

Wisdom in The Shack

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

Psalm 8

Romans 5:1-5

John 16:12-15

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Trinity Sunday

Dr. Edwin Gray Hurley

How do you come to grips with the presence of evil and suffering, injustice and brutality in the world? The sort of horrors that Holocaust Survivor and Birmingham businessman Max Steinmetz vividly brought before us here a few weeks ago. This Memorial Day Weekend we honor the memory of our uncles, I personally lost my only two uncles in the Second World War, and parents and grand parents, and generations upon generations before us who made the supreme sacrifice of their lives in order to defend this country against recurring forms of evil and suffering, injustice and brutality in the world. In the various wars in which this country has been involved, lives were lost that freedoms might be preserved. Yet ever again come new forms of these same evils that were once put down. What are we to make of all this Job-like suffering and the evil that continues?

Today is Trinity Sunday, and what I suggest is we come to grips with evil and suffering, injustice and brutality through nothing other and nothing less than a fresh robust trust in the Triune God revealed to us in the Bible as Father Son and Holy Spirit. “O Trinity of love and power, all travelers guard in danger hour. Protect them where so ever they go.”

The doctrine of the Trinity sets forth that which is unique about our faith, unlike any concept in other world religions. Through the Trinity we are reminded of the immensity, and yet the intimacy and interconnectivities of the God we glorify and enjoy forever, as the Westminster Shorter Catechism reminds us is our chief end. The Trinity tells us God is one, and yet God is three in one. God is being in relationship, a deep mystery but filled with meaning.

The Trinity is our shorthand way of defining the essence of God, of naming God. All our worship each week is grounded in this “God in three persons blessed Trinity.” We mean thereby that we worship and serve one God who exists in three persons. God is one yet has revealed himself and relates to us in three different ways. More than that, God exists relationally within God’s own inner being in three ways or persons. We call these ways, these persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit because this is the way the Bible itself unfolds the story to us. In this Triune name, Father, Son and Holy Spirit we offer our worship, sing our praises, say our prayers, profess our faith, baptize our young, marry our couples, and bury our dead. Through the Trinity we come to understand and experience the living God who creates, redeems and sustains us for all eternity.

While the word “Trinity” itself is nowhere mentioned in the Bible, the concept of Trinity reflects the logical outworking in the life of the Early Church as they sought to

define and explain and summarize what they were experiencing of the God of the Bible. Theologian Donald McKim, who spoke here last August on Rally Day, has said, “The Trinity is a human attempt to explain who the Christian Church has understood God to be on the basis of Scripture.”

Take our Scripture Lessons today.

The 8th Proverb begins with an appeal to Wisdom, out of which we come to appreciate the deep things of God’s wisdom, - an expression of the Holy Spirit. “When he established the heavens (wisdom), I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep, when he made firm the skies above... I was there beside him... and I was daily his delight... rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.”ⁱ

Psalm 8 tells us God is Sovereign creator over all the earth, and yet this Sovereign God has made us human beings in God’s own image, though undeserving, to be only “a little lower than God, and crowned with glory and honor and given dominion” over all the earth.ⁱⁱ

Romans 5 summarizes the inter-working of this Triune God - how we are given peace with God, through justification by faith through our Lord Jesus Christ, with the hope of sharing the very glory of God, and then how because of that ultimate hope we are enabled to endure great suffering, “because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In John’s Gospel where Trinitarian imagery is especially abundant, from that deep extended meditation Jesus had with his disciples at the Last Supper, he describes the glory of the Father that is about to be revealed through of all things, Jesus the Son being lifted up on a cross, and how afterward the Spirit of truth will come to make the connection. “The Spirit will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”^{iv}

Again and again we see Trinitarian vibrant, living, organic relational manifestations of God throughout the Bible. By means of the Trinity, God is alive, active, involved and able to express his being, purpose, plan and communion to us.

But it is a tough concept. Alister MacIntyre grew up in Northern Ireland. He remembers the church saying the Athanasian Creed – a long, complete early church creed that has reference to the Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible. One dear farmer next to him whispered loudly “The whole darn thing is incomprehensible.” A fresh expression of the meaning and mystery of the Trinity came out in the form of a novel a few years ago called The Shack. Published in 2007 it was written by a previously unknown author by the name of Paul Young, with the subtitle, Where Tragedy Confronts Eternity. Initially he had it published privately, but then it took off, became wildly popular, and the number one New York Times Best Seller, with over five million copies in print.

Paul Young grew up as a mission kid in New Guinea. There he experienced something of the dark side of the church, including physical and emotional abuse suffered from his missionary father, all in the name of the Christian God. This novel became cathartic for Young as he worked out how he himself came to experience healing and renewal of faith, through a fresh understanding of a dynamic relational Trinity.

The Shack tells how his character Mackenzie Philips comes to grips with the abduction and brutal murder of his youngest daughter Missy while on a family camping trip. For four years thereafter Mackenzie, or Mack exists as a shadow person, living with all the if-lys, not really present to his family, angry with God, and gripped by his Great Sadness.

Then one day Mack receives a strange note from God-called Papa - asking him to come spend a weekend back at the abandoned shack deep in the Oregon wilderness where Missy was last seen, where her bloodied dress had been found. Arriving there in winter, which suddenly blooms into spring, he meets God, portrayed as three individuals. God the Father is a big black woman named Papa who loves to cook. God the Son Jesus is a Middle Eastern laborer dressed in jeans, plaid shirt and a tool belt. God the Holy Spirit is named Sarayu, an Asian woman who loves to garden and seems to fade in and out of visibility, clearly the least controllable or predictable one.

Most of the book consists of Mack's weekend visit with these persons as they help him come to grips with the tragedy of his daughter's death and the way God is still lovingly at work in Mack's life and in this world. Through his interaction with these three, Mac comes to a remarkable vision of God's presence in the midst of suffering and an understanding of forgiveness that does not deny, but rather overcomes evil.

Not every reader has been excited about the book. It has received a good deal of theological criticism by experts who point out certain deficiencies, particularly some of the trite comments the three characters make to one another. It can be jolting to traditional notions of God.

Yet taken for what it is, not a theological treatise but a novel along the lines of C.S. Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia, The Shack may be a window that helps us experience again the living loving relational vibrancy that is at the heart of our Triune God. Presbyterian Pastor and translator of The Message Bible, Eugene Peterson, goes so far as to say, "This book has the potential to do for our generation what John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress did for his. It's that good!"

In the time that remains before you head out for your lunch, I would like now to lift up three themes that emerge from Mack's encounter at the Shack, and share some of the dialogue from the book that undergird those themes, with you.

I

First Mack experiences **Awe and Wonder**. When we consider God the Father, Creator of heaven and earth, when we look at the heavens, the work of his fingers and the

moon and the stars that the Creator established, how can we respond but with Awe and Wonder?

When Mack arrived at the Shack it looked “dead and empty... The memories and horror of the last time he’d stood at this door came flooding back... the emptiness of the place invading his soul... The Great Sadness tightened around him, and he almost welcomed the smothering sensation... He looked up into the open rafters (of the shack) ‘I’m done, God,’ he whispered. I can’t do this anymore. I’m tired of trying to find you in all of this.”^v

But then, “He had barely walked fifty feet up the trail (back to his car) when he felt a sudden rush of warm air overtake him from behind. The chirping of a songbird broke the icy silence... all around him the white covering dissolved and was replaced by emerging and radiant growth. Three weeks of spring unfurled before him in thirty seconds... The snow banks had vanished, and summer wildflowers began to color the borders of the trail and the forest as far as he could see... He was stunned... The dilapidated shack had been replaced by a sturdy and beautifully constructed log cabin... it was built out of hand-peeled full-length logs, every one scribed for a perfect fit...”^{vi}

Awe and Wonder gripped Mack as he began to experience the change that was taking place around him. The Triune God of the Bible evokes awe and wonder and when we experience the beauty of the creation – we can only cry out, “My God, how great Thou art.”

II

Second, Mack experiences **Love and Acceptance**, though he is Unworthy. “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us,” Paul writes.

At the door Mack was greeted by God the Father, called Papa, in the person of a big black woman, “she crossed the distance between them and engulfed him in her arms. She was shouting his name- ‘Mackenzie Allen Phillips’ with the ardor of someone seeing a long-lost and deeply loved relative. He could feel the warmth of tears beginning to gather behind his eyes... It seemed that she saw them too. ‘It’s okay, honey, you can let it all out... I know you’ve been hurt, and I know you’re angry and confused. So, go ahead and let it out. It does a soul good to let the waters run once in a while – the healing waters.’”

“He felt the presence of love. It was warm, inviting, melting.... Just as she turned to enter the cabin, a small, distinctively Asian woman emerged from behind her. ‘Here, let me take those,’ her voice sang.. He then glanced past her and noticed that a third person had emerged from the cabin, this one a man. He appeared Middle Eastern and was dressed like a laborer, complete with tool belt and gloves.”^{vii}

“Mack struggled to ask, ‘which one of you is God?’ ‘I am,’ said all three in unison. Mack looked from one to the next, and even though he couldn’t begin to grasp what he was seeing and hearing, he somehow believed them.”^{viii}

Throughout the weekend Mack shares a number of meals with the three persons of the Shack, some all together, some one on one. He marvels at their interaction. “He had never seen three people share with such simplicity and beauty. Each seemed totally aware of the others rather than of himself.”^{ix}

“ ‘Mack said Papa with an intensity that caused him to listen very carefully, ‘we want to share with you the love and joy and freedom and light that we already know within ourselves. We created you, the human to be in face-to-face relationship with us, to join our circle of love. As difficult as it will be for you to understand everything that has taken place is occurring exactly according to this purpose, without violating choice or will.’ Mack experiences **Love and Acceptance**.

III

Third Mack experiences **Transformation and Healing** from his Great Sadness. “Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us St. Paul writes. Questioning Papa about this talk of love in the midst of a world filled with pain and suffering where a little girl is murdered by some twisted deviant, Papa answers tenderly, “ ‘Mackenzie there are millions of reasons to allow pain and hurt and suffering rather than to eradicate them, but most of those reasons can be understood only within each person’s story. I am not evil. You are the ones who embrace fear and pain and power and rights so readily in your relationships. But your choices are also not stronger than my purposes, and I will use every choice you make for the ultimate good and the most loving outcome.’”

“ ‘But the cost!’ Mack was staggered. ‘Look at the cost- all the pain, all the suffering, everything that is so terrible and evil. He paused and looked down at the table. ‘And look what it has cost you. Is it worth it?’ ‘Yes!’ came the unanimous, joyful response.”^x (from all three)

Mack asked, “‘Papa, what did Jesus accomplish by dying’ – oh nothing much, just the substance of everything that love purposed from before the foundations of creation.”^{xi}

“ ‘Mackenzie,’ It was the voice of Papa again, especially gentle and tender. ‘You really don’t understand yet. You try to make sense of the world in which you live based on a very small and incomplete picture of reality. It is like looking at a parade through the tiny knothole of hurt, pain, self-centeredness, and power and believing you are on your own and insignificant.... The real underlying flaw in your life Mackenzie, is that you don’t think I am good. If you knew I was good... then while you might not always understand what I am doing, you would trust me. But you don’t.’ ”^{xii}

“There was silence, and finally Mack looked up at Papa and spoke, ‘I don’t know how to change that.’ ‘You can’t, not alone. But together we will watch that change take

place. For now I just want you to be with me and discover that our relationship is not about performance or you having to please me. I'm not a bully, not some self-centered demanding little deity insisting on my own way. I am good, and I desire only what is best for you. You cannot find that through guilt or condemnation or coercion, only through a relationship of love. And I do love you.”^{xiii}

IV

My Friends, the point of speaking about, relating to, and thinking of God as Triune is to encounter God's Glory in the midst of life's pain, suffering, and joy, and recognize how greatly you are loved. You are forgiven. You are given life. The God who was from the beginning in relationship and who meets you in the present moment as the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is the God of eternal and unending relationships. This God desires you only to trust him and live in loving relationship with him. You, who are created in the image and likeness of this Triune God, will experience this sense of Awe and Wonder, Love and Acceptance, Transformation and Healing, life that is truly life, when you have made room for this Triune God to dwell with, relate with, and thrive within you. That is amazingly good news.

I close with this prayer from the Orthodox Church, who of all branches of Christianity, have most consistently maintained and lifted up the Holy Trinity.

“O Trinity, O Trinity, the uncreated One;
O Unity, O Unity of Father, Spirit, Son:
You are without beginning,
Your life is never ending;
And though our tongues are earthbound clay,
Light them with flaming fire today.”

And in these words of the Apostle Paul at the end of 2 Corinthians,

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and
the love of God and
the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with you.”^{xiv}

Amen.

ⁱ Proverbs 8:27-31 selected.

ⁱⁱ Psalm 8:1,5.

ⁱⁱⁱ Romans 5:1-5, selected.

^{iv} John 16:14.

^v The Shack, William Paul Young, pp. 79-88

^{vi} *ibid.*, pp.82-84

^{vii} *Ibid.*, pp.86-88.

^{viii} *ibid.* p.89.

^{ix} *Ibid.* p.123.

^x *Ibid.* p. 128.

^{xi} Ibid. p. 193

^{xii} Ibid. p.128.

^{xiii} Ibid. p.128.

^{xiv} 2 Corinthians 13:14.