

5 Lent A April 2, 2017

What Made Jesus Cry

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About 6 years ago, on December 26, my husband Michael, his daughter Hailey and I drove up to my hometown of Waupaca, Wisconsin to have Christmas dinner and exchange gifts with my parents and siblings. This was the Christmas before Michael and I were married and his and Hailey's first visit with my family. As he merged the car onto the highway, Michael turned to me and asked what it was like bringing my new family home for Christmas for the first time. I wasn't expecting his question, and was still tired from the multiple Christmas services and events at the parish I was serving, so my response to his question was to burst into tears. This upset Hailey, because she thought I was sad, and Michael explained to her that I was crying "happy tears", that sometimes when a person is overcome with emotion that emotion is released from the body as tears. Crying can mean a person is feeling an emotion (whether it is happy or sad, or angry or any combination of emotions) deeply, with their body as well as with their heart and mind. In other words, there can be more than one good reason to cry.

I've read several articles published by psychologists and psychotherapists that state crying is good for us; as the act of crying actually helps us rid our bodies of harmful substances like toxins. Which might make anyone who considers crying a bad thing or a sign of weakness to think differently about it. Not only is there no shame in shedding tears, it is healthy for our body and soul, and even Jesus cried, as we saw in our Gospel reading today.

Like Hailey on that morning of the second day of Christmas, though, each time I hear this morning's Gospel I can't help but wonder what made Jesus cry.

Was he sad that his friend Lazarus had died? If so, he didn't seem to express such sorrow earlier in the Gospel when Lazarus' sisters Martha and Mary sent word to Jesus about their brother's sickness. Jesus seemed to know that Lazarus' condition was severe, yet he didn't drop everything and rush to his side, as we might expect someone who loves his friends to do.

Did Jesus cry because he felt regret for that decision about not arriving until after his friend had been dead 4 days? Again, the author of John's Gospel didn't seem to indicate Jesus was too busy to come when his friends called, and Jesus himself said that he had a reason for not coming until after Lazarus had died.

Was Jesus moved to tears by all the crying around him? We heard in our Gospel that not only was Mary weeping, so were the Jews who had come to comfort her. That is a lot of crying, and can certainly create an atmosphere that makes it hard not to join in, just out of empathy or sympathy.

Was Jesus, as one translator and commentator suggested, faking it? This translator noted that the disciples had warned Jesus he was headed to a dangerous place, where the authorities had tried to stone him earlier in John's Gospel. This translator suggested that is why Martha and Mary ran to meet Jesus before he got to town, so the people who wanted to hurt him wouldn't know he was there; in other words, they were trying to protect him. So the translator's theory is Jesus' tears were a way to gain sympathy from the Jews so they wouldn't turn him in to the authorities. Which is a fascinating theory, but I am not sure it works in John's Gospel where Jesus appeared to be in control of every moment when it comes to his trial and crucifixion later on. Many scholars remind us the raising of Lazarus is the 7th sign in John's Gospel pointing to who Jesus is, and is the reason he waited so long.

Did Jesus cry because no one seemed to believe in him? I'm not sure, because he told to his disciples they were going after Lazarus died so that they would believe.

Many commentators and pastors like to point out Jesus' tears are evidence of his humanity, and is a time when we can feel especially close to Jesus, which can be a comfort. Others point out that Jesus is God's Son, as divine as much as he is human, which makes those tears so much more significant, for could those tears mean that God weeps? Which brings us back to the original question of what made Jesus cry.

Was Jesus crying because death separates people from God? Or from each other? Was Jesus tired from his trip and deeply saddened by the suffering in the world and the tragedy of a person who died too young? Was he upset for his friends Mary and Martha who would forever be living the loss of their brother?

I wonder if Jesus was crying older tears, tears that go further back, back to the beginning when God made human kind in God's own image, and how those humans disobeyed God and when God confronted them about their choices and their actions the first man and the first woman responded by blaming. Blaming the snake for deceiving the woman. And worse yet, the first man blamed God for creating the first woman. Remember that part? Adam said to God, "The woman you gave me gave me the fruit and I ate of it." It seems to be after Adam blamed

God, that is when God got upset and chased the first man and woman from the Garden and out into the hard, cruel world, where no one much wanted to walk with God in the cool of the evening anymore. Perhaps another translation might have read, "If only you hadn't made the woman, then the snake would never have deceived her and I wouldn't have eaten that fruit and we wouldn't be having this conversation." The words "If only" can be heartbreaking words; they are deeply expressive of grief, sorrow and love, and when I hear those words I also hear them laced ever so delicately with blame.

Jesus heard the words, "If only you had been here," not once but twice, from Martha and from Mary. Their desire to reach into the past and change it is stronger than their love, faith and belief in their friend. They believe Jesus could have done something; he could have saved their brother, if only he had hurried up and arrived when they first sent word to him, this terrible sadness might have been avoided. But he failed, didn't he, because their brother is dead and buried and rotting in the tomb.

Martha and Mary aren't the only ones to blame God or Jesus when tragedy strikes. A good friend of mine remembers feeling that way when she discovered her brother was an alcoholic and how she cried and prayed to God, "If only you had been here this wouldn't have happened to my brother." It is a human thing to do, and we humans have been doing it since the beginning, since the very first time we felt far away from God, and every time it felt like God didn't respond when we wanted God to.

And that is hard. It is devastatingly hard on us humans. Just like it was for my friend. Just like it was for Martha and Mary. What is extraordinary to me is that it was also devastatingly hard on Jesus. And I wonder if that is why he burst into tears and began to weep, because of the deeply disturbing feelings and distance blame causes. If that is the case, then those tears Jesus shed serve the even more beautiful purpose of bringing everyone closer together; not just grieving friends in that moment, but all humanity and God. All those tears were evidence of love, and in that moment God's love for us and our love for each other and love for God brought us all closer together.

Which is perhaps why Jesus came in the first place; to reunite us with God who longs to be with us, not just in this life, but in resurrection life. Perhaps the raising of Lazarus isn't just a miracle of resuscitated life, life that will still hunger, thirst, age, be susceptible to illness and would one day die once again, it is the frightening miracle that will turn the powerful against Jesus, as it turned some towards Jesus. Even more, the raising of Lazarus can point us all, on this last

Sunday in Lent, toward the deeply emotional, mysterious events of Holy Week, which starts next Sunday with Palm Sunday. Before that journey starts, we have today's miracle of tears and life and reunion are all part of how God brings us into the fullness of resurrection life, a life that is one long walk with God, who comes to meet us in our tears of sorrow and tears of joy, making them holy encounters.