

The Shack: Part 1
When God Doesn't Make Sense
(Philippians 4:4-7 and John 3:1-12)

The Great Sadness really began when he was a child, the young and innocent object of an abusive alcoholic father. Mackenzie Allen Philips carried the baggage of his childhood throughout his life. The full force of *The Great Sadness*, however, didn't come to bear until much later in life. We connect with Mack's story as he enjoys a weekend camping trip in the Oregon wilderness with his three youngest children, Josh, Kate, and Missy.

The final day of the camping trip was to begin with a surprise for the kids – a breakfast of pancakes. But two burnt fingers caused Mack to knock over the stove and spill the batter in the dirt. Cold cereal was all that was left for breakfast. The circumstances of the day would not improve.

Mack began packing up for the trip home while Kate and Josh went for one last canoe ride on the lake. Missy, Mack's youngest stayed in camp coloring at the picnic table. "It is remarkable how a seemingly insignificant action or event can change entire lives."¹ As Kate lifted her paddle to wave at Mack she lost her balance and the canoe rolled over. Almost immediately, both kids were in the water.

¹ William Paul Young, *The Shack*. (Windblown Media, copyright © 2007 by William P. Young), page 40.

Mack rushed to the lake to rescue his children. Kate managed to swim to shore but Josh was tangled in the canoe. After several attempts, Mack was able to free him and pull Josh to the bank of the lake. After some mouth-to-mouth respiration, Mack was able to revive Josh. After a time, both Kate and Josh were out of danger and a "... potential crisis had been averted. Or so Mack thought."²

After Mack regained his composure his thoughts went back to Missy who he had left coloring at the picnic table. He walked back to where he could see the campsite, but Missy was not sitting at the table. She was, in fact, nowhere in sight. As Mack's story unfolds in the third chapter of *The Shack*, it becomes clear that Missy was abducted and taken from the campsite. A massive search and police investigation led authorities to a trail that ended at an abandoned shack in the remote wilderness. There they found Missy's blood-stained sun dress. The trail went no further. Missy was presumed dead, the crime unsolved. Isn't it strange how a seemingly insignificant action or event can change our lives forever. Please pray with me:

Miraculous God, the One who creates and recreates, touch our hearts with your peace, the peace that surpasses all understanding. Plant within our human minds the wisdom to accept that we cannot possibly understand the breadth and scope of your involvement in our corporate history and in our individual lives. Help us to trust you in all things, especially in those things

² Ibid, page 42

that don't make sense. In Christ you have revealed your love, so it is in Christ we pray. Amen.

If you read *The Shack*, you will agree that the story of Mackenzie Philips and *The Great Sadness* is very difficult to hear. Very difficult indeed! As Mack's story evolves and *The Great Sadness* overwhelms him, a time-honored question surfaces in the book and in our minds. Why does God allow bad things to happen? While God has many attributes, love seems to be the most significant way many of us understand God. If God is love personified, why would a loving God allow such a tragic thing to happen to Missy? We could also rewind Mack's story of *The Great Sadness* back to his early childhood and ask why a loving God would allow the mistreatment of a young and fragile boy. What are we to believe when God doesn't make sense?

Hopefully, none of us have ever experienced the brutal murder of a loved-one. For me, I can't possibly imagine what it must have felt like for Mack and his family to have experienced the tragic loss of Missy to a warped soul who preys on six-year-old girls. It must be devastating. While we may not have had Mack's particular experience, nearly all of us have been through some sort of tragedy at some point in our lives. A tragedy that has caused us to question why God would allow bad things to happen to us. What are we to believe when God doesn't make sense.

Before we address that question, let me back up to last Wednesday evening when we began the study of *The Shack*. We considered the idea that we all have an image of God that resides in our hearts and minds. That image is shaped by the circumstances of our lives – the way we have been affected in life, both in the positive and negative. While our image is *of God*, that image is based on human understanding which compared with God is also limited understanding.

Whether we realize it or not, we project our own thoughts and ideas onto God. We project our joys and our fears onto God. Whether we realize it or not, we project our human emotions, our limitations, our faults, and our prejudices onto God. In theological terms, this is called *anthropomorphism* or a human expression or understanding of God. It's this expression or understanding that leads to questions like: Why does God let bad things happen?

As we mature in our faith journey and our ability to trust God, our image of God also matures. Through self-examination of our conscience, we begin to realize how our humanity has influenced our image of God. Self-examination of conscience is what the season of Lent is all about. And there is no better place to start that examination than with our image or understanding of God. Through honest self-examination of conscience we also form a better understanding of who we are and what we really believe about God.

Mack's image of God is important to *The Great Sadness* that has enveloped most of his life. Our image of God is important to us when we consider the role God plays or doesn't play in the bad things that happen in the world, those times when God doesn't make sense. The question: Why does God let bad things happen? is based on at least three misunderstandings of the nature of God.

The first misunderstanding is that only God determines the outcome of our lives. While we believe that God is in control and that God has a plan for our lives, we often times forget that God has also given us free will. We forget that there are consequences to our actions. It's like the man dying of lung cancer. In his pain and suffering he asks: "Why are you doing this to me, God?" The patient fails to understand that the two packs of cigarettes a day he smoked for forty years was his will, not God's! This is evidence that God doesn't always determine our fate – we do!

The second misunderstanding is that God punishes the bad and rewards the good. In our United Methodist tradition and in most other Protestant denominations, this is known as "works righteousness." We think we can simply work our way into heaven. The root of our Christian belief, however, is based on God's grace not our human effort. It's by this grace we are saved, not by anything we do. We can't earn God's grace and will never deserve God's grace. It is freely given to us with no strings attached.

The third misunderstanding is that God judges us as either good people or bad people. While we will be held accountable for our actions in this life, God is not actively involved in our lives as judge and jury. In Paul's letter to the church in Rome³ we are reminded that there is no condemnation in Christ Jesus. Through the power of the life-giving Spirit we have been given freedom from the power of sin that leads to death. The law of Moses couldn't save us because of our sinful nature, but the sacrificial love of Jesus does. Once again, it's called God's grace.

When we ask the question: "Why does God let bad things happen?" we are asking an invalid question. The question is invalid because the assumptions behind the question – our own human assumptions – are invalid. God doesn't let bad things happen. God simply lets *all* things happen. God has given us free will and individual consciousness.⁴ More importantly, when we ask such questions we are actually blaming God for our own circumstances like the cancer patient I spoke of.

As the full story of *The Shack* unfolds, Mack's understanding of the nature of God is called into question. He is forced to look deep inside and examine his own conscience. As we continue our study of the book so too will our understanding of the nature of God – our image of God – be challenged. We too will be given the opportunity to examine our own conscience which brings us back

³ Based on *Romans 8:1-3a*.

⁴ *New Thought Essay* (<http://www.darkhorsepress.com/horsesmouth-44.htm>), accessed 2/19/2010.

to the reason underlying the season of Lent. It's for this reason our study of *The Shack* is very relevant.

In the next three weeks we will go deeper into what we think and believe about God. There will be more questions but few answers. We will be left to wrestle with our own faith and what we believe, especially when God doesn't make sense. At this point in our journey we are like Nicodemus in the gospel reading this morning.

Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a learned man charged with knowing and interpreting the law of Moses. In his interaction with Jesus he admittedly does not understand what it means to be reborn by water and the Spirit. Jesus reminds Nicodemus that if he doesn't believe in what he has seen on earth he can't possibly understand heaven. His human knowledge and wisdom falls short of divine understanding.

In the face of our misunderstanding of the nature of God, in the midst of our failure to understand why bad things happen, we can be comforted by what Paul said to the church at Philippi.

The Lord is near. ⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. [Philippians 5b-7 NIV]

The operative language in this text is "... the peace of God, which transcends all understanding ...". When bad things happen, when God doesn't make sense, we need to trust in God rather than judge God. We need to trust in God rather than blame God. We need to accept that we cannot possibly understand the breadth and scope of God's involvement in our corporate history and in our own individual lives. God has planted eternity in our hearts and given us the gift of peace which transcends all understanding.

In the fullness of time, God's time, we might someday understand what we cannot possibly understand today. And this is important to remember when God doesn't make sense!

Reflection Questions

As you continue to read the book and prepare for this coming Wednesday evening, consider the following questions we will be discussing in our groups.

1. Did God create evil as well as good?
2. Do you believe God has given us dominion over our lives, that is to say free will to do as we choose?
3. If God doesn't simply let bad things happen to us, can God intervene in our lives at any time?
4. If God can intervene in our lives at any time, why doesn't God choose to prevent evil in the world?
5. If God simply lets all things happen without intervening in our lives, do you believe that God uses those bad things for a purpose?
6. When bad things happen to us, do you believe God grieves with us over our loss?