

# **William P. Young. THE SHACK A Book Review by Phil Kuehnert, Pastor, Zion Lutheran Church, Fairbanks, Alaska**

It was February a year ago that Bob Sugden irrupted in our Fairbanks Text Study. For almost 25 years now, a group of deacons, pastors and priests have met on Wednesday mornings at 9:00 AM to study the texts for the rising Sunday. It is an eclectic group – but for the most part leaning toward the left side of the American religious community. I say religious, because in my more grumpy moods I claim to be one of the few in the group that still believes in Jesus! Occasionally over the years, clergy from the more conservative side come, take a look, speak, then go silent and finally slip away. The exception has been Bob Sugden, a retired military guy in his late 40's, who is the preacher at Two Rivers Church of the Nazarene.

Two Rivers is one of several old hippie communities that surround Fairbanks, its inhabitants being the quintessential APP (Alaskan Personality Profile): “leave me alone and I will do it my way, but by the way I want a triple share of my government entitlements.” Bob has been in the community for four years and has done wonders to tend, mend and grow the wounded and fragmented community that Two Rivers Church of The Nazarene was. Bob also attends the fundamentalist clergy prayer warrior group that meets at 10:30 on Wednesday morning. A year ago he shared with us that God had laid on his heart to be the bridge between these two disparate expressions of the Body of Christ in Fairbanks.

The irruption on that cold and bleary February morning caught my

attention. Bob said, his cherry cheeks blazing with his squeaky Santa Claus voice strained in urgency, "Have you heard about The Shack?" Nobody had. He proceeded with a five minute synopsis of a book that left me spellbound. His normal hesitant speech was now a flow of eloquence and symmetry describing a riveting story line with mind-boggling theological implications. That evening I went to Barnes and Noble and was surprised to find a large supply of the book. That week I read it, finding it dealt with a topic that I have spent the last 25 years exploring, both as a pastor and as a pastoral counselor – the topic of theodicy. [Webster: "theodicy" = defense of God's goodness and omnipotence in view of the existence of evil.] My intuitive instinct was that it would become a breakout bestseller like other religious books that have had huge crossover acceptance. Here I was thinking about Scott Peck's THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED, Rabbi Kushner's WHY BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE, the LEFT BEHIND series, Wilkerson's THE PRAYER OF JABEZ, and most recently, Rick Warren's THE PURPOSE-DRIVEN LIFE. My instinct has been proven right.

I did not read it critically from a theological standpoint – I read it as the younger brother to Paula Hope, my sister who was stillborn in 1942, after "a perfectly normal pregnancy." I was the child born to my parents 2 1/2 years later, alive! My father often told the story of her birth/death at St. Joseph's Hospital in St. Charles, Missouri. The same hospital I was born in. The Catholic "Sister," Dad recalled, came and asked him to baptize his daughter. He at first refused, saying that Lutherans don't baptize the dead. At her insistence that there were still living cells in the body, he baptized Paula Hope. About 15 years ago, shortly before Dad passed, he shared with me that Dr. Schulz, our family doctor, an alcoholic, was drunk that night and was not able to come to the hospital. The nurse on duty was inexperienced.

I read THE SHACK as the brother-in-law to Jeani, my wife's sister, who almost five years ago was beaten to death by her husband, my brother-in-law Jim, beaten to death with a baseball bat.

I read it as the pastor of Craig, husband to Gloria and father of four daughters including toddler Beatrice. Craig comes to church with his three surviving daughters. Weeping through most of the service, he admits he struggles in his believing in God. Almost three years ago he was piloting a high-powered jet boat on a family outing up the winding Cheena River less than a mile from where I live. Distracted for a moment, he ran the boat up on the steep bank and overturned it, trapping his wife and his 2 year old daughter Beatrice. A fireman by profession and EMT by training, he was helpless to rescue his wife and daughter. They drowned.

My personal and pastoral stories are not unique. These stories are us. From the Foreword of the book, written by Willie who introduces us to his friend Mack, the reader knows that this will be a story of a powerful encounter with God. Mack, brutalized by his godly father as a child, is the father of four children, the youngest of which, three-year-old Missy, is abducted from a family camping trip. She disappears and becomes the victim of a serial rapist. The remaining part of the book has Mack returning to the shack where Missy was murdered and there, in a transformative state, he encounters the Trinity. The encounter is where Mack has his conversation with God, the three persons!

For those of you not familiar with the book or the firestorm of criticism that it has stirred, you need to know a couple of facts. I was shocked early in July when I saw that THE SHACK was No. 1 on the NY Times Trade Paperback Best Seller List. By the end of July it had sold 1.2 million copies. In the religious

fiction market, if a title sells more than 10,000 it is considered a bestseller. By the end of September, more than 2 million had been sold. When I checked its current listing the last week of September on the Amazon.Com selling list, it was No. 4. However this was telling. The No. one book had 70 some reviews, the No. 2 had 9 reviews, the No. 3 had some 20 odd reviews, The Shack at No 4. had over 1500 reviews submitted. When I checked in January, it was No. 1 with 1606 reviews submitted. The author, William P. Young, was interviewed on the Today Show, and recently I heard it had already sold 6,000,000 copies.

Much of the criticism of the book has been misdirected, holding the book to standards of theological purity or ecclesiastical correctness that it never espoused to. I am not here to discuss the theological merits of the book; I present the book as an example of what I think is happening with God and Pastoral Care. [EHS: Note the capital P and capital C. Later Phil will distinguish this kind of Pastoral Care from lower-case "p" and "c" brands of "pastoral care."] People from the beginning have wrestled with God. Now the wrestling is more desperate. Pastoral Care is the business I am in. Pastoral Care is waiting on the side outside the ropes until I am "tagged" and it is my turn to have a go at it. Whether in my preaching, teaching or shepherding the congregation or wearing my administrative hat, I am in the business of Pastoral Care. My parishioners are going to find it wherever they can. While that is fine with me, I have the responsibility to know what they are reading and be able to assess the relative strengths and risks of what they are listening to, watching or reading. 20 years ago it was Rabbi Kushner's book. How pathetic!

Yet, the Rabbi's personal story and his compelling interpretation of the book of Job provided an answer, though inadequate, for their "cry." Again and again, WHY BAD THINGS

HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE provided me the opportunity to talk about the Cross and the hope that we have that the good Rabbi doesn't have a clue about. Then came the LEFT BEHIND series. Again, those books have provided the opportunity to lay out in simple terms the Biblical basis for our belief about the second coming. And now it is THE SHACK. With THE SHACK, as with the other titles, I want to make sure that pastoral care—lower-case “p” and “c”—becomes Pastoral Care with caps. Pastoral Care with caps is distinguished from lower-case pastoral care by the presence of Christ's Cross in the former and its absence in the latter.

In the Crossings matrix, lower-case pastoral care attends to D1, D2 and P2 and P3. It does surface diagnosis (D1) and yes, even diagnoses deeper inside stuff (D2), but never touches the genuine God-problem (D3) at the root of the trauma. So also with its therapy—P2 and P3 in Crossings parlance—pastoral care (with no caps) addresses these levels of pain but does not offer healing at the root. Pastoral Care (with caps) pushes to the root diagnostic level (D3) where people talk and wrestle with God, and then speaks Christ (P1) to the agonized sufferer. Pun intended, the crucified and risen Christ is the crux of the context for Pastoral Care.

I write this on a flight from Houston to Panama. The woman across the aisle is reading THE SHACK. She, a Lutheran (!), like my wife, has had a hard time finishing it, because of its “dark nature.” When she found out that I knew about the book, we immediately had a point of connection. My wife finished it only after hearing author William P. Young in person. She was taken with his straightforward presentation and the transparent nature of what he hopes the book will accomplish.

I will continue to encourage my parishioners to read the book, especially those who ask me about it. Now more are coming to me with concerns about whether they should read it because of some

of the negative things they have heard about it. I encourage them to read it because if they have had any life situation that has given rise to the "Cry." they have had in some small part, or maybe in large part participated in the conversations that go on between Mack and the mythical persons who represent the Trinity. Mack gives expression to the questions and the anger and the frustration and the helplessness and even the hopelessness when faced with the tearing of the fabric of one's life. And for those who are still in the wilderness, as Fred Niedner reminds us, the place of "no words," Mack will provide words for them. And the triad of persons he encounters in the Shack play their parts well in listening, mirroring, cajoling, teasing, and crying and laughing with him.

Sure, I wish I could distill a more orthodox version of the Trinity from the book. Absolutely, I wish that the worshipping community would play a more important part in Mack's life. Of course, theological education is not a waste and seminaries are not out of touch with life. My grandiosity would love for the hero of the book to be Mack's pastor. It would be swell if the message of Christ's death on the cross were not robbed of its power. But the book is religious fiction and it does its job well, and it does provide pastoral care, but not Pastoral Care.

I must remember that every person who asks me about the book will read the book from their personal experience. And most of the people who ask me about the book, I know because they are part of my Pastoral Care responsibility. I know that her first husband abused her. I know that the couple who worships regularly lost their first child to stillbirth and that the couple who no longer worships lost their first three children to stillbirths. I have heard the story of his wife's adultery. I know the struggle of the families in my congregation with special-needs children. The book provides just another place to listen to their pain and their ongoing recovery, and then to

gently walk them to the cross, and then joyously and  
courageously to get on with life – Life!