

THE  
SHACK

BY WILLIAM P. YOUNG

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REFLECTIONS ON THE SERMON:  
QUESTIONS TO PONDER  
AT HOME...

1. When you hear the word, Trinity, what immediately comes to your mind?
2. What is your reaction to the book's 3 images of the Triune God?
3. What of these images challenges your preconceptions? What of these images do you find compelling or comforting?
4. Has this author's images helped you with your understanding of God? If so, in what way?

ENDINGS, DREAMS & OTHER  
THOUGHTS:  
A WAY OF APPROACHING THE SHACK  
BY REV. JEFF RAINWATER

One of my favorite gospels is the Gospel of Mark – mostly because of its bold ending. An angel appears to the women at the tomb proclaiming Jesus' resurrection and commanding them to tell the story. Then Mark ends his Gospel with this:

*So they went out and fled from the tomb... and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid.  
(Mark 16:8, NRSV)*

They say *nothing*? What kind of ending is that? Manuscript copyists found the original so disturbing they later "fixed" the story by adding the extra endings in verses 9 through 20. But Mark had a purpose for ending his story in such a way. In his commentary, Lamar Williamson, Jr. writes,

*In one sense this unfinished story puts the ball in the reader's court. It puts us to work; we must decide how the story should come out. In a deeper sense, however, Jesus remains in control of the ball. No ending proposed by our decisions can contain him, any more than the tomb with its great stone could. Always he goes before us; always he beckons forward*

*to a new appearance in Galilee of the nations, in the Galilee of our daily lives. We never know where and when we shall see him; we only know we cannot escape him.*(Lamar Williamson, *Mark: Interpretation Series*, John Knox Press: 1983, p.286 )

You may wonder what this digression into a study of Mark's ending has to do with *The Shack*. First of all, endings matter. Even more than beginnings, how a story ends shapes the entire character of a story's impact on the reader. How a story ends determines how the entire story should be interpreted. If the final triumph of God recorded in Revelation were left out of the Bible, would we be left wondering if God was faithful and capable of redeeming us especially when times are hard? I think it is important at the beginning of our four-week conversation to first consider the end of *The Shack*.

*The Shack* has been a controversial book. Many have found it inspiring. Others have vehemently declared it dangerous to the right practice of the Christian faith, as if Jesus and the church are so fragile that they must be protected at all costs. I believe some concerns arise because the ending and how it operates to shape the story is misinterpreted.

**First, a fair warning: I am about to reveal the end of the book.** If you have not read it and don't want to know how it ends prematurely, put this article aside and pick it up when you've finished. O.K. Are you ready?

After spending three days at the Shack with God, Mack is involved in a very serious car accident on his way home. When he awakes from unconsciousness, he learns that he wrecked his car on Friday and not Sunday. As Author "Willie" is carefully (and rightfully) ambiguous, we are left with the possibility that everything we have just read was a dream.

Dreams and visions are important avenues of God's revelation in the Bible. Young Samuel receives his call while sleeping in the Temple. Was the voice he heard in his dreams? Joseph receives instruction to keep his engagement with Mary in a dream. Many prophets including Isaiah, Ezekiel and John (of Revelation) receive instruction through visions – a kind of waking dream. In all of these cases, it did not matter to them that such instruction came in this form. They acted upon what they received.

In our scientific world, we have an uneasy relationship with our dreams. They don't feel real to us. My sister-in-law raised a question with Laura about the book: "Was Mack's experience real or was it only a dream?" Either real or only

a dream (not real). That is our usual choice. Why can't it be both, especially if God is Spirit who can speak through dreams? In the story, whether dream or not, it is real to Mack. The story has become real to many.

What is important about the possibility of the story being written as a dream is not whether we can dismiss it and its implications as fiction. This book itself is fiction. What does that mean to us as we read it with our own spiritual journeys in mind? Part of our Bible was most likely written as "fiction" as we understand that word today (notably Jonah and Job). And yet these stories have become part of our story as the people of God. They are fiction and they are real to us at the same time. Such ambiguity is uncomfortable for many today because in our scientific world we equate Truth with Fact. For example, many today cannot believe in the story of Jonah unless they believe that Jonah was an actual person swallowed by a very large fish. But for ancient (and now many post-modern) believers, that question is irrelevant because these stories contain Truth that transcends facts.

As we begin a theological conversation about *The Shack* it is important to remember this is written as a dream (and fiction) because dreams (and fiction) are theologically interpreted differently. First, dreams are a visual medium filled with symbolic imagery. Even those who read the Bible literally do not believe that the Devil depicted in Revelation 12 is literally a great, red Dragon with seven heads. That image is a symbol. Let's look at an example of a possible use of symbolism in the shack:

*[F]or the first time Mack noticed the scars in her wrists, like those he now assumed Jesus also had on his. She allowed him to tenderly touch the scars, outlines of a deep piercing, and he finally looked up again into her eyes. Tears were slowly making their way down her face... "Don't ever think that what my son chose to do didn't cost us dearly. Love always leaves a significant mark," (95, 96)*

Many have taken issue with this passage because orthodox theology makes a distinction between the suffering of God the Son and God the Father. God the Son was the one crucified so God the Father would not, should not, have marks as Jesus does. Objectively, I agree. On the Cross, Jesus – God the Son distinct from God the Father and God the Spirit – was crucified. Yet God the Father ('Papa' in the Shack) surely suffered a pain that Mack was well acquainted with – the death of a child. Many of us as parents have felt the pain our child is feeling in our own soul. Is "Willie's" use of this imagery wrong? No. It speaks to a truth of the nature and experience of God: Papa felt Jesus' pain even as she feels ours. But no imagery can speak the whole truth either.

Often the peril of Christian fiction and dreams is that they paint God and the world in large, bold strokes but the finest details are left out. Think of the comparison between an impressionist painting with its bold colors and moving images and those of the Renaissance era that captures the

finest details of life. Both are beautiful in their own way. But the impressionist painting leaves room for ambiguity. It is an open ended and personal experience. So are dreams. They are deeply personal. The imagery is very contextual to an individual or people. One of the reasons I think we have so much trouble reading and properly understanding Bible passages filled with bold, symbolic, imagery is that we are far removed from the original audience and their context. One of the boldest, most startling, images early in the book is God the Father, "Papa," as a large, black woman. Papa gives two reasons for this *particular* image. First, is to avoid reinforcing religious stereotypes. But the second reason is deeply personal.

*Hasn't it always been a problem for you (Mack) to embrace me (God) as your father? And after what you've been through, you couldn't very well handle a father right now, could you?"(93)*

God comes to Mack as a large, black woman, precisely because that is what Mack needed. This revelation is of a very personal nature based upon Mack's unique story. If in your dreams, God looks different it does not mean that Mack is wrong or that you are completely right.

William Young has described this book as a way of sharing his own personal journey of faith with his children through a narrative form. Whatever else this book has become to others, we must first approach it and appreciate it for what it is – a personal testimony, Christian fiction, a dream. It is not a theological treatise and should not be critiqued in the same way.

But likewise we cannot appropriate the imagery and implications of *The Shack* into our own faith story without some "translation" and evaluation. Pastors and theologians have been accused of cruelly pouring cold water on such a heart-warming story because they have raised theological concerns. Through our conversations, I will raise some of my own. This is also an important discussion. As compelling as *The Shack* is, it is an incomplete picture of the way our world works and the ways the whole people of God have experienced Papa, Jesus, and Sarayu. As the Body of Christ we are in conversation together.

In the end, *The Shack* leaves us in much the same place that the ending-that-is-not-an-ending of Mark does. We are called to finish the story for ourselves through appreciative reading, critical thinking, and faithful living. And as we do, we are called to experience a God unbound whose unexpected appearances will always confront and undo our expectations – even those of Mack and William Paul Young.

Enjoy your reading.

Rev. Jeff Rainwater  
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