It is part of the natural world that humans have tried to explain with stories like we have in Genesis, and like many cultures have tried to explain in their similar myths. There simply are natural disasters, and the people most affected are the poor. That we allow poverty to exist around the world, that may be our greatest sin. And today's paper says there is more flooding also in Colombia and Indonesia.

The United Methodist Church is responding through UMCOR in Peru. And the people there will pull together, and life will go on, but not without sorrow from loss of life and loss of property.

The challenge is how we deal with sorrow. Will we come together as a global village and help one another? Will we share our resources and our hope? I believe God carries us through the flood—if we survive the rising waters. Some will not survive. Some children will die, some people will have to rebuild their homes. And then the survivors will have to write a new narrative—a new story of what it means to be human.

I hope that new story will be drawn from working together for the common good. I hope the characters will be you and me, finding hope in a partnership with God and other humans. Tears of sorrow are necessary. They are the first chapter of the story. Then comes healing and rebuilding, and, finally, God's salvation.

Sometimes in the flood we see our own sin and our own need to return to God. That's what happened to John Newton, the captain of a slave ship bringing slaves from Africa to England in the 1700s. There was a terrible storm at sea, and Newton wrote in his journal, "Lord, have mercy on us." Later Newton became aware of God's accompaniment and God's grace, and wrote the song "Amazing Grace." He confessed his sins, changed his ways, and denounced slavery. We have a choice. We can survive the storm and become part of the healing of the world. In this way, we contribute to our own salvation. In this way, we are released from the bands of sorrow and death. Jesus said, "Unbind him, and let him go."