

What Does God Look Like?
The Shack, by William Paul Young
Galatians 5:1, 13-25
June 27, 2010

Sometimes horrible things happen to completely innocent people. Right near here, in the East Bay, on June 14, Melissa Huckaby was sentenced to life imprisonment without the possibility of parole for the rape and killing of Sandra Cantu, an 8-year-old girl. Melissa Huckaby, a 28-year-old mother and Sunday school teacher, pleaded guilty to kidnapping, drugging, and smothering Sandra Cantu, a neighbor at the mobile home park where they both lived in Tracy. The story went like this: Melissa Huckaby drove Sandra Cantu to the church where Melissa's grandfather was a pastor, then an hour and 25 minutes later, she drove her car to an irrigation pond. The next day Huckaby gave the police a note that said Cantu had been locked in a suitcase and thrown in the water. 8 days later, the police indeed found the body stuffed in a suitcase in the pond, and they found evidence in the church of the crime committed there. 4 days later Melissa Huckaby was arrested—and now a year later she is sentenced to remain in prison for the rest of her life.

This is a true story, a crime committed nearby, a despicable crime, one that makes us cringe, one that makes us ask, why?

If you have read *The Shack*, you know the story starts with a camping trip and a despicable crime. It's written from the point of view of the father of the victim. The father is Mack Phillips, and his youngest daughter Missy is 6 1/2 years old. The story is fiction, but because we read these stories in the news, we know the story could have been nonfiction.

It was Labor Day weekend, and Mack decided to take his younger 3 children for an end-of-the-summer camping trip in northeastern Oregon. His wife, Nan, had a class to attend in Seattle, and the older children were already back at college for the fall. So Mack and the 3 children drove to the campground, found a campsite, took a hike, made supper, watched a beautiful sunset, and bedded down in their sleeping bags for the night. Mack reflected on Missy's questions to him that afternoon in the car. He had told her her favorite story—an Indian legend where the Indian princess sacrifices her life for her tribe. Missy had asked why the Great Spirit made the Indian princess jump off the cliff to her death. Mack said, "It's only a legend," and Missy asked if Jesus dying on a cross was only a legend too. Mack said, "no," that was true. And then Missy asked, "Why did God make Jesus die on a cross?" Mack said, "Jesus chose to die because he loved you and me and everyone in the world. He saved us from our sickness, just like the princess saved her tribe." "Will I ever have to jump off a cliff?" Missy asked.

(—This question gives us a foreshadowing of the tragedy to come...)

The next day, the family made friends with other campers, had an evening by the campfire together, then on the third day, while Mack was cleaning up after breakfast and Missy was coloring with crayons at the campsite, the other two children, Kate and Josh, went down to the lake to go for a canoe ride. Kate called to her dad from the middle of the lake, and when she waved with her paddle, the canoe tipped and turned over, sending both children into

the lake. Mack ran down to the shore, kicked off his tennis shoes and swam out to the canoe. Kate surfaced and he shouted to her to swim to shore. But where was Josh? Mack dove down and saw that Josh's life vest strap was caught underwater in the canoe webbing. With a great heave of strength, Mack rolled the canoe over and freed Josh from his tether, but Josh's body was limp. Mack began mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and, by then, other adults gathered to help them come ashore. Finally Josh coughed up water and cried and everyone was relieved. He was all right. Mack went back to the campsite, just then remembering Missy who was coloring there. He couldn't find her. He looked everywhere. They checked the bathrooms, the showers, the other campers' campsites, and she was nowhere to be found. Mack went to the Camp headquarters and reported his daughter missing. A search started. Several hours passed and fear began to set in. Missy was gone. Then someone reported having seen a truck leave the campground with a little girl in the front seat wearing red. Then they found a red crayon over by a tree, and then one of Missy's shoes. Then Mack noticed something peculiar, a little ladybug pin on Missy's coloring book pinned into the pages, left at the campsite. They radioed these details in to a detective's office. The detective asked them to describe the ladybug pin exactly. When they said it had 5 dots, the detective paused on the line in silence, and said, "We've been trying to catch this guy for four years. He's got the nickname "Little Ladykiller," and we think he's responsible for the death of four girls, all under the age of 10. The only clue we ever have is that he leaves this little ladybug pin at the scene of the kidnapping, usually at a campground."

They never found Missy, but they did find her little torn, blood-soaked red dress crumpled on the floor in a shack off in the wilderness. A "Great Sadness" set in. Missy was presumed dead, and Mack cried out to God, "Why?"

Three and a half years later, Mack was telecommuting from his home during a freezing snowstorm. He bundled up to go outdoors to pick up the mail from the mailbox. There in the mailbox was letter in an envelope—no address, just his first name on the outside of the envelope, with a note inside: "Mackenzie, It's been a while. I've missed you. I'll be at the shack next weekend if you want to get together. Papa"

"Papa" was what his wife called God. How could he explain this? It was either from God, as absurd as that sounded, a cruel joke, or something more sinister from Missy's killer (67). Something propelled Mack forward; he started making plans to return to the shack where Missy was killed. He didn't know what he would find: how could it be any worse than the grief he felt?

When he approached the shack, "he had barely walked 50 feet up the trail when he felt a sudden rush of warm air overtake him from behind. The path in front of him lost its veneer of snow and ice. Three weeks of spring unfurled before him in thirty seconds. The snowbanks vanished and summer wildflowers colored the trail and forest as far as he could see" (80). Mack was stunned. "This can't be happening!" Voices were coming from inside the shack—he entered and found there 3 figures: a large, beaming African-American woman named "Papa," a Middle Eastern man who dressed like a laborer and called himself "Jesus;" and a small Asian woman shimmering in the light, with her hair blowing in all directions with the name "Sarayu."

These three characters are the author's portrayal of God in three persons, the Trinity. A motherly black woman, a Middle Eastern young man, and a creative Asian woman who comes and goes with the wind.

So what *does* God look like anyway? When you were little, you may have thought of God as a white man with a long beard. Or if you have brown skin, maybe your God looked like you? God is portrayed in the Bible in many ways: as a rock, as breath, as fire, as a mother hen, as an eagle, as love, as a fountain, as light, as a shepherd, as a lamb, as a king, as a dove, and as a father. That's what Jesus called God, "Father." And so the words of the Trinity came about in our ancient creeds: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in order to convey the multiplicity of God, that God can be imagined in many forms. Some prefer not to limit God by assigning gender to God. Though Jesus was a man because he was a living person, God need not necessarily be masculine.

William Paul Young in *The Shack* uses whacky characters for God to show unconditional love that a person needs in the crises of life. In this case, it was Mack who had been overcome by grief in losing his daughter Missy. A "Great Sadness" settled in upon him, making him unable to move forward. God had become his enemy, and he engulfed himself in anger and despair.

In this novel, God reaches out to Mack, inviting him to revisit the shack where Missy died. There he encounters springtime, a garden of flowering plants, delicious food, pleasant aromas, and supportive conversation with each of the Trinitarian characters. They help him examine his life, including his broken relationship with his own father. They help him face the tragic loss of Missy on earth and give him a glimpse of Missy in heaven. A moving scene in the book comes when Mack meets his father in heaven and forgives him for abusing him when he was a child.

I got a phone call about this very scene. Many of you know Marion Strickler, who moved to Willits. He was here on Shirley Spina's last Sunday and read that I would be preaching on *The Shack*. Marion told me I could share with you what he told me on the phone: Marion had worked as a correctional counselor at the Vacaville Prison. He had all the records of the prisoners at his fingertips and knew what crimes they had committed. The prisoners he had the hardest time with were the ones who had tortured little children. He felt such hatred toward these people. Then he read the book, *The Shack*, and he said when he read the part when Mack forgives his father, he suddenly let go of all his hatred. He realized that even the men who abused young children were human beings too. Something allowed Marion to let go of his anger and learn to work with these men and bring them hope for the future.

In the novel, Mack learns from the Trinitarian characters that there is evil in the world, but that God is love and that love is available to all, freely given, and that through it, one's life can be redeemed. Even though there is bad in the world, there is God.

Our evening Spirituality Group is going to be reading *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* by Harold Kushner, starting July 8. The question of *why* bad things happen may never be answered, but we can come to the conclusion that *when* bad things happen—and they do—God is there! And God comes to us in many forms! There may be crime and senseless violence in the world, but there is also goodness—when bad things happen, we need goodness all the more. We need God.

Paul says in Galatians to live by the Spirit, not by the flesh. By the "flesh" Paul means by all that is worldly, not godly. And he includes, in his list of worldly ways, anger, quarrels, strife, jealousy, and dissention. We can live in those ways, but when we do we are not free. We can live in sadness and despair, we can feel sorry for ourselves; we can be jealous of others and angry about injustices perceived to be perpetrated against us. We can live that way if we want to. But wouldn't we rather live in love?

Paul says, "By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit (God's way) is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Gal. 5:22). God invites us to choose this way, the way of the Spirit. God invites us to encounter love in many forms—in worship of God the Creator (the Father or Mother), in prayer with Jesus the Son (friend and brother), and in unity with the Holy Spirit, the force that works among us changing who we are and how we see the world.

Mack undergoes a life transformation when he accepts the invitation to imagine God in new ways, when he allows God to enter his cold and bitter world and bring healing. It is an invitation God gives each of us—to open ourselves to a new path, to freedom from the past, from anger and resentment, to discover forgiveness and joy and new life. I pray for this new life for the families of Sandra Cantu and Melissa Huckaby, devastated by incomprehensible tragedy, caused probably by untreated mental illness, not by God, and I pray for each of you, that when bad things happen to you, you will not reject God, but walk with God, however you imagine God to be. I pray this in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.