

Sermon: Papa and the Trinity

Luke 3:21, 22

I'm a pastor now. I used to be a National Sales Director. I accepted Christ when I was nine but in my thirties I met Jesus in such a powerful, life transforming way that I went to seminary, got a masters degree and went through the challenges of becoming an ordained pastor. It's been my journey to know God. Along the way I have certainly come to know a lot about God. All in all, I've been a Christian for fifty years.

But, until I read *The Shack*, I didn't know that God, the one God, in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit was especially fond of me. The wonder and potential of that for my life is exhilarating. After forty years I think coming to know that is worth the risk of reading something about God that isn't exactly correct. Like reading that God the Father is actually an African American woman named "Papa." As if I or anyone else would read that and say, "Oh my gosh, I never knew that." For the record, God is not an African American woman. Nor is he a white man. In fact, he isn't even a he.

Then again, Jesus is not a lion even though the *Chronicles of Narnia* portray him as Aslan, the lion who is good but not safe. And millions of people are better off for holding that image in their heart ... as an image, not a belief.

Is the Holy Spirit a tongue of fire landing on the heads of the disciples in the upper room or a dove descending on Jesus at his baptism or both or neither?

I was delighted by The Shack's gentle description of God who is love and who as three, coordinate with each other on my behalf, and on your behalf. It makes it so personal. And, I honestly don't get the controversy over the book. I get that Bible Scholars take exception to some of what it describes. What I don't get is the harsh and judgmental, hurtful nature of a lot of the criticism. Paul Young, the author of The Shack, has been accused of heresy and in collusion with other undesirables and teaching universalism and that he is secretly promoting Hinduism.

Here's a contrast for you. On the one hand there are all the videos on You Tube with preachers or teachers or radio talk show hosts, all Christians, jumping to conclusions, sometimes belittling the book or the author, calling it and him

heretical, questioning his motives, disparaging his reputation, all for the sake of keeping our knowledge about God pure.

And, on the other hand we have Mack, after meeting God in the Shack, back, talking with his friend Willie who had been in on the secret of Mack going to the Shack. We pick it up on page 242.

Finally, Willie asked, “So, are you telling me that he was there? God I mean?”

And now Mack was laughing and crying. ‘Willie, he was there! Oh was he there.’ Mack stopped, lost in his memories for a moment. “Oh yeah,” he said at last. “He told me to tell you something.”

“What? Me?” Mack watched as concern and doubt traded places on Willie’s face. “So, what did he say?”

Mack paused, grasping for the words. He said, “Tell Willie that I’m especially fond of him.”

Now, which of those two situations, the critics on You Tube or Mack with Willie, feels more like Jesus?

I’m not saying the critics don’t make some good observations. Here are two articles you can google if you want to study this more. One is highly critical, the other supportive. Both are worth reading. [Is The Shack Heresy?](#) by Wayne Jacobsen. [The Shack: Harmless Allegory or Deadly Heresy](#) by Tim Morrison.

We are going to talk about the Trinity in [The Shack](#) a little more. Drawing from my experience with the book, I want to ask you, “Do you know the God who is especially fond of you?”

Luke 3:21, 22

the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

In that text, the three members of the trinity work together, in loving relationship. Each of them, father, son and holy spirit, has a role to play in our salvation. The clarity of the trinity in the new testament is implied throughout the old testament, including the first chapter, *In the beginning God created the heavens and the*

earth...the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. 26 Then God said, "Let us make man in our image.

We know about the Trinity. The Shack invites us to know them. And I have learned on my journey from sales director to pastor, there's a big difference between knowing God and only knowing about God.

There is a reality show called Beauty and the Geek. Eight young men and women participate in various activities over several weeks and learn about each other and themselves. The women, the beauties, are airheads. They are gorgeous but know nothing about anything beyond fashion, entertainment and looking good. Literally, their idea of personal development is plastic surgery.

The geeks on the other hand are geniuses at math and science. They are experts on seemingly everything except fashion, entertainment and they definitely know nothing about looking good. One thing the geeks are very good at is knowing about stuff. They can read any textbook. These geeks can study women. The geeks on the show know about women but they didn't know any.

I fear that the church in America is filled with God geeks, Christians who know all about God but don't know him. When a book like The Shack comes along, all God geeks can do is argue about its accuracy and criticize any deviation from the norm. Papa and Jesus and Sarayu invite a God geek, Mack, to go past what he knows about God to actually know God. It's the same invitation we hear in the Gospel. Christianity is about having a personal relationship with God, not an ever increasing knowledge of God. Jesus was all too familiar with people who were more interested in the latter.

Mark 7:5-7

"These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. 7 They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men."

I am going to look at just one of The Shack's challenges to our traditional understanding of the Trinity that has critics hopping mad. To be honest, I was caught off guard by it myself. Papa, God the Father, tells Mack that he never left while Jesus was on the cross. When I read that, I immediately said it was wrong. Scripture is clear on this. Jesus cried out "My God, My God, why have you

forsaken me.” In the worst moment of his life, Jesus’ father abandoned him. If God could forsake his son, he certainly could forsake Mack at the worst moments of his life and as far as Mack was concerned, God did. He thought he knew about God. But he was wrong.

(Dramatic Reading)

“How can you really know how I feel?” Mack asked, looking back into Papa’s eyes. Papa didn’t answer, only looked down at their hands. Mack’s gaze followed Papa’s and for the first time Mack noticed the scars in her wrists... Don’t ever think that what my son chose to do didn’t cost us dearly. Love always leaves a significant mark, she stated softly and gently. We were there together.

Mack was surprise. At the cross? Now wait, I thought you left him – you know – My God, my God, why have your forsaken me? It was a scripture that had often haunted Mack in the Great Sadness. Papa said, You misunderstand the mystery there. Regardless of what he felt at the time, I never left him.

How can you say that? You abandoned him just like you abandoned me!

Mack, I never left him, and I have never left you.

That makes no sense to me, he snapped.

I know it doesn’t, at least not yet. Will you at least consider this: When all you can see is your pain, perhaps then you lose sight of me?

The father didn’t abandon his son. And, he didn’t abandon Mack either even though he had lost sight of God. Is that heresy? No, that’s mystery. By the way, no where in the Bible does it say God forsook Jesus on the cross. Only that Jesus asked the question.

I think those of us who are parents can shed some light on this. Remember, God is the one who called himself father and son, a parent and a child.

Any of us who have had to take a child to a doctor for a procedure or a shot understands this experience. We hand our son or daughter over to the doctor and

we may even have to leave the room, but we never abandon them. We wait, we ache, we go through the experience with them, even though we didn't get the shot ourselves. Our child may feel that we have forsaken them, but we haven't and no uncaring nurse or theologian is going to be able to tell us that we have abandoned our child simply because we were forced to put him in the hands of one who would temporarily cause him pain. Decades later, we still carry the pain of that experience with us. We can't talk about it without getting choked up. If we parents experience that, why not God THE FATHER? I suppose God the father, has never watched Mel Gibson's movie, The Passion of the Christ. When Jesus and the angels play it on the big screen, he leaves the room. It's too painful.

So, if that is as bad as the wrong stuff gets in the Shack, what is the right stuff that it tells us about God? Here are a few things that come out of scripture and the Shack. I've included the Scripture references in the printed sermon which you can get in the Welcome Center or online.

God is able to communicate with humans. John 1:1
God is able to present himself to humans. John 20:27
God is equally Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Luke 3:21, 22
God, one in three, has different roles. Hebrews 9:14
God the Father loves human beings. John 3:16
God the Son died for the salvation of the world. John 3:17
God the Holy Spirit is a counselor. John 14:26
God is passionate about every human being. 2 Peter 3:9

I'm no author, but that's not bad for a novel, at least one on the world's best sellers list and not just in Sunday school. But, just knowing those things about God isn't enough. It seems to me that we may have substituted knowing about God for knowing him. But, any geek will tell you that knowing about a beauty is definitely not the same as knowing one.

Are you a God geek? Do you know about God? Do you know God? They are two completely different questions. Mack was a God geek and what he knew about God kept him trapped in his prison of despair and self loathing, on the verge of divorce and estrangement from his kids. Amazingly, he almost chose to stay in that prison rather than accept God's invitation. God never intended for us to live that

way. Jesus didn't say, "I came that you might have knowledge." He said, "I came that you might have life."

When was the last time you sat and had a conversation with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit? I reread portions of the Shack this week. Tears came to my eyes when Mack got the chance to offer his daughter, Kate, healing and freedom from her great sadness. Why take that away, or any of the other precious images in the story because God is portrayed as an African American woman? What God is truly portrayed as is the infinite being he is, infinite in his love for all of us and especially fond of you.