



# Talking Theology at *The Shack*

Weeks 2 and 3

*A Piece of  $\pi$*

Chapter 6

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## *Theology??!*

- ❖ Theology
  - The contemplation and study of God! What better use of our time and efforts could there be?
- ❖ Everyone is a theologian
  - All people, in all places, at all times contemplate the most fundamental questions of our existence. Their answers shape their worldview!
  - The only question is whether we will be a better theologian or a poorer theologian.
- ❖ Why do we – Christians -- “do” theology?
  - So we can come to know God! So we can be better disciples of Jesus Christ! We must always remind each other of this. Sometimes, it is easy to forget.
- ❖ The church needs more amateur theologians
  - Amateur – from the French word, *amator*, meaning “lover”!

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## How can we go wrong at this?

- ❖ By forgetting our purpose => knowing God
- ❖ By believing we can truly understand God!
  - Most of the great heresies and mistakes in the church have come from an unwillingness to find peace in the mysteries of God.
  - Don't allow yourself to be pushed into either-or choices!
    - Is God one or three?
    - Is Jesus God or a man?
    - Is the Bible the work of God or of humans?
  - In the end – these are unanswerable questions. We have to hold onto the tension, not try too hard to resolve it. If this makes you uncomfortable, learn a little about quantum physics!
  - Ours is a faith built on “ANDs” not “ORs.”

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## Obligations

- ❖ Mack is left with Jesus and Sarayu, unsure of whether to follow Papa into the kitchen.
  - He feels obligated, but Jesus tells him to do what he *wants*.
- ❖ ***Are there ever times that we ought to feel obligated – such as attending worship even on a day that we don't “want to.” Perhaps the obligation will lead to the desire.***

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## **“Especially Fond”**

- ❖ Mack does go to the kitchen
  - God (Papa) is listening to funk
  - We begin to learn that God is “especially fond” of everyone.
- ❖ ***What is this meant to convey about God and about ourselves? Where do we each stand with God?***

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## **Magic Wand?**

- ❖ Mack doubts that God can be the papa he never had.
  - If God couldn't take care of Missy, how can God take care of Mack?
    - God doesn't provide an answer – only a desire for healing of Mack and of their relationship.
- ❖ God has no “magic wand” (p.92) to wave over Mack and make it all better. “Life takes a bit of time and a lot of relationship.”
  - ***Almost a throw-away line in the book, but the entry point to BIG questions.***
  - ***If God is all-good and all-powerful, why doesn't God have a magic wand. Can't God do anything? Why not make things right!??***

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## What we mean by evil?

- ❖ Moral evil -- bad/immoral/wrong; the results of our bad choices.
  - What are bad choices? Choices to do things that are not in God's moral will; not in God's way; not according to God's law, which is loving God and neighbor
- ❖ Natural evil – harmful . . . tornadoes, hurricanes
- ❖ Is evil real?
  - Is it is another name for “mistake,” “social causes,” “lack of growth,” “misguided zeal” and so on?
  - Is there something more at work?
  - What do we mean when we pray for deliverance from the evil one, or evil, in the Lord's prayer? (Matthew 6:9-13, in the Sermon on the Mount)

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## Did God create evil?

- ❖ Could he?
  - **No**...God is good! He is the Good Shepherd.
- ❖ Then, evil cannot have been created, for God created all that is. Thus, evil cannot be some “thing.” Thus, for Thomas Aquinas, evil is the absence of being.
  - Paul tell the Athenians that it is God in whom we move, live, and have our being (Acts 17).
- ❖ This is why most Christian theologians see evil as “nothingness.”
  - The essence of evil is to make something into nothing. It is about destruction ... of life, of hope, of joy, of peace.

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## **The Problem of Evil**

- ❖ God is all-powerful (omnipotent)
- ❖ God is good
- ❖ Evil is real

*You can logically make any two of these work, but not all three.*

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## **Possible “Solutions” – reduce three to two**

- ❖ God is not all-powerful
  - He’d like to eliminate evil, but he is unable, not simply unwilling. This seems to be Rabbi Kushner’s approach in *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*.
- ❖ God is not as good as we think.
  - He is able to eliminate evil, but unwilling.
- ❖ Evil is not real
  - What we call evil will be overcome with more progress and education.

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## Does God Permit Evil?

- ❖ Yes! Why?
  - It seems bound up with freedom; the freedom to choose the destruction of life.
- ❖ Why such a premium on freedom?
  - God is love. True love must be freely given; there must be the possibility to “not love” for love to reach its most profound reality.
- ❖ It seems that a free world, even with the resulting evil, is better (more good) than a world that is not free but without evil.
- ❖ But God is not on the sidelines!!
  - God permits evil, but he also *hinders* our abuse of our freedom (Gen 20:6), *corrects* us (Job 5:17), and *prevents* the forces of evil from triumphing (1 Cor 10:13; Job 1:12, 2:16; Romans 8:28).

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## The God Who Suffers

- ❖ One of the profound differences about Christianity, compared to other worldviews and religions
- ❖ We understand that evil is real, but we also understand that God has experienced evil’s reality with us.
- ❖ Yes, we suffer – but God himself has suffered more that most of us can possibly imagine.
  - God is not remote, merely observing our suffering – **he suffers with us.**

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## Can God be Trusted?

- ❖ Is God real? Does he suffer with us? Is Jesus who he claimed to be? Is Jesus living?
  - Christians answer yes to all this – in spite of the presence of evil.
- ❖ In spite of evil, we must decide and we must act. Do we choose God? Do we embrace life and love?
  - Job never gave up his faith in God, despite all the horror visited on him and the specious arguments of his friends. Job said yes, God can be trusted, and Job did! We are called to make the same choice, working toward the full realization of God's kingdom, a kingdom without evil.

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## “Head issues”

- ❖ God tells Mack that getting “head” issues out of the way first makes the heart stuff easier to work on.
- ❖ ***The standard phrase is “faith seeking understanding,” but I’ve come to believe that “understanding seeking faith” is actually just as or even more typical for people.***

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## Gender . . . Father/Mother

- ❖ God changes the subject to gender. God doesn't have one.
  - Mack, like many people, finds it hard to conceive of God without gender. God is not Gandalf!
- ❖ Mack wonders why “Father” and not “Mother” is the person of the trinity.
  - God tells him that God knew the world would be woefully short on fathering, not mothering.
    - *I love this answer. How true it is. How many more people have “father issues” than “mother issues.”*

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## Holy God as Loving Father

- ❖ God is the Father of his people; the husband to his bride (Isaiah 54:5-8; Hosea 2:16, 18-20)
- ❖ The NT is a fuller expression of God as Father, emphasizing covenantal intimacy
  - *Abba* = “daddy” Jesus refers to the Father as *Abba*, as does Paul, speaking for the early church (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:16)
- ❖ Encompasses two key tasks of fathers
  - righteousness/standards/instruction/discipline
  - love/affection/encouragement/support
- ❖ In this portrait, salvation means being born again, becoming children of God, being adopted, being heirs

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## **Free will . . . and God's sovereignty**

- ❖ God says “I’m not interested in prisoners.” (p.94)
  - God then asks about the meaning of “freedom” and all the forces that impel us in one direction or another. How much “freedom” is there?
    - “Freedom is a process that happens inside a relationship with him [Jesus].”
- ❖ ***We are off to the theological races again!***
  - ***Why would God not be interested in prisoners? Are you? Your answer to this will shape the rest of your theology.***

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## **Sampling Scripture**

- ❖ God's providence
  - Genesis 50:7-26; Psalm 139:1-18; Isaiah 45:1-19; John 15:1-17; Matthew 6:25-33; 2 Cor 4:11-18; 1 Peter 1:3-9
- ❖ God's grace – He chooses!
  - Isaiah 44:1-2; Psalm 78:67-71; Genesis 12:1-3; Ephesians 1:3-6; Romans 8:29-30,33; 9:9-18
- ❖ Our free will – We choose!
  - Genesis 3:9-10; Joshua 24:15; Matt 23:37; John 1:12; 2 Peter 3:9; John 3:16; Rev 22:17;
- ❖ A key, and often misread, verse – Ephesians 2:8-9
  - “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”
    - “this” (neuter in the Greek) refers to the gift of salvation, not to “faith” (feminine in the Greek)

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## Election?

- ❖ The “elect” are God’s chosen
- ❖ Equivalent statements
  - God chose Israel = the Israelites were God’s elect
- ❖ God himself is the object of election
  - God chooses others to be in communion
  - God chooses to be God for the world; God chooses to be Emmanuel, God with us!
  - Jesus is the Elect of God! Jesus is also the Rejected!
- ❖ We can better see the glory and goodness of God’s election by looking at Jesus – the concrete expression of God’s free love.
- ❖ The goal of election is about the creation of God’s people, not, initially, individual salvation.
  - We are saved, individually, because we are part of God’s people – those who place their faith and trust in Jesus.

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## God’s Grace

- ❖ God is the initiator. By “grace” we mean “unmerited favor.”
  - God chose Abraham; God chose Jacob; God chose Israel; God chooses us!
- ❖ God’s gift of our salvation, our eternal relationship with God, is free – it is not earned or merited. God owes us nothing.
  - Israel did not earn nor deserve their deliverance from Egypt. We do not earn nor deserve a loving relationship with God.
- ❖ God’s gift is a gift made out of love.
  - The relational God

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## Our Free Will

- ❖ Our decision to put our trust in God – to return God’s love -- is freely made. It must be! Love is only love when it is freely given.
- ❖ But we need to be modest when thinking about what that freedom means.
  - How free are you? Are you capable of doing anything at any moment? Every action you take results from a pre-existing preference.
  - What happens in this world or life without a cause? Our world seems very “deterministic.” Enough so, that many philosophers hold that our freedom is an illusion. The Bible holds otherwise.
- ❖ The biblical view is that however you define freedom or liberty, we are free enough to be morally responsible for our choices!

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## Where we go wrong

- ❖ Do we choose God or does he choose us?
  - *This is a false either/or choice!!*
- ❖ The consequences of over-emphasizing God’s choosing
  - You end up with a God who arbitrarily chooses some for heaven and others for hell! Basically, you end up with a monster that bears no resemblance to Jesus! This is why so many people are repulsed by some ways of thinking about predestination.
- ❖ The consequences of over-emphasizing our choosing
  - You end up thinking that you made the right choice because you are spiritually superior. You end up losing God as the great-covenant keeper, whose promises will be kept.

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## **The God-Who-Suffers**

- ❖ Mack asks: “How can you really know I feel?” (referring to Missy).
  - The answer is the scars on Papa’s wrists – just as they would be on Jesus and Sarayu.
- ❖ ***And so we are brought to the cross.***
  - ***What does it mean when Jesus cries out the opening phrases of Psalm 22? Did God forsake him?***
  - ***What does it really mean to proclaim a God-Who-Suffers?***
  - ***What sort of answer is this going to be for Mack’s big question – How could God let it happen to Missy?***

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## **Feeling Close to God**

- ❖ God says: “When all you can see is your pain, you lose sight of me.”
- ❖ ***When we feel separated from God, who has moved away?***
  - ***Our feelings can mislead us.***
  - ***We need to always remember that God’s Spirit dwells in each of us (all believers) – whether we feel like it or not.***

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## **The way we were made . . .**

### **Why were we made?**

- ❖ God and Mack talk about a bird. “Living unloved,” God says, “is like a bird whose wings have been clipped.” It is not the way we were made.
  - Pain clips our wings. We can even forget that we were made to fly.
- ❖ ***If we were made to love and to be loved, might that not also reveal to us why we were made?***

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## **God as “Other” . . . Wholly Other?**

- ❖ But . . . God and Mack are not alike. “I am who I am.”
  - ***YHWH, the name that God reveals to Moses at the burning bush.***
  - God is not simply the best version of ourselves.
- ❖ ***A very important theological point!! And a common mistake.***
- ❖ God is God and we are not
  - ***But is God “wholly” other?***
  - ***What does it mean to be made in God’s image? Is not our love at least in the same genus/species as God’s love?***

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## **Kenosis – the self-emptying of God**

- ❖ God is unlimited, unbounded. God exists in a full state of satisfaction. God wanted us to share in that, but we humans tossed that away. God has stepped in to put things right. (p.98)
  - In the incarnation, God chose to embrace all the limitations of being fully human, like a bird choosing only to walk not fly.
- ❖ ***How is this for an explanation of the incarnation and Paul’s kenosis in Philippians 2?***

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## **Jesus’ Miracles**

- ❖ Not done out of Jesus’ “God nature” but out of his human nature, fully trusting in God’s life and power to be at work in him and through him.
  - In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus’ miracles are not a sign of his divinity.
- ❖ ***Here, (p. 100), we come to a passage where some Christians may find fault. How does Young’s explanation strike you?***
  - ***Some may see this as diminishing Jesus’ divinity, though I think that Young is striving to avoid that conclusion on the part of the reader.***

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## Jesus Brings a New Understanding of God



- One God in three persons
- God has always known himself as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit
- God is inherently relational!! God is a community of three!!

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## The Hypostatic Union (what??!!)

- ❖ The classic understanding, reflected in our own Confession of Faith, was hammered out in a council that met at Chalcedon in 451AD.
  - The Council didn't invent anything – they simply brought together the core teachings and practices of the early church. Their language expressed, in precise terms, those teachings and practices.
- ❖ *Hypostasis* means entity; *union* refers to the union of two natures.
  - We believe in the perfect union of two distinct but never separate natures – one human and one divine – in one integral, eternal divine person.
  - One person – two natures
  - We can think of the trinity as one what and three whos; Jesus is two whats and one who
- ❖ The early church concluded that this must be so, even if we can't penetrate the mystery.

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## **The Denial of Jesus' Truly Human Nature**

- ❖ *Docetism* (from the Greek word for *appear*)
  - Jesus only appeared to be human
  - Perhaps there is a heavenly, spiritual redeemer, the “Christ,” took who over a human body, “Jesus”
  - “God in a bod” or God with a human skin are both *not* the way to think about Jesus. He was more human than you and I.
- ❖ We can be drawn to this if we see the material world as inherently evil and something to be escaped from.
  - Gnosticism
  - We end up thinking Jesus didn’t really suffer, nor was he really tempted, that he was omniscient and omnipotent throughout his life
- ❖ This heresy weakens our the message of the incarnation – that God became human so that our humanity might be healed and restored.



## **The Denial of Jesus' Truly Divine Nature**

- ❖ *Arianism and adoptionism*
  - Jesus was only a very special human – one “adopted” by God as his special son and prophet.
  - Jesus was a human being perfectly fulfilling the image of God and God’s ideal for humanity.
  - Jesus is unique in his relationship with God, but is NOT equal with God’s eternal being.
- ❖ Something like this underlies the Unitarian church and much 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century liberal Protestantism. Also Jehovah’s witnesses.
- ❖ This heresy weakens the Christian understanding of redemption. Leads to redemption being redefined as pulling us up by our bootstraps or following Jesus’ good example. We *lose the God-who-suffers!!!*



## ***The Denial of Jesus' Unity in Two Natures***

- ❖ Here, the mystery is solved by seeing Jesus as having only one nature, a hybrid of sorts – the unique “God-man.”
- ❖ Another way was to suggest that Jesus had a truly human body, but lacked a human rational mind or soul, instead being filled with the divine Logos/Word . . . “God in a bod.”
- ❖ Or perhaps Jesus was a perfect “moral union,” much like persons in a perfect marriage. One doing the “God stuff” and one doing the “human stuff.” This denies the inseparability of the two natures.
- ❖ Or another choice . . . “Jesus’ humanity was like a drop of wine in an ocean of his divinity” . . . Jesus’ humanity was swallowed up in his divinity.



## ***Diversity within Our Confession***

- ❖ The great Christian confessions, including the UMC, uphold two inseparable natures, divine & human, in one person, Jesus – two “whats” and one “who”
  - Don’t deny the full and true divinity and humanity of Jesus
  - Don’t divide him into two persons
  - Don’t make him into some hybrid “God-man”
- ❖ Beyond that . . . There is plenty of room for diversity and exploration! For example, what was Jesus’ self-awareness?
  - Kenosis – “emptying (Philippians 2:5-11) – the divine Son did not set aside his divine attributes but suppressed or restricted them during his time on earth.
  - Others strive for a way to see Jesus as having two minds during his time on earth.



## The Trinity

- ❖ Does the Trinity really matter (p.101)? What do we lose if we don't proclaim One God in Three Persons?
  - We lose God's inherent relationality – God is love. Love must have an object. God is inherently both lover and beloved, making all love possible.
- ❖ **Here, Young is very Wesleyan. He begins his theology with this statement: "God is Love" (1 John).**
  - **All of our understanding of God must begin somewhere. This is where Young begins and it will color all that follows.**

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## A New Understanding of God



- One God in three persons
- God has always known himself as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit
- God is inherently relational!! God is a community of three!!

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## **Three key distortions**

- ❖ Collapse the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit into one
  - modalism is an example -- where God appeared first as the Father, then as the Son, then as the Spirit
- ❖ Trying to “rank” the Father, the Son, and the Spirit – particularly, making the Son less than the Father
  - Differing roles – Father sends the Son; but not a ranking
  - Was there a time when the Son was not? Is the Son of the same substance as the Father?
    - Arius and the Council of Nicea
- ❖ Focusing too much on one person of the Trinity

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## **Three Key Affirmations (from Migliore)**

- ❖ The eternal life of God is personal life in relationship
  - God IS love (1 John 4:16b) – this makes sense only because of God’s inherent relationality
  - God’s identity is personal relationship
- ❖ God exists in community
  - Yes . . . God has a social life! -- the three persons of God “indwell” each other
  - God creates a people to live in relationship with him
- ❖ The life of God is essentially self-giving love
  - The compassion of God – stronger than sin and death!

What does this say about us – we who are made  
in God’s image?

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## ***“I cannot act apart from love”***

- ❖ God says, “I cannot act apart from love.”
  - ***This takes us back to the big question – then how about Missy?***
  - ***But if “God is love” (1 John 4:16) then this makes sense.***
- ❖ Mack tells God that he is sorry that Jesus had to die.
  - God thanks Mack but says “we” aren’t sorry at all. Jesus pops in and tells Mack he would have done it for one person.
  - ***Did God risk, would God risk, that no one would believe?***