

“Three Dimensional God”

Romans 5:1-5

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1/24/10 First in a four part series on “The Shack”

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

Mack decided to bang loudly. . .just as he raised his fist to do so, the door flew open, and he was looking directly into the face of a large beaming African-American woman.

Instinctively he jumped back, but he was too slow. With speed that belied her size, she crossed the distance between them and engulfed him in her arms. . .shouting his name. . .with the ardor of someone seeing a long-lost and deeply loved relative. She finally put him back on earth, and with her hands on his shoulders, pushed him back as if to get a good look at him.

Mack was speechless. In a few seconds this woman had breached pretty much every social propriety behind which he had so safely entrenched himself. But something in the way that she looked at him and yelled his name made him equally delighted to see her too, even though he didn't have a clue who she was.

A small, distinctively Asian woman emerged from behind her.

As she stepped back, Mack found himself involuntarily squinting in her direction, as if doing so would allow his eyes to see her better. But strangely, he still had a difficult time focusing on her; she seemed almost to shimmer in the light and her hair blew in all directions even though there was hardly a breeze.

He. . .noticed a third person had emerged from this cabin, this one a man. He appeared Middle Eastern and was dressed like a laborer, complete with tool belt and gloves. He stood easily, leaning against the door jamb with arms

*crossed in front of him, wearing jeans covered in wood dust and a plaid shirt with sleeves rolled just above the elbows. . .*¹

And so we meet the three persons Mack meets in his strange return to the cabin that had been the scene of the horrible crime. Even if you haven't already read *The Shack*, you can probably guess who they are.

The names they are given in the book are Elousia, Jesus, and Sarayu.

The name Elousia comes from a combination of 'El' (which is Hebrew for God) and 'ousia' (which is Greek for 'being'). Mac ends up calling Elousia 'Papa'.²

We know who Jesus is. No explanation needed there.

The Sarayu (also Sarju; Dev. *sarāyu*- f., later Dev. *sarayū*-) is a river that flows through what is now the modern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. This river is mentioned in ancient Hindu religious texts (the Vedas and the Ramayana). Its meaning? Air, Wind, That Which is Flowing.³

God represented by two women and a man and none of them white?

Before we get too thrown off, we remember even the Bible has numerous images for God!

Young's depiction of God has raised a lot of uproar in some of the more conservative Christian communities. Some have even called Young's book part of a cult intended to promote non-Christian ideas.

Let's not forget this is a fiction story. This is not a religious tract or a sermon or even a Bible lesson. In this work of fiction, though, Young communicates religious ideas in ways that get people talking. And his book certainly has impacted people, with millions of copies sold. People seem to either love it or hate it.

Over the next four weeks, we will explore four theological themes in *The Shack*. This week we address the Trinity. With this unusual family trio, Young is intentionally drawing a representation of the Trinity.

¹ Pp. 82-85 from William Young's "The Shack"

² . This is Biblical, taken directly from Paul's calling God the Father 'Abba'.

³ The name is the feminine derivative of the Sanskrit root *sar* "to flow"; as a masculine stem, *sarāyu*- means "air, wind", i.e. "that which is streaming".

It may surprise you to know Christians in America are not very Trinitarian, despite the fact that all mainline Christians claim belief in the Trinity. Often we are **Binitarian**, talking about and praying to God the Father and Jesus. Sometimes we are simply **Unitarian**, talking about and praying only to, Jesus. The Spirit is all but forgotten, an afterthought swirling around in some foggy, invisible manner. We have trouble with Trinity.

Not that you can blame us. The Trinity is a very abstract, confusing, and in many ways a difficult doctrine to wrap your arms around. The Bible never mentions the word Trinity. Father, Son, and Spirit are certainly mentioned in the Bible, but the actual word and concept of God as Trinity is just not there.

The Trinity was something the early church argued about for centuries before finally deciding on an explicit doctrine at the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. It was from this Council the Nicene Creed, which we will again pray today, developed.

The basic concept of the Trinity says that God is three persons in one essence, or three beings in one being.

So, a large African American mama named 'Papa', a Middle Eastern subcontractor named Jesus, and a slight Asian woman named Sarayu?

The images may be jarring, because they are not our stereotypic images of the Trinity (God the Father as an old white man with a long white beard, the blond and blue-eyed Jesus of 1950s vintage painting style, and the Holy Spirit as dove). Still, they may make the reality of the Trinity **more accessible** to us.

In drawing out a story which features detailed descriptions of real humans, united in a loving family, we catch a glimpse of the nature of God as Trinity. Concrete images of the Trinity flesh out our experience and encourage our imaginative exploration of who God is.

However, what Young does in "The Shack" goes well beyond his depiction of each person of the Trinity. It is in **how the three persons of the Trinity interact** that we truly get to the bottom of why the doctrine of the Trinity even matters.

There's a scene in the book where Papa is cooking and Jesus accidentally knocks a bowl of batter over, creating a huge slippery mess. All three end up on the floor laughing and then all three help each other clean up the mess. No blame, no anger, no frustration. There's another scene in which Jesus shows deep tenderness towards Papa. Here is what Mack said about it. . .

To be in the presence of such love expressed seemed to dislodge an inner emotional logjam, and while he didn't understand exactly what he felt--it was good. What was it he witnessed? Something simple, warm, intimate, genuine; this was holy. (p. 107)

Papa, Jesus, and Sarayu loved one another and cared for one another in ways Mack had never seen. It was a picture of God in relationship with Godself---this was holiness.

[Mack] *had never seen three people share with such simplicity and beauty. Each seemed more aware of the others than of himself. It was a circle of relationship, no authority, no chain of command.*⁴

This mutual submission of the Trinity, God serving God within a circle of love. This is why the Trinity matters.

The Trinity matters

Because it is God in relationship

Mutual respect and submission

Give and take, complete care and concern

A picture of what it means to truly love

The Trinity matters because it shows us

God's very being is love

God's very being is interrelated and connected

No one is more important than the other, no one takes
advantage of the other

The Trinity is important because it tells us of the nature of God, but it also informs us of God's desire for us. It models both the vertical dimension of our faith (our relationship with God) as well as the horizontal dimension (our relationships with each other). It gives us a picture of the mutual submission, respect, and care we are all supposed to treat each other with. Imagine how different our world would be---how different our lives would be---if we truly lived into the image of God expressed in the Trinity.

We are standing in the grace of the Trinity. We are already there---do we even know it? All we have to do is honor and recognize it. Jesus, Jesse, Yeshua knocks on our door, inside our skin. Papa, Mama, Elousia waits for us, with infinite and eternal patience. The Spirit? Sarayu, Comforter. She is ready to give new life, to lead us in new and unpredictable ways.

⁴ Pp. 121-122, "The Shack"