

**At the Movies: The Shack**  
**2 Corinthians 2:3-4; 11:24-27; 12:9**  
**July 15, 2018**  
**Pastor Steve Richards**

Today's movie is *The Shack*, a best-selling book, first published in 2007, that became a movie in 2017. It addresses questions that many of us have but are either afraid to ask or afraid of what the answers might be. Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people? Why does God even allow evil to happen in this world today? Where is God when life really, really hurts? Those moments when it does not feel like God is on my side.

There are places in our lives where we are forced to face the harsh realities of life. I often take highway 55 into downtown Minneapolis and there is a place on the north side of the highway just before a stop light where people have created a makeshift memorial. There are always flowers there. It is the spot where a woman was shot a few years ago – a grandmother who was waiting in her car when she was shot and killed by a bullet that was not even intended for her – a shot by someone who did not see her or even the car she was waiting in. I didn't know the woman but I remember reading her story and every time I pass that spot, I feel this sadness – it's personal – not that I'm vulnerable but that I live in a world where we all are. And seeing that spot does that to me every time. I could take another route, but somehow I'm drawn to that place.

Do you have a place and every time you return to it, it is like your pain is held hostage there, just waiting for you to show up? It could be a relationship that fell apart and that brokenness keeps showing up. Or a failure at work and what it did to your self-image and confidence and every time you remember that moment, the emotion comes rushing back. Or a life dream came crashing down. Or it was the untimely death of someone you loved and the pain is holding you back from reinvesting your love in others. We all have these places.

The movie is about a father named Mack who suffers an unimaginable loss. One weekend, Mack takes his three children camping at a state park. His two older children are out on the lake in a canoe when his daughter stands up to wave at him, and the canoe capsizes. The strap of his son's life preserver gets caught on the canoe, pulling him underwater. He's drowning. Seeing what's happening, Mack jumps in the water, swims out to release his son, and pulls him to shore where he resuscitates him. While this is happening, someone comes along who happens to be a serial killer of young children and takes his younger daughter, Missy. The story follows Mack through this difficult journey of pain and grief as he struggles to survive what's happened. The Shack is the place where Mack's daughter was taken and murdered. It becomes a metaphor for a place of unimaginable pain. The question is: what is your shack? The place that gave you unexpected hardship and pain. We all have them. This place of pain. It is the price of being human and if we live long enough every one of us will have incredibly joyful experiences and horribly painful ones as well. And God meets us there.

One day, Mack finds a note in his mailbox, calling him back to the Shack. At first, he thinks it is his daughter's killer who invites him to the Shack, but instead that's where he meets God in the form of the three persons of the Trinity. God, the Father takes the form of a loving, joyful African-American woman called Papa. The Holy Spirit is an Asian woman called Sarayu, a word that means "wind." And Jesus is a middle eastern carpenter. God meets us in all our shacks. In the place of your greatest pain, God is waiting to bring you healing.

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross wrote the book on the stages of grief. Her research involved terminally ill patients and their families. Not everyone follows the process as Kubler-Ross describes it, but it is a helpful framework to understand our pain. She describes these five stages as a process: [slide] denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. It is this process from “how could this happen” to “where were you God” to “I’d do anything to bring her back” to “what’s the use in living” to “for her sake and for mine, I must keep on” – it’s learning to live with what has happened. In the movie, Mack is stuck, painfully stuck – and he is angry. Everyone in his life can see it. In this scene, Mack meets God, known as “Papa”: [video #1]

Love always leaves a mark. If you have loved, you have been marked. God’s love also leaves a mark. In 2 Corinthians 1, the apostle Paul writes: **Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with comfort we ourselves receive from God.** (2 Corinthians 2:3-4) In how much of our affliction does God meet us? All of it. Paul found this almost overwhelming. The English word is comfort but it means “to come near” It is one person being with another. Ten times in five verses, Paul uses the word. And he uses the present active tense to indicate the comfort is continual. As deep as the tragedy is the depth of comfort waiting for us. God has been there. God knows, and God has been with us, suffering with us. This letter – 2 Corinthians is deeply personal for Paul. He describes his own unimaginable pain and suffering. **Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open seas... danger from rivers... from bandits...** (2 Corinthians 11:24-27) And he goes on and on, describing his own pain and suffering, and yet through all of this tragedy, Paul found the fullness of God’s grace. In this scene, the Holy Spirit leads Mack into a garden and invites him to help her clean out of the mess, a space for new growth. [video #2]

This wild wonderful mess of you. Why do our lives seem so messy? Because when God works in our lives, it’s messy. Have you ever tried baking without spilling flour on the counter or having something boil over on the stove? Have you ever worked on your car without getting your hands dirty? Last Monday, in the midst of the heat and humidity, I spread 40 bags of mulch and I was dirty and drenched in sweat and I came inside, laid on the floor, and thought I would never get up again. I wasn’t sure I wanted to get up again. As God works in us and our tragedies, turning the soil of our lives, it’s messy. God does this, not for God’s pleasure or to torture us, but to help us get to a place of healing.

In this scene, Mack is nearly overcome by the pain and yet in the midst of what he is experiencing, Jesus is there. [video #3] God has promised to be with us no matter what. God promises to never leave us. But Mack is stuck in his pain and grief. It nearly consumes him. He carries guilt about what he has done and what he has not been able to do. Abused as a child by a father who made him believe it was his fault. A daughter who was killed because he could not protect her. His family struggling all because of him. He needs forgiveness. It’s the door to his freedom. And yet, we hang on to the guilt and the pain, thinking someone needs to be punished. We hang on to our own guilt thinking we deserve to be punished when God is waiting at the door to set us free. Just open the door. One day, the disciples asked Jesus, “How many times must we forgive – seven times?” Jesus replies, seventy times seven. What I think Jesus was saying is don’t get hung up on the number. How many times? As many times as it takes for you to start feeling it. Madam Jeanne Guyon was a 17<sup>th</sup> century French mystic who wrote about prayer and the spiritual life, and I like what she said: **“If knowing answers to life’s questions is absolutely necessary to you, then forget the journey. You will never make it, for this is a journey of unknowables,– of unanswered questions, enigmas, incomprehensibles, and**

**most of all, things unfair.”** The answer to true healing is learning to let go, knowing that God is with us, working to bring good out of unspeakable pain. In this scene, Mack let’s go. He’s in a conversation with wisdom when he finally let’s go of the pain, and watch what happens: [video #4]

In Romans 8:18, Paul says, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” The sufferings of the present don’t even compare to the good/glory that will be revealed to us. The way I know this is that the spot where the worst thing in history happens – the death of Jesus – is just a stone’s throw from the greatest thing in history – the garden tomb – and to this day that tomb is still empty. Life is eternal, and we are given the power to live beyond today. Mack is given a glimpse of eternity and he walks in the water, washing away the pain and giving new life. The place of your greatest pain can become the place of your greatest healing. God can do something new.

There is one final scene that I want to share. God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) is alongside Mack as they carry a casket representing the pain that he has carried. Watch what happens. [video #5] The shack is the place of your greatest pain – and it’s where you can bury that pain once and for all. And the tear that you’ve shed become the seeds and the water to bring forth healing and hope. We can go about our lives pretending we don’t hurt. How are you doing? I’m fine. I’m okay. But deep down, until you let God meet you in that pain, you will never be free. God is waiting to give you the fullness of life that only God can provide.

Let’s pray: In the movie, the name for God was Papa. It’s also what Jesus called God. So, would you pray with me: “Papa, I want to start the healing process today.”

### **Grow, Pray, Study for Week of July 15, 2018**

**Weekly Prayer:** God of mercy and grace, send your Holy Spirit into this place. Touch and heal our brokenness and lift us out of pain and despair. Dry the tears of our hurts. Comfort and nourish us with the many blessings of your powerful love. Let us also be your instruments of healing to people and to a world that is hurting. In your name, we pray. Amen.

### **Monday, July 16**

#### **Scripture: 2 Corinthians 11:24-27; 12:9**

I received the "forty lashes minus one" from the Jews five times. I was beaten with rods three times. I was stoned once. I was shipwrecked three times. I spent a day and a night on the open sea. I've been on many journeys. I faced dangers from rivers, robbers, my people, and Gentiles. I faced dangers in the city, in the desert, on the sea, and from false brothers and sisters. I faced these dangers with hard work and heavy labor, many sleepless nights, hunger and thirst, often without food, and in the cold without enough clothes.

He said to me, "My grace is enough for you, because power is made perfect in weakness." So I'll gladly spend my time bragging about my weaknesses so that Christ's power can rest on me.

**Observation:** In his letter to the Corinthian Christians, Paul makes it clear that he is not speaking to them as someone who has not experienced great hardship and pain. Just the opposite! Paul’s life experience has come with unspeakable pain and suffering. But it was in the suffering that he came to understand the depth of God’s grace. Paul found God’s amazing grace.

**Application:** In the movie, *The Shack*, Mack is led back to the Shack, the place in his life of insurmountable pain. It is in that place where he begins his journey of healing. Where is your “shack?” Where have you experienced a place of great pain in your life? Does it still hold you hostage?

**Prayer:** God of amazing grace, you know all about me, even those places of great pain that I attempt to hide and refuse to let go. Be the gentle and constant force that will lead me through my pain to your great and amazing grace. Amen.

## Tuesday, July 17

### Scripture: Psalm 6

Please, LORD, don't punish me when you are angry; don't discipline me when you are furious. Have mercy on me, LORD, because I'm frail. Heal me, LORD, because my bones are shaking in terror! My whole body is completely terrified! But you, LORD! How long will this last? Come back to me, LORD! Deliver me! Save me for the sake of your faithful love! No one is going to praise you when they are dead. Who gives you thanks from the grave? I'm worn out from groaning. Every night, I drench my bed with tears; I soak my couch all the way through. My vision fails because of my grief; it's weak because of all my distress. Get away from me, all you evildoers, because the LORD has heard me crying! The LORD has listened to my request. The LORD accepts my prayer. All my enemies will be ashamed and completely terrified; they will be defeated and ashamed instantly.

**Observation:** Written by King David, this psalm expresses the anguish that David experiences over his sinfulness. He interprets his current illness (could be physical, emotional or spiritual) as an indication of God's disfavor – that God is somehow judging him. In what the 16<sup>th</sup> Century mystic, St. John of the Cross, called “the dark night of the soul,” David cries out for deliverance, confident that God has heard his cry and will bring mercy.

**Application:** The psalm allows us to overhear David's conversation with God and see the mess that David was in... *The Shack* also takes us to a garden where the Holy Spirit helps Mack realize what a mess he is – “a wild wonderful mess of you.” Much of that mess results from his efforts to pass judgment on others and himself. What questions have you asked of God? How do you talk to God when you are in deep anguish?

**Prayer:** Merciful God, thank you for your patience with me, your readiness to listen to the cries of my heart. Even when my anger is directed toward you, you still love me. “Save me for the sake of your faithful love!” Amen.

## Wednesday, July 18

### Scripture: Psalm 34:18; 1 Corinthians 1:3-8

The LORD is close to the brokenhearted; he saves those whose spirits are crushed.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I thank my God always for you, because of God's grace that was given to you in Christ Jesus. That is, you were made rich through him in everything: in all your communication and every kind of knowledge, in the same way that the testimony about Christ was confirmed with you. The result is that you aren't missing any spiritual gift while you wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will also confirm your testimony about Christ until the end so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

**Observation:** In our pain, God is closer than we think. That's the psalmist's realization: "The LORD is close..." The apostle Paul is also confident of God's faithfulness. God is able to empower the Christian to holy living in an environment where there was little encouragement to do that. Even today, many see their pain and suffering as an indication that God has abandoned them. Not so, says the psalmist. Not so, says Paul.

**Application:** In an early scene from *The Shack*, when Mack first comes face to face with "Papa" (God), his questions to God are raw with emotion. Yet, the response that he receives is acceptance and love and a reminder that God has never left him alone. Where is God when it hurts? Looking back where can you see that God has been with you?

**Prayer:** God, how great is your faithfulness! Help me to see that even in my places of disappointment and pain you have and will continue to be with me. Hold me close and let your love be real to me. Amen.

**Thursday, July 19**

**Scripture: 1 John 1:5; James 1:17; Numbers 23:19; Joshua 1:8-9; Micah 7:18-19**

This is the message that we have heard from him and announce to you: "God is light and there is no darkness in him at all."

Every good gift, every perfect gift, comes from above. These gifts come down from the Father, the creator of the heavenly lights, in whose character there is no change at all.

God isn't a man that he would lie, or a human being that he would change his mind. Has he ever spoken and not done it, or promised and not fulfilled it?

Never stop speaking about this Instruction scroll. Recite it day and night so you can carefully obey everything written in it. Then you will accomplish your objectives and you will succeed. I've commanded you to be brave and strong, haven't I? Don't be alarmed or terrified, because the LORD your God is with you wherever you go."

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity, overlooking the sin of the few remaining for his inheritance? He doesn't hold on to his anger forever; he delights in faithful love. He will once again have compassion on us; he will tread down our iniquities. You will hurl all our sins into the depths of the sea.

**Observation:** In the book of Exodus, Moses discovers that God comes to him in a bush that is burning but not being consumed. When Moses asks who is speaking to him, God says, "I am." Throughout the Bible, people struggle with a perception of God that does not always match the reality of who God is. People often make God be who they want God to be, only to discover God is greater than who they have perceived.

**Application:** *The Shack* totally changes Mack's perception of what God is like – and even how God looks/appears. Using the Bible references, define who God is. Who is God to you? How has your image of God changed as you have grown in faith?

**Prayer:** Sometimes, God, I struggle to find the right words for my prayers, wondering what it takes for you to hear me. Remind me that you are with me now as a dear friend and can even hear the unspoken words on my heart. Thank you for your relationship of love. Amen.

## Friday, July 20

**Scripture: Exodus 14:14; Isaiah 40:29-31; John 14:18-21; Matthew 28:20b**

The LORD will fight for you. You just keep still."

...giving power to the tired and reviving the exhausted. Youths will become tired and weary, young men will certainly stumble; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength; they will fly up on wings like eagles; they will run and not be tired; they will walk and not be weary.

"I won't leave you as orphans. I will come to you. Soon the world will no longer see me, but you will see me. Because I live, you will live too. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, you are in me, and I am in you. Whoever has my commandments and keeps them loves me. Whoever loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

...teaching them to obey everything that I've commanded you. Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age."

**Observation:** Throughout scripture, we are given promises from God. The words of a gospel hymn remind us to stand on the promises of God. Near the end of the movie, *The Shack*, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit remind Mack who is concerned that he will no longer be able to "see" God: "I was, I am, I will be." You can build your life on the promises of God.

**Application:** These are just a few of God's promises. Today see how many you can list. What has God promised you, and how do you apply God's promises to your life?

**Prayer:** Loving God, help me to be still and to know that you are God. Stir up in me the certainty that no matter what may come in this day, you will always be with me and all of your children. Amen.

## Saturday, July 21

**Scripture: Matthew 18:21-22; James 5:16**

Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Should I forgive as many as seven times?" Jesus said, "Not just seven times, but rather as many as seventy-seven times.

For this reason, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous person is powerful in what it can achieve.

**Observation:** How many times must we forgive? It is hard to forgive. Our human nature wants to hold on to the pain, wanting our pain to somehow condemn those who hurt us. Jesus offered his disciples a number. Jesus, how many times must we forgive? Seven times? Seventy-seven times? Maybe Jesus' response is meant to pose this question: how many times do you need to forgive before you start feeling it?

**Application:** In the movie, Mack carries a lot of pain resulting from the way his father treated him. Mack is eventually able to be set free when he finally forgives. What steps do you need to take to forgive those who have harmed you? Have you forgiven yourself for your mistakes? What part does confession play in forgiveness?

**Prayer:** Lord, help me to forgive as you have already forgiven me. Set me free from the pain, whether it be the result of my actions or the words and actions of others. I want to follow you. I want to feel your fullness and grace. Amen.