

A Lightning Funeral

Lightning? From a cloudless sky?

It is Zambia's dry season. But like a bolt out of the blue, Esther gets sick. "It's meningitis," a hospital doctor tells her husband of 16 years.

"Dear God," he prays.

She dies almost lightning-fast. It is Monday, 13 September 2021.



L-R: Rev. Frank, Esther, and Justina Shonga

Justina, her 13-year-old daughter, their only child, grieves. Pastor Frank Shonga, her 49-year-old husband, aches. Serving Sinda Parish in the Lutheran Church of Central Africa Zambia Synod, Pastor Shonga has conducted many funerals. "This is so different," he tells himself.

It feels different too for fellow LCCA-Z pastors and One Africa Team missionaries in Zambia. "When was the last time an LCCA-Z pastor's wife died while her husband was actively serving a congregation?"

"We can't remember," people keep answering.

A flurry of arrangements follows. Three LCCA-Z pastors, a missionary, and the OAT operations director hastily pack, then drive to the funeral for *Amai Abusa* (Mrs. Pastor) Shonga. The trip takes twelve hours over two days.



Some 400 mourners have gathered by the time the five arrive in the village, near Lundazi. Men have dug a grave by hand 1.5 km away. "That is one of the deepest graves I have ever seen," a veteran missionary later notes. ("Why deep?" you may

ask. The more honored the person, the deeper the grave.)

“Please, may we use your Land Cruiser later? Could you transport the pallbearers and coffin to the burial site? It is too far to carry. The path is too narrow for the truck.”

“Of course.” *Katundu* (luggage) is rearranged.

Guests of honor sit in the shade on mats. Women, sing, wail, and carry the coffin outside onto another mat. The funeral begins. A young man explains in Chewa who will speak, in what order.

Choirs sing. Grief erupts. Hope swells.

Pastor Banda speaks. No, the Spirit speaks through him.

Is this sudden death nothing but the lightning and thunder of God’s judgment?

Not in our risen Lord. “I heard a voice from heaven saying, ‘Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.’ ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘so they will rest from their labors since their works follow them.’” (Revelation 14:13)

Pastor Mumba speaks God’s Word last. “God took his sinful people into exile,” he says. Their exile seemed death. Every death *is* an exile.

Yet God told his people of old, “You will seek me and find me when you search for me with all your heart. I will be found by you”—this is the Lord’s declaration—“and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and places where I banished you”—this is the Lord’s declaration. “I will restore you to the place from which I deported you” (Jeremiah 29:13-14).

From all the nations?

From *all* the nations, in “Christ, the life of all the living, Christ the death of death our foe.”

Choirs sing again, two Chewa songs at the same time, as the funeral becomes a procession. Both choirs sing of *ulendo*, “the journey.” Mourners journey on foot to

the grave through the bush.

It is the dry season. Eyes get wet, though. Young men scoop dirt over the lowered coffin.

In the dry season parched hearts moisten with hope. Believers pray, *“ufumu, mphamvu, ndi ulemelero nzanu kwamuyaya”* (“the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, forever and ever”).

“I saw Satan fall like lightning from the sky,” Jesus said after his 72 disciples came back from preaching the good news of his kingdom (Luke 10:18).

They had told him, “Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name” (10:17).

“I saw Satan fall like lightning from the sky,” Jesus could have also said in 2000 when Frank Shonga, a Muslim, a man who had memorized 17 of the 30 suras in the Qur’an, was baptized.

“I saw Satan fall like lightning from the sky,” Jesus could have said too when Frank confirmed his wife in biblical Christian faith in 2007. He had helped her learn God’s Word.

“What was it like for you before?” the missionary had asked him in April.

“In Islam,” Pastor Shonga wrote back, “we learned that we should keep all the commands of the Qur’an in order to enter heaven. But [...] I learned that God offered his Son Jesus Christ as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”

“I saw Satan fall like lightning from the sky.” The missionary even sees that invisible truth on the long return to Lusaka. The Land Cruiser which had carried 5 now holds 14.

What do eleven hot, cramped people on the vehicle’s backbenches do for hours while the OAT operations director drives, negotiating pothole after pothole? A mother nurses her baby. The other ten belt out holy hope. Pastors and their wives sing hymn after joyful hymn. The missionary sings along as best he can.

His heart still sings.



click "play" to hear the hymn "Kwathu Sipadziko"

The hymn the group in the Land Cruiser sings is "Kwathu Sipadziko," "My Home Is Not Here." In English, its refrain goes like this:

Lord, you are my friend, for sure.

What if heaven were not ours?

An angel motions in welcome to heaven's door.

And this world I do not think of as mine.

Missionary Dan Witte lives in Zambia

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