

Holy Spirit

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

John 16:5-15

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

Mack meets God at the shack in a way he's never imagined before.

A year ago, William Paul Young was selling circuit boards in Portland and trying to market a book he had written called *The Shack*. His manuscript was rejected by a dozen Christian publishers for being too edgy. Secular publishers wouldn't touch it either. They thought it contained too much Jesus. So, Young self-published it. It now sits atop the New York Times best-seller fiction list, a position it has enjoyed for 33 weeks and counting.

In the story, Mack and his five children are camping in the mountains of eastern Oregon when his young daughter is abducted. Evidence of her murder is found in an abandoned shack. This horrible crime tears the family apart. When the book picks up the story four years later, Mack receives a note from someone called "Papa," his wife's nickname for God, inviting him to meet at the shack.

Mack meets God at the shack in a way he's never imagined before. God appears as a jolly African-American woman named Elousia. Jesus, true to form, shows up as a Middle Eastern carpenter. The third member of this trio, a wispy Asian woman named Sarayu, represents, you guessed it, the Holy Spirit. These three persons help Mack overcome his Great Sadness.

The Shack has clearly struck a nerve with its readers, touching many people at a deeply spiritual level. Some Christian reviewers, however, have taken *The Shack* to the wood shed, calling it dangerous and even subversive. It has been criticized for hinting at universalism, for being anti-church and for its unorthodox interpretation of the Trinity.

Young wrote this book, at the prodding of his wife, to explain to his six children his 11-year journey of healing back to God. His book is a spiritual autobiography of sorts. Young admits to his readers, "Mack is basically me." Young, who was raised by missionary parents in New Guinea, was sexually abused in his early life and traumatized by the death of several family members. Young wrote *The Shack* to help his kids not to think of God as distant and angry. Indeed, his early life experiences seemed to confirm God as a malevolent deity. He reacts to an overemphasis on God's wrath and justice. There are also hidden dangers of overemphasizing God's love to the exclusion of God's justice, but that's a topic for another day. Young writes in the postscript of his book, "Most of us have our own grief, broken dreams and damaged hearts, each of us our unique losses, our own shack. I pray you find the same grace there that I did, and that the abiding presence of

***Jesus in the
flesh is limited.***

Papa, Jesus and Sarayu will fill up your inside emptiness with joy unspeakable and full of glory.”

I find so few books, let alone theological fiction, willing to explore the intricate relationships between the members of the Trinity we call Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The anthropomorphic language for God as Father and Jesus as Son helps us to conceive of them as “persons” with whom we can enter into relationship. But when it comes to the Holy Spirit, we tend to think of the Spirit as an “it.” I suppose that’s why Young uses a person with a name attached to express the Holy Spirit’s personality. Sarayu is a Sanskrit word meaning air or wind. Wind is one of the images Jesus employs to describe the Spirit (John 3:8).

The Holy Spirit is not an impersonal force. The Holy Spirit is personal.

During this season of Lent, we are reading a portion of John’s gospel in chapters 13-17 called the “Farewell Discourse.” Jesus announces his departure to his disciples in this parting discourse. He makes known his leaving in our Scripture lesson: “Now I am going to him who sent me” (John 16:5). This announcement must have rocked his disciples’ world. Jesus knows his disciples will be troubled by this revelation. That’s why he says, “Because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts” (16:6).

Then Jesus proceeds to tell his disciples, “I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away the

Advocate will not come to you” (16:7). Jesus’ disciples have come to rely on the physical, body and blood, Jesus. But Jesus in the flesh is limited. In a physical body, he cannot be two places at once. But in the Spirit, Jesus can wonderfully be everywhere at once. That’s why “It’s to your advantage that I go away.”

The name given for the Holy Spirit by Jesus, “Advocate,” is sometimes translated in other versions as Counselor, Comforter or Helper. The Greek word, “paraclete,” is a compound Greek word composed of para meaning “called to the side of” and clete meaning “calling.” So literally, the word means to be called to the side of someone with the purpose of helping. A paramedic is called to the side of someone to offer medical assistance. A paraclete is called to the side of a Christian to offer spiritual counsel and support.

When Jesus uses the word Advocate earlier in his discourse, he speaks of the Spirit as “another advocate” (John 14:16). The adjective “another” implies a previous advocate. Jesus Christ is our first advocate. We read in the epistle of John that “Jesus Christ is our advocate with the Father” (1 John 2:1).

Jesus and the Holy Spirit are our advocates. They are sent by God, if you will, as defense attorneys; to offer us God’s counsel, comfort and help.

The Holy Spirit also serves another role in our lives: “to convict the world of sin” (16:8). Our metaphor changes to a type of prosecut-

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ing attorney working in our conscience to reveal sin to us. Otherwise, we would never change. The Holy Spirit serves as God's sovereign change agent.

In 1983, Robert Duvall wanted to make a movie about the Holy Spirit. He felt as if the motion picture industry had largely ignored the work of the Spirit in American religion. When he first approached movie studios about his idea for a movie, producers weren't the least bit interested. They wanted a script that would somehow attack the religious right. For 13 years, Duvall shopped the script, but nobody was buying. So, in 1997, Duvall financed the movie with his own money, directed the film and played the lead role of a Pentecostal preacher named Sonny Dewey. Duvall's portrayal of Sonny earned him an Oscar nomination.

Duvall was raised in a Christian home and taught to believe in Jesus Christ but never knew much about the Holy Spirit until he made *The Apostle*. While doing research for the film, he visited a little church in Hamilton, Va. The 96-year-old black preacher of that church seemed to Duvall to be more spiritual than the Dalai Lama and Mahatma Gandhi. He had a great way about him, a genuine honesty that intrigued Duvall. The preacher ended every sermon the same way. One day he expects to get into an airplane and fly off, not to London or New York or any earthly city. He expects, on this last day, to fly past the moon and the stars and go straight to heaven.

The preacher would then pause and choir and congregation would begin to sing, "I'll Fly Away."

The movie industry isn't the only institution in America that ignores the Holy Spirit. Many Christian churches do, as well. The Apostle Paul asks whether new converts in the book of Acts have as yet received the Holy Spirit. They reply, "We have not so much as heard of the Holy Spirit" (19:2). I suspect quite a few Presbyterians could say that! If someone were to ask you, what is the Holy Spirit, what would you say?

We're focusing on God's Big Story of creation, fall and redemption this year in our church. Each member of the Trinity is committed to our redemption. God the Father created us for relationship. When sin thwarts the relationship, God seeks to redeem the relationship through our Redeemer, Jesus Christ. Christ accomplishes this work of redemption (or rescue) through his life, death and resurrection.

The Holy Spirit, then, is sent by the Father in the name of the Son to continue this work of redemption in our lives. The Spirit is not some hocus-pocus, magical mystery tour. The Holy Spirit is the presence of God the Father and Jesus the Son that comes to live inside every believer.

During World War I, Thomas Edward Lawrence was sent to Egypt as a British military liaison to Arabs involved in a revolt against the Turks of the Ottoman Empire. He led the Arabs in guerilla warfare to divert the Turks from the British. He became something of a hero to

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the Arabs and became known as Lawrence of Arabia.

After the war, Lawrence brought Arab leaders to the Versailles in Paris for a peace conference. It was the first time these Arab leaders had been in Paris, so Lawrence showed them the sights, the Louvre, The Arc of Triumph, Napoleon’s tomb and the Notre Dame Cathedral. But what really fascinated these Arab leaders were the faucets in the hotel bathrooms. They couldn’t comprehend how twisting a faucet handle could produce so much water.

After the conference, the manager of the hotel came to Lawrence and said, “You’ll have to do something—the Arabs are tearing apart the plumbing—they’re taking the faucets with them.” Lawrence of Arabia had to explain to his guests why taking the faucets wouldn’t work. The faucets are no good without the water. If you separate the faucet from its source, the faucet is worthless.

The relationship among the members of the Trinity can be likened to the relationship between a faucet and water. A fancy faucet without the water will do no good. Jesus and the Holy Spirit connect us like faucets to our source of life, which is found in God.

Dr. Julie Kellersberger and her husband, also a physician, were medical missionaries in Africa in the early 1900s. She writes, “Do not pray for more of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit does not come to people piecemeal. If you profess Jesus Christ as your Lord

and Savior, you have been given the Holy Spirit as a gift.” She continues, “Every true believer has all the Spirit, the real question is whether the Holy Spirit has all of us.”

It’s not whether we have all the Spirit, it’s whether the Spirit has all of us. Does the Spirit have all of us or just a portion of us? Here God, we say, you can have our religious life on Sunday morning but not secular life on Sunday night and Monday morning. Let God have all of you—your heart, your soul, your life.

