

only later, in the morning.

Here we are with our words and with many tears. But the reservoir of our faith is deep and resilient, and so we locate Peter's death in the midst of that faith that surpasses all of our anguish and pain. In the Heidelberg Catechism, a wondrous Reformation statement of our faith, the first question of the teaching is this: "What is our only comfort, in life and in death?"

This is an urgent question, given that the poet has said over and over, "There is none to comfort."

And the answer in the catechism is this: "My only comfort is that I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself, but to my faithful savior, Jesus Christ who has completely freed me from the dominion of evil." We belong to Christ in his faithfulness! Peter belongs to him! And so do we! The catechism answer goes on to say, "He protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation."

This is the truth for us in this day of loss and death. All of our sadness and anger and bewilderment are held in the heart of God who knows the hair on our heads and the yearning of our hearts and the our hunger for wellbeing. Peter is left to rest in that good assurance. And we, in our turn, can rest there as well. The God who birthed us and knows us and counts our hairs is the one we know in steadfast love, mercy, and faithfulness. That is our only comfort. We wait for that comfort to come among us. It is poised and will come for us in time to come.

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Words for Peter

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For those of you who do not know, I am Peter's mom. I thought it was important for you to hear from Peter's mom today. I thought it was important because when I think about my situation as someone else's, I can't help but think that the first place I would go in my mind would be to the mother, in this case the only surviving parent. How is she doing? What is she thinking? How can she survive another tragedy? What will she do? How can they go on? Although I don't know the answers to most of these questions, I do feel called to tell you at least part of what it is like to be me right now.

I have had the privilege over the past nine years to be exposed to a man who has taught me more about survival than anyone. I was married to one of his most prized students and am very close friends with two of his others. Walter Brueggemann's years of work on the psalms has provided me with much of what I have needed to deal with the death of my husband, David. Because of Walter's work and his presence in my life through my darkest days, I have been reminded that my cries of pain have to be uttered, whether through soft and controlled words or through literal shouts and screams. The psalms are our Biblical model of the utterance of pain making possible the sight of hope. Once we have cried out and have felt heard, we are then able to move to a new place. Only because my cries have been heard, by God and by many of you, have I been able to stand in this new place and enter into the healing that has

taken place in my life over the past three years. Because I have been able to say how bad the bad is, I can also say how good the good is.

I remember well in the weeks after David died feeling like I was every bit as overwhelmed by the goodness of people stepping in and caring for us in unimaginable ways as I was by the awfulness of the fact that my husband had just died and I was left alone to face life and raise four children. I realized even then that this was a remarkable thing to be experiencing. I am not sure I am there this time. The horror of Peter's death is overwhelming in a much different way, and I have, in one week, been faced with things that have not yet and never will surface in grieving David. What I do know is this: like those being addressed in the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, I have two choices in front of me. Chapter 30, verse 19 says, "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live."

This choice is one we are faced with over and over every day. It is difficult, especially when we have so many voices coaxing us away from the choice we know will bring life. The forces of evil want to pull us toward death, both literal death and paths that lead toward eventual destruction. Hundreds of you, from my close friends to those with whom I am loosely connected, have been amazing examples to me of choosing life. You choose life when you fly across the country, twice now, to be by my side and give me a hug. You choose life when you bring my family a meal, allowing me one less dinner to think about. You choose life when you take my family on vacation, pay for us to ski, spend time with my children, provide me ways of caring for myself that go far beyond my basic needs. You choose life when you give and give and give to me. Some of the acts of generosity are so huge, I promise they would take your breath away. So, how can I make any other choice than that which has been so beautifully modeled to me? I would literally have to bury my head in a hole to not be blinded by the light of God's love that so many of you have allowed to shine through yourselves. I cannot reject it; I cannot turn away from it. Indeed I can and will be distracted from it, pulled back into the painful places of the other parts of my reality, but I am convinced that choosing life will always be my ultimate decision because I have had the gift of seeing what that choice looks like in the very best and in the very worst situations.

As a result, I stand here today to tell you that even in the unspeakable awfulness of what has happened to Peter, death will not have the final word, not in my house and not in my family. Horrific images and haunting questions of why will not be my focus, even if they manage to creep in sometimes. Darkness and evil and horror and sadness and guilt and pain will not be the last thing left at the end of the day. I will continue to tell them that they have no place in a life and in a family that has been won over by Jesus' message of triumphant love. That love will triumph over everything, even this.

"Where, O Death, is your sting?" That I can answer. The sting of death has been and will continue to be a big part of my life experience. However, I can also answer the question asked next to that one in I Corinthians 15: "Where, O Death, is your Victory?" And my answer is, "*Not here.*" I hope that you as my community can keep answering this question with me this way. Death will have to find another place to settle in. We will keep choosing life together, and we will move ahead in our faith in the One that will, one day, banish all death forever, the day when we meet Peter

again face to face and see that beaming smile and know that all of this is behind us, and love has won once and for all.

As we struggle with moving from this day back into the Christmas season, I find that this poem of Anne Weems offers us an acceptable way to deal with the otherwise difficult messages of good tidings of great joy that will surround us:

Your burden is too great to bear?
Your loneliness is intensified during this Christmas season?
Your tears have no end?
Not celebrate?
You should lead the celebration!
You should run through the streets
to ring bells and sing the loudest!
You should fling tinsel on the tree,
And open your house to your neighbors and call them in to dance!
For it is you above all others who know the joy of Advent.
It is unto you that a Savior is born this day,
One who comes to lift your burden from your shoulders,
One who comes to wipe the tears from your eyes.
You are not alone,
For He is born this day unto you.