

The Shack
Where Is God When I Need Him the Most?
4/23/17

- It's a good morning to be here together. Now, I don't want to put a damper on our time, but did any of you have a bad day this week? Anybody willing to raise your hand to that? You know, just one of those days when maybe things didn't seem to be going your way? Maybe you had one of those wake-up-on-the-wrong-side-of-the-bed type days and everything just went downhill from there.
 - o We've all been there, haven't we? We've all had bad days.

- Of course, some of you may be feeling like it was just a bad week—or a bad year – or a bad decade! Life is a mix of good and bad, right? Yet, when the bad comes it can definitely overwhelm the good at times so that we have a hard time seeing the good.
 - o Last Sunday was a great day! We had a great Easter Celebration Service, didn't we? It was a day some of us have been preparing for, for weeks, months even. We reached our goal with 121 people in attendance!
 - o Yet, the 1½ weeks leading up to Easter wasn't the best week for our family personally. Our dog, Mollie, who we've had for 10½ years, since she was a puppy, got very sick. After going back and forth to the vet for testing and medications, it was determined that it was something that she wasn't going to recover from.
 - o So, on Maundy Thursday, Wil and I had to make the decision that it was time. I held her as she was put to sleep. That evening, I had to come and do the Maundy Thursday service, which is one of my favorites. But, it was overwhelmed by losing my sweet girl that morning. Then, Easter was great! But, when I went home, I wasn't greeted by the excited wagging of a big old tail. And, I miss that.

- So, I fully realize that some of you may really be facing some serious struggles or pain or loss that go way deeper than the loss of a pet. You may be even in the middle of a downright tragedy.
 - o You know, this life on earth can be wonderful and exhilarating, but if you live a few years, you're going to run into some hard times. We don't have to look far to hear the news about awful tragedies and injustices and talks of war happening near and far. And while we're blessed in many ways here in our community and our nation, I know many of us have faced extremely difficult situations and experiences—some still are right now.

- It prompts one of life's biggest and hardest questions in whatever form you ask it: Why does pain exist? Why does God let bad things happen to good people? It can be the biggest hurdle for some people to experience relationship with God, and it can be the type of question that really rocks our faith.

- I know we're getting heavy pretty quickly here this morning, and sometimes we don't like to talk too much about the events, experiences, or questions that cut us to the core and cause us to struggle with trusting God.
 - It can feel a little like opening Pandora's box to admit our doubts or face those things in life that have the potential to shake our faith. But, we need to.
- So, wherever you are on your journey of trusting God, whatever you're wrestling with inside, I'm glad you are here. Last week, I encouraged folks to seek answers for their questions and I'm glad you took me up on that.
 - And, let me say up front that our God is big enough to handle our questions. He is loving enough to handle our emotions—even our anger or confusion. And He is good enough to meet us where we are, to heal us from the inside out, and to bring good out of even the most terrible pain or circumstances.
- Over the next few weeks, this is going to be a place where we ask and explore some tough questions. Together we are going to dig into some provocative questions, start some deep conversations, and, I hope, explore what it can really look like to encounter God.
 - As we've said, we'll be using the movie, *The Shack*, to help spark our journey, and we'll be watching some video clips as examples and illustrations. Based on the novel, *The Shack* takes us on a father's spiritual journey as he questions God, God's existence and God's goodness.
 - After suffering a family tragedy, Mack Phillips spirals into a deep depression, causing him to question everything. Facing a crisis of faith, he receives a mysterious letter urging him to an abandoned shack deep in the Oregon wilderness, the site of the tragedy.
 - Despite his doubts, Mack journeys to the shack and encounters a group of three people (think the Trinity), led by a woman named Papa. Through this meeting, Mack finds important truths that will transform his understanding of his tragedy and change his life forever.
 - Last week, we watched the trailer, but something was up with the sound and I don't know if you could hear it well, so let's watch it again to get a little taste of the movie.
 - **Show trailer.**
- Out of curiosity, how many of you have seen the movie? How many of you have read the book? They are both so powerful! If you haven't seen *The Shack*, although it is no longer in theaters, the book is still, obviously, available. It is an easy read. It is a fictional book that shares some wonderful spiritual truths. If you want to go deeper through this series, I would encourage you to read the book.
- In many ways, *The Shack* is like a modern-day parable, similar to the stories Jesus told to help people better understand the truth He wanted to communicate. *The Shack* is an artistic and imaginative representation of a deeply personal story that explores how we

deal with pain, how we find healing, and what it might be like to encounter God face-to-face in our day.

- It helps us give voice to some of our difficult questions and points us toward the path for healing. For all those who have wondered where God is in their pain, for those who have questioned if God is there at all, it presents an unforgettable encounter with a divine love that promises to never leave us.
 - It points us toward biblical principles that apply to us all, whether we have endured terrible tragedy and pain or the more common struggles of everyday life.
- As we start to dive in, today's movie clip takes us to an early conversation between Mack and Papa at the shack. And, right up front, I want to discuss what we are about to see because you'll notice right away in this scene that Papa (God the Father) is a black woman, played by Octavia Spencer.
- In later clips we'll see Jesus as a young carpenter of Middle Eastern descent (that makes sense) and Sarayu, the Holy Spirit, in the form of an Asian woman.
 - Now, when I first read the book and read that God was portrayed in the form of a woman, I was taken back. And, there are folks then and now with the release of the movie who are up in arms about God being portrayed as a woman and calling it heretical theology.
- But, let me encourage you that these characters are not meant as literal portrayals of God or as a theological statement on the gender or race of God. Instead, they are an artistic way of presenting the different aspects of God's character in each member of the Trinity.
- God created man in his image and God created woman in his image. Genesis 1 tells us, "both man and woman were created in His image." Therefore, God holds the attributes of both men and women. He is strong and compassionate. He is provider and nurturer. He encompasses everything about all of us and goes beyond everything about us as well.
 - The Trinity of God the Father, God, the Son, and God, the Holy Spirit in the book and movie are creative representations of God's transcendence and goodness. God is above and beyond all earthly limitations, and in His goodness, He desires to break down all boundaries in order to reach us with His compassion and saving grace.
- That's what we see Him doing with Mack. In the context of the story, Mack has rejected God in the past, but God is reaching out to him. Early in the movie, we see that Mack and his mother were abused by his alcoholic father. This naturally shapes Mack's view of God as a father and is a big part of why Mack rejects God.
- I personally know women who have had a real hard time accepting God as Father because they were sexually and physically abused by their earthly father. You probably know people like that as well. Their image of father is warped because of the abuse. God wants to meet them where they are and help them through it so they can see him as their perfect heavenly Father.
 - So, in the movie, we hear Papa tell Mack, "After what you've been through, I didn't think you could handle a father right now." Papa knows what Mack needs. And,

God longs to heal him, so Papa reaches out to Mack in a representation he can relate to.

- In fact, later in the film, Papa appears as a man and tells Mack that a father figure is what's needed for the challenge Mack has to face at that time. In much deeper ways than gender, God is not at all who or what Mack expected.
- While the movie is fictional, the artistic representations of God through these characters are a powerful picture of the Trinity. The appearance of God in different characters echoes the truth of the Bible that God is three in one and that God is not limited by our earthly concepts of Him.
 - In fact, throughout the Bible, we see God taking on various forms in order to meet with those He loves. For Moses, it was a burning bush. To the Israelites escaping Egypt, God appeared in the form of a pillar of cloud and of fire.
 - Elsewhere in the Bible, God's presence was manifested in and through a rushing wind, and His message came through angels and even a donkey. Even Jesus Himself, who had a human body, was not what the people expected of the Messiah.
- And in case, like me, you feel taken aback by the portrayal of God as a woman, don't forget that there are places in the Bible where God's character is described in female terms.
 - Hosea 11:4 compares God's love to that of a mother: "I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them"
 - Isaiah 66:13 echoes this idea when it says, "As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you."
- Are these passages claiming God is a woman? No. And neither is The Shack. But God is in the business of eradicating our assumptions and expectations and replacing them with an invitation to trust His goodness as He works in our lives. He will stop at nothing to draw us closer and demonstrate to us His love and goodness.
 - The Shack isn't teaching that God is a woman. What we find are powerful elements of storytelling and beautiful depictions of God's character and His relentless love and pursuit of each of us to meet us where we are in our brokenness.
- So, without revealing any spoilers, as they knead bread dough together, things get deep.
 - Let's watch.
 - **Show Movie Clip 1: "Truth"**
- Have you ever asked that question: "Where were You when I needed You?" Have you ever wondered, "Where is God in all this mess, in all this pain?"
 - These are big questions, aren't they? For many people, this what can keep them from belief and faith. The general question is "How can a loving God allow such evil in the world?"

- But for most people, the most difficult question in this world has a much more personal tone. It's "Where were You when I needed You?" It's "Where is God in my pain?"
- Maybe you've grappled with these questions. Maybe you're facing them right now. Everyday, humans for millennia have wrestled with them.
 - We all feel the weight of a broken world. Live long enough on this earth, and we will face trouble and hardship. Our worst fears are of the most painful events, and we hope and pray that we won't have to experience them.
 - For Mack, he is going through what is probably the worst fear for anyone who is a parent. He is going through the loss of his daughter at the hands of a child predator.
 - As a mom, this is my worst fear. It is why my eye is ever watching, ever scanning, ever looking around to see who is in our vicinity and, if we are at a park or a children's event, is every adult here with a child? It's why I always tell my boys, "I need to be able to see you." Josiah ask me once, "when can I go outside by myself?" I said, "I don't know, maybe when you're 16 or so." He just looked at me.
- So, when troubles come and even if our worst fears become reality, what do we do with these questions? How do we answer them? How do find hope in the midst of our pain? And how do we know God is good when everything around us feels like He isn't?
 - Now, I'm not promising that we'll find the be-all, end-all answers today. I can't give all the answers in a 30-minute sermon. But there is hope. There is good that overcomes evil. And I'd like for us to look at some starting points that can offer encouragement and hope.
- First, Don't Hold Back
 - Listen, let me encourage you today and tell you again that God can handle our questions and emotions. We don't have to hold back with Him. He understands our emotions. He knows our thoughts and feelings whether we give voice to them or not. He created them, after all.
- I preached a sermon years ago that was entitled "How to Have a Fake Relationship with God." It dealt with the idea of not questioning God or asking "why."
 - See, growing up, I remember hearing from good-intentioned saints that you shouldn't question God. You should never ask him "why." God has a reason and you don't have to know the reason, just have enough faith to know that God knows what he is doing.
 - Those good intentions that were meant to build our faith actually broke our faith down. If we aren't allowed to ask questions and go to God with our deepest hurts and even our anger, how in the world can we have any kind of relationship with him?

- Can you imagine being married to someone who refused to listen to any questioning, who refused to hear or seek to understand things that they have done to hurt you, who doesn't want to hear your emotions, who basically doesn't want to hear anything from you unless it is good about them? That would be a fake marriage.
 - o God is not into fake. He is all about being real. He wants us to be real. And, the God who is big enough to create the universe, the earth and all that is in it, is quite capable, able and willing to deal with your questions and emotions.
 - o He would rather you be angry with him and tell him about it so that he can work with you through that, than to keep it in and distrust him. That is a real relationship and that's what he wants.

- How do we know that's what God wants? Well, let's look in the Bible at King David, arguably Israel's greatest king. He offers us excellent examples in his psalms. He wasn't afraid to tell God exactly what he was feeling. Consider these examples:
 - o Psalm 13:1-2, David says, O LORD, how long will you forget me? Forever?
How long will you look the other way?
²How long must I struggle with anguish in my soul,
with sorrow in my heart every day?
 - o Psalm 22:1-2, David says, My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?
Why are you so far away when I groan for help?
²Every day I call to you, my God, but you do not answer.
Every night I lift my voice, but I find no relief.
 - o You probably recognize that second one. We talked about it last week. On the cross, it was what Jesus cried out in anguish.

- But let's look more closely at David for now. Did God get angry at him for his honest outbursts? Did He strike David down and tell him, "How dare you! You're not allowed to ask these questions! Who do you think you are? I'm God, not you!"
 - o No, not in the least. This is how God described David much later in history in Acts 13:22 it says, "After removing Saul, he made David their king. God testified concerning him: 'I have found David son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do'"
 - o This could be surprising considering how much David questioned God, cried out to God and given some of the mistakes and sins David committed. Yet, David's relationship with God was marked by honesty, and God saw David's tendency to tell it like it is as part of his authentic search to know God.
 - o A man after God's own heart—what a description, especially coming from God Himself! I want God to say that about me! David poured out his heart and emotions to God. He wasn't afraid to ask God the tough questions directly to His face. We don't have to be afraid to do the same.

- What we see in David's psalms and experience is that after David unleashes his pains and fears and doubts, he almost always comes back to cries of need and dependence on God. His rants turn into honest pleas for help and humble expressions of worship.

- Maybe that's an important note for us: David took those painful emotions to God and he allowed God to turn his hopelessness into hope. He opened his heart—honestly, with everything that was inside it—and let God work there to bring healing and to plant the seeds of hope even if David couldn't yet see the way out.
 - Being honest brings healing. David is a real, sometimes gritty, example of how we can reach out and connect with God through our pain and questioning.
- When we do, we find that . . . God Meets Us
- See, in the midst of our pain, we often—and understandably— we get caught up in the why? But a more important focus might be the where?
 - This morning, I don't want to gloss over these questions like "If God is good, why does so much evil and pain and tragedy still exist?" or "Why do bad things happen to good people?" Those are legitimate questions, and if they are questions you're wanting to explore more deeply, I or Pastor Wil would be glad to talk with you further individually.
 - But for our time together this morning, let me just point out that the Bible gives us a framework for answering and understanding those questions.
- Evil and suffering exist in this world because humans (we) chose evil. This goes all the way back to Adam and Eve. When that first couple chose to disobey God, they took the fall for all humanity, and sin has stained every one of us. The perfect creation God had made was broken, and that brokenness continues.
- Images of children suffering just breaks me. Especially since becoming a mother. Not long ago, there were images of children flooding the news and social media who were found dead on the hills outside of one of those cities in the Middle East as they were trying to flee with their families when ISIS had invaded and were targeting Christians.
 - And, I thought, "God, these people are Christians - your people! And, they are children! Why couldn't you do something? You know, fire from heaven, a plague of some kind? Just a couple of suggestions. Why is it like this?" I heard almost a whisper in my ear, "It wasn't supposed to be like this. This was never my plan. My plan was perfect." Humanity chose something different and we continue to. The choices of humans can never be a reflection on God's goodness.
- But, doesn't He care? Absolutely. Why doesn't God stop it? Someday He will when He restores all creation and makes everything new. His bigger plans will prevail.
- In the meantime, He is working to connect and heal within us and around us and through us. Even in this broken world, we can find encouragement. And asking the question "where?" can help. Where is God?
 - The answer is: right here. Right beside us and within us. God has promised to be with us always—even in the midst of our pain and suffering. Hebrews 13:5 tells us, "God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.'"
 - God is with us through the pain. Jesus promises to be with us through whatever we face. "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" Jesus said in

Matthew 28:20. And He also said in John 14, “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth”

- The evil and suffering of our world break God’s heart, but until the day that He makes everything new, He continues to stand beside us to carry us through, working good even out of the most horrible tragedies and pain as we and others make our choices.
 - o Does our pain go away? No, but He can and does redeem our pain. He wants to carry us through our pain to new healing and, as Romans 8:28 tells us, he can make good out of any circumstance.

- When we are hurting, it can be easy for us to focus so much on our pain or struggle that we lose sight of God. Instead, we need to turn our vision back to God, through His Word—we can refocus on His promises to bring deeper clarity and hope that the dark cloud of pain will pass and that He will carry us beyond its shadow.
 - o God is reaching out for us, wanting to carry and heal us. God is in the business of disintegrating our assumptions and expectations and replacing them with an invitation to encounter His love and allow Him to work in our lives. God is not hiding from us. He is pursuing us, and He will stop at nothing to draw us closer and demonstrate His love to us.
 - o God knows our needs, and He is willing to do what it takes to reach us, if we choose to allow him in.

- Finally, we can find hope by knowing that God Was There and God Is Here.
 - o Do you believe God is willing and able to do whatever it takes to reach and connect with you? It’s one thing to believe in a general way that God is good and His love is true. It’s another to believe that God’s love and goodness are personal—for you.
 - o Throughout the movie, Papa often uses the phrase “I am especially fond of you.” Do you believe God is fond of you? He is! Psalm 139 tells how He knew you before you were even born and how He knows all about you today. I would encourage you to highlight these verses in some way in your Bible. **Read Psalm 139:1-6**

- Even greater, God loves you so much that He sent His Son to die for you. John 3:16 tells us, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”
 - o But, let me ask you a question: What’s your view of Jesus’s crucifixion? Now, think about that for a minute. How do you see the interaction of God as Trinity in Jesus’s death on the cross?
 - o Now, you might be wondering “what does that have to do with God in our pain? In my pain?” Well, everything.

- See, sometimes we have a hard time seeing God being fond of us because of the cross. We look at the horror of the cross but lose sight of the powerful reason for the cross. The reason was the heart of God for us. Unfortunately, we see the penalty and the judgment

and an angry God whose wrath must be appeased. And whether we admit it or not, we view Jesus as a nice God but His Dad as a God with anger management issues.

- When the movie, *The Passion of the Christ* came out, I was in seminary. Several of us were talking about the movie one day. One of the students said, “I just kept thinking about what non-believers would see. They would be wondering why Jesus had to suffer like that. What kind of God would do that to his son? It kind of made me angry.”
 - While we may not say it out loud, maybe we’ve thought the same. We find ourselves feeling that if salvation is found by God somehow beating up His best kid and hanging Him out to suffer on His own, why in the world would I want anything to do with the Father? Or, we fear that he might do the same to us if we cross him. It’s a viewpoint that sees God as the ultimate punisher and angry judge.
- But that is an incomplete and inaccurate view. Let’s look for hope...
- Deeper insight comes from the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:18–19: “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them.”
 - God as Trinity, as three in one, is a mind-bending concept that exists outside the normal confines of our physical world. But maybe what’s most important for us to grasp emotionally about the Trinity is that God is a living community of love and a unified presence.
- When Jesus suffered on the cross, God was there, “reconciling the world to himself in Christ.” Jesus told His disciples, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Therefore, God was pained during the crucifixion.
- When Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” it was because God had to look away from the sin of the whole world. But, God was still with Him, connected with his Son and participating in the painful work of sacrifice and redemption.
- It’s like, whenever a cure for a disease is discovered, it comes at the expense of something. Usually, it’s an animal, right, that gets tested to see if the cure works.
- That is what happened on the cross. That is what Jesus, the Father, and the Holy Spirit did in the laboratory of time and space in the spirit realm of that moment. They did much more than inflict and endure punishment to satisfy some judicial decree. They produced a cure for the disease of sin. The cross was the cure.
 - Why? So God could heal us. So God could be with us here and now.
- God will not let us go, no matter what difficulties we face in this world. Consider some of these promises.
- Come near to God and he will come near to you. (James 4:8)
 - The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. (Deuteronomy 31:8)

- In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. (Romans 8:26)
- These are truths we can cling to. These are words that can refocus our vision. God wants to carry us through whatever we face. Will we let Him? Will we make that choice?
 - In the movie, Mack ends up at the shack because he accepts Papa's mysterious invitation. He could never have guessed what he would find there. But he felt compelled to go.
 - What journey is God inviting you on today? What step is He calling you to take to meet Him in whatever circumstances you are facing? How will you answer?