

David's Vision of God
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(Psalms 23 NRSV) The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. {2} He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; {3} he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. {4} Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff-- they comfort me. {5} You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. {6} Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

Last year, while out golfing, Steve Anderson asked me if I had read the book, THE SHACK. I had not.

I had actually read about the book in an article from USA today that was explaining all the many ways that the fundamentalist church was up in arms about it.

As Steve began describing the book to me I became intrigued.

Steve loaned me his copy, and, to be completely honest, it sat on my shelf for a long time before I picked it up.

But once I started reading it, I could not put it down. I read it in a couple of days.

Then when we used it as a discussion topic at WWE, last fall I listened to it, which was even more powerful than reading it.

THE SHACK got to me.

Without doubt, William Paul Young pushes some theological boundaries - but to be honest, they really didn't bother me. What intrigued me so much was the way he raised so many of the issues that I hear people wrestling with today.

Issues that have devastated people spiritually both within the Christian community and outside it.

Issues such as: Bitterness
 Guilt

Powerlessness
 And the emotional paralysis that often destroys
 persons following a traumatic experience in their life.

Soon after finishing the book, I encountered my first Shack critic, and there are many out there.

One of my favorites came from a website created solely to attack the book. He writes:

“The Shack” is not about a basketball player it is a book that twists the gospel. If you are buying into the message of this book thought out in an outhouse you are buying into damnable heresy.

As if that wasn't enough, he goes on:

The endorsement on the cover of this heretical book is from Eugene Peterson, author of “The Message”. {Peterson writes:} “This book has the potential to do for our generation what John Bunyan’s ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’ did for his. It’s that good!”

I for one am fed up with those who quote “The Message” as if it were the Bible. It is not. It is nothing but a very bad paraphrase. Stop quoting “The Message” on your media programs or I will turn you off for good. Stop quoting “The Message” from your pulpits or I will walk out of your church. Stop reading from “The Message” in your Bible studies or I will not attend. Why? Because Eugene Peterson’s popular paraphrase of the Bible is twisted. He has no Biblical discernment, his bad paraphrase of the word of God is not the word of God no matter how popular it has become. If you cannot use a literal version of the Bible to get across your teachings, perhaps you should not be teaching at all. Now Eugene Peterson is endorsing even more twisted wrings for your deception.

I am sure that this author is using the King James Version of the Bible, which – I hate to tell him is one of the LEAST literal translations. But like The Message or the New Revised Standard Version, or the New International Version --- they are all translations – imperfect translations from the original languages of Greek and Hebrew.

But what is it that makes him so vitriolic?

Why is he so afraid of a novel?

Maybe we have to go back and ask the same question as to why the fundamentalist church was so upset with the DiVinci Code, or the Harry Potter series?

I don't know about you – but when I read a commentary like that one, it makes me even more intrigued as to what the fuss is all about.

In case you are not familiar with William Paul Young's book, let me give you a brief overview.

The Shack opens in the context of tragedy.

The book is set out west; the main character of *The Shack* (Mack) is still devastated by the grief and guilt over the abduction and murder of his precious six year old daughter Missy, which had taken place on a camping trip to Oregon four years earlier.

One day, Mack receives a very strange letter, it was an invitation and it said quite simply:

“I've missed you, I'll be at the shack next weekend if you want to get together. Papa”

Papa was the name that Mack's wife Nan used for God.

Uncertain what to do, but drawn mysteriously by the invitation, Mack heads for the Oregon wilderness and finds a dilapidated old shack.

Upon entering the shack and realizing that this was the place where Missy was abused and murdered --- it somehow is miraculously transformed into a comfortable cottage.

Young writes:

. . . 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.

Just as she turned . . . a small, distinctly Asian woman merged from behind her . . . He then glanced past her and notices that a third person had emerged . . . a man. He appeared Middle Eastern.

When they finally stopped giggling, the large woman . . . said, 'Okay, we know who you are, but we should probably introduce ourselves to you . . . you could call me what Nan does: Papa' . . . 'And I,' interrupted the man, who looked to be about in his thirties . . . 'I am Hebrew . . .'

Mack was suddenly staggered by his own realization. 'Then you are . . .'

'Jesus? Yes . . .'

Mack stood dumbfounded . . . Just as he was about to crumple to his knees, the Asian woman stepped closer and deflected his attention. 'And I am Sarayu [the Holy Spirit]. Thoughts tumbled over each other as Mack struggled to figure out what to do . . . Since there were three of them, maybe this was a trinity sort of thing . . . 'Then,' Mack struggled to ask, 'which one of you is God?'
'I am,' said all three in unison.

Of course that little exchange is one of the many places in the books that has fundamentalist grabbing their chests.

God . . . a woman?
God . . . a black woman?

Papa explains why Mack sees her as a black woman.
For me to appear to you as a woman and suggest that you call me Papa is simply to mix metaphors, to help you keep from falling so easily back into your religious conditioning.

Gordon MacDonald in his review of the book writes about the critics he encountered and why they were so upset.
Of this critic's sincerity, there was no doubt. He and others I would later meet were deeply disturbed that Young had dared to portray the members of the Godhead – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – as eccentric personalities with offbeat ways of communicating their message.

More than once I heard Young accused of blasphemy. I heard him labeled a post-modernist for whom "truth" meant nothing. I was told by one Shack-detractor that anyone refusing to denounce the author and his book could not be considered a sound evangelical.

I can admit to a sense of shock when I realized in the course of my reading that Young had chosen to portray God our Father as an absolutely enchanting, powerfully-mothering, African-American woman. But I will also admit that it wasn't too long in my reading before I found myself wanting to sit at her kitchen table and to enjoy her cooking, her conversation, and her maternal affection. The beauty of the fellowship generated by her presence was what many of us have sought for a lifetime and so rarely experienced.

The Shack is a fascinating book, because it really seems to help people connect to God in some powerful ways.

Maybe not in the ways of old – but some of the issues that the book tackles were not addressed in the Bible – so it speaks to these people in ways that they had not been available to them before.

Even I found some of the theological liberties that Young took in *The Shack* to be a bit much – but at the same time, I would hate to throw the baby out with the bath water.

Because if we find Young’s description of God offensive – think about how the ancient Jews would have reacted to one of our most beloved images of God found in the Bible.

Did David have critics when he wrote these words?

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I am certain that many in ancient Israel were offended by the notion of God as a shepherd.

Today – that is not an issue

We see a shepherd as something that would be a role model for a King, let alone God.

Shepherds in ancient Israel were not the clean, cute, romantic figures that we have in our Christmas pageants.

Shepherds were dirty, unkempt, drifters that people did not want to hang out with.

Most shepherds did not own their own sheep. They were temps who worked for others in the nasty business of flock-tending. They lived on the underside of the community.

Not an image that most of us would give to a loving, nurturing always present God.

So how do you describe a God who is good, gracious, caring and patient to a fault?

How do you describe a God who was not aloof, not capricious, not cruel or vindictive like most of the neighboring deities?

Maybe you would point to somebody who had those qualities and say God is like what you see in that person.

It does not make that person God, it just gives us some handles --- something to grasp as to what God is like.

For William Paul Young, it is a loving mother.

And for David → it was a shepherd – just as he had been.

Everyone in ancient Israel had seen shepherds leading their sheep toward green pastures and cool waters (and in the Middle East that is a challenge!)

Tradition says that David wrote the 23rd Psalm following the loss of his son Absalom. It also says that he wrote this psalm while walking the Wadi Kidron which is known as the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

The hearers of this Psalm had walked from Jericho to Jerusalem and would know the desolation of this path well. So the image of God as a shepherd who leads one through this valley and brings them to cool green well watered pastures would be a welcome image.

William Paul Young knew that for many of us today, the image of God as a hostess in her kitchen, whipping up a meal that makes your mouth water was comforting as well.

As Gordon McDonald closes his article on the Shack writes:

The picture of a simple shepherd in motion – grimy though he might be – was sheer genius when it came to forming impressions of who God is and how he connects with those who are the sheep of his pasture. Once the Psalm was read, anyone in the ancient world could possess a beginning theology of an incredible God who provides “everything that I need.”

There there’s The Shack. I think Young had the same idea the Psalmist had. Find a way, any way, that will open the heart of a broken person and point him toward Heaven and all of its redeeming love. Tell the old, old story in new and astonishing ways.

