

## **Sermon for March 14, 2010**

### **The Rev John A. Baldwin**

How many here this morning have read *The Shack* by Paul Young? For those who haven't, here is a brief synopsis. In the story, Mack Phillip's youngest daughter is abducted during a family vacation. Evidence that she has been brutally murdered is found in an abandoned shack deep in the Oregon wilderness. Four years later in the midst of his on-going grief, Mack receives a mysterious note signed by "Papa" inviting him back to that shack for a weekend. Who is Papa?... the abductor of his daughter trying to lure him into danger? or someone more mysterious, perhaps even God himself. What ensues is a life-changing weekend in which Mack encounters God (in the guise of a black woman cooking pancakes), along with Jesus & the Holy Spirit in the Shack.

The relationship and interplay of these three beings is filled with love, energy and community. I have never run across a better description of the Holy Trinity in a work of fiction. What the book says about forgiveness is profound. It's a book that moved me deep within, in its depiction of a loving, merciful God and His transforming power.

Three weekends ago, I had the opportunity to hear the author of *The Shack* speak here in Virginia Beach. I was blown away. The story of how *The Shack* came into being left me in awe. This is a book, I am convinced, which the Holy Spirit wanted to see published.

Although Paul Young had previously written some short stories and a few poems, he'd never had anything published. A friend, impressed by his theology of the Trinity had encouraged Paul to write down his thoughts, thinking he might write 6 or 7 pages. Instead over 6 months a full length novel unfolded. With its completion, Young made 15 copies & gave them to his children & a handful of close friends. The book was read and handed on to others until at length one reader urged him to have it published. So Young sent 26 copies to both Christian & secular publishers, & received in response 26 rejections. For Christian publishers it was too edgy. For the secular press there was too much Jesus.

So Young and a couple of friends pooled their meager resources and published 10,000 copies themselves, hoping they'd be able to sell or distribute them in a year's time. 3 months later to their astonishment they were down to one box, and Young was receiving emails from near and distant parts of the world attesting to how much the book had moved them. So another 20,000 copies were ordered. Gone in two months. Then 30,000 copies, which were gone in one month. About this time in 2007, Barnes and Noble got wind of this developing phenomenon, and contacted Young asking him about his marketing plan. Marketing Plan???? What's that? Barnes and Noble went on to say that they often profiled a book in the front of their stores for \$50,000 a month. They offered to profile *The Shack* for 3 months, for only.....no charge!!! They also arranged to have one of their contacts take charge of publishing future editions.

As of this January (2010), *The Shack* now has over 7 million copies in print, and has been at number 1 on the New York Times best seller list for 70 straight weeks. It has been translated into 33 languages, and has been on the best seller list in Brazil, Australia and Korea.

How can you rationally explain such an amazing story except that the message of a compassionate and merciful God has touched human hearts in an incredibly powerful way. The Holy Spirit wanted this message out, and people have responded with tears, hope and passion.

Paul Young was joined by Baxter Kruger on the first evening of the weekend. Together they spoke of their experience of God not as the demanding, judgmental and angry God that is proclaimed in fire and brimstone sermons, but as the playful, joyful and loving Being portrayed in *The Shack*. As they were speaking, I glanced around the room and was startled to see how many in the audience were visibly nodding in response. On Saturday before the start of the morning session I had the opportunity to speak with both Young and Kruger. "As an Episcopalian", I said, "I agree completely with what you've been saying. It's a view of God I've grown up believing. But that's apparently not the view of a majority in this room. What's going on?" Kruger responded by saying, "90% of the people I've spoken to grew up with an angry, demanding God. We've just touched the tip of the iceberg." No wonder, I thought, that *The Shack* has sold 7 million copies and counting.

The theology of *The Shack* dovetails nicely with this morning's Gospel, the Parable of the Prodigal Son. This story, told by Jesus, is timeless. Who has not known a prodigal child, our own, those of our friends, or perhaps even ourselves?.....someone who has strayed far away from a loving family, been untrue to their own inner values, wandered in loneliness far from their true selves, and known the depths of despair.

Indeed this is the spiritual journey of many of us amidst the temptations, challenges and setbacks of life. Jesus used this story as a metaphor for describing the first person of the Trinity, Papa, the Creator of Heaven and Earth. God is like the Prodigal Son's Father....filled with a longing desire for relationship, long-suffering, and bubbling over with forgiveness and generosity.

But this Parable, I believe, is more than just a "lived-happily ever after" story. It's far more radical than that. Most of us know well that many of our wayward children, spouses, loved-ones, neighbors and friends continue to screw up, make mistakes, err and stray from God's ways like lost sheep even after sincere repentance. Are we only given one "Get out of Jail Free" card by God?

I was really captivated some years by a sequel to this parable written by a priest in California (whose name I've lost track of). In this follow-up, the younger son gets totally bored after a while, and after garnering some additional funds, sets off for the excitement of the city again. He returns to his dissolute ways, and gets into deep trouble, with thugs threatening his life. Word of this gets back to the father. This time, the older son volunteers to go into the city to help his brother. In doing so, he ends up being killed by the thugs. In despair, the younger brother returns to his father to share this tragic turn of events. How will the father respond this time?

Most of us, I dare say, would fully understand the father responding in rage. "I gave you a second chance, and this is how you repay my kindness?" We would fully understand, wouldn't we, a God responding in wrath? But remember this, when Peter asked Jesus how many times he should forgive his brother? Seven times? Jesus responded by saying "seventy times seven". If this is what God yearns for in us, how much more so is God capable of forgiving us?

It should come as no surprise that in the sequel to the Prodigal Son, the father embraces the prodigal son once more, and together they weep over the death of the older brother. This is the God depicted in *The Shack*. It's an understanding of God so many Christians yearn for with all of their heart, but have such a hard time believing. But let me attest to you this morning, I believe it. I hope and pray that you come to embrace and believe in this loving God who merciful and compassionate beyond anything we are fully capable of comprehending.