

Reclining in “The Shack”

As a teenager growing up in rural Ireland, I didn't remember any of the homilies the local priest preached. Maybe I was distracted by other things. But I do remember one particular series of homilies that fascinated me.

The local priest decided to set aside a series of Sunday to relate the story of “The Pilgrim's Progress” by John Bunyan. Decades later, I still remember the story and the many characters in the classic. The book chronicles the story of Christian who journeys from the “City of Destruction” to the “Celestial City.” As he travels on his journey, he is weighed down with his sins. Along the way, he meets various characters: Evangelist, Mr. Worldly Wiseman, Mr. Legality, Civility, Faithful, Hopeful, Ignorance, The Interpreter and Goodwill. Christian journeys through the Enchanted Ground, crossing the River of Death and into the Celestial City with help from Hopeful.

I am not sure why the story fascinated me at that time in my life. Maybe, it was divine intervention that contributed to a vocation in some small but significant way.

Since then, I have poured through tomes of theology books, trying to understand the finer points and nuances of theology and its implications for daily life.

Recently, I have read another book that has pricked my curiosity and broadened my horizons. It is the New York Times bestseller, “The Shack,” by Wm Paul Young. It is the story of Mack who carries around within him “The Great Sadness” until he is invited to meet a Trinity of Persons in The Shack. He also meets Sarayu, the wise one.

During his journey, he finds out that “there are times when you choose to believe something that would normally be considered absolutely irrational. It doesn't mean that it is actually irrational, but it surely is nor rational. Perhaps there is a suprarationality: reason beyond the normal definitions of fact or data-based logic; something that only makes sense if you can see the big picture of reality. Maybe that is where faith fits in.”

Along the way, Sarayu reminds him that “relationship are never about power; and one way to avoid the will to power is to choose to limit oneself – to serve. Later, Jesus reminds him that “being always transcends appearance – that which only seems to be. Once you begin to know the being behind the very pretty or ugly face, as determined by your bias, the surface appearances fade away until they simply no longer matter.”

Having lost his abducted daughter, Mack tries to understand the meaning of pain and suffering. God tells him that “there are millions of reasons to allow pain and hurt and suffering rather than eradicate them, but most of those reasons can only be understood within each person's story. I am not evil. You are the ones who embrace fear and pain and power and rights so readily in your relationships. But your choices are also not stronger than my purposes, and I will use every choice you make for the ultimate good and the most loving outcome.” Sarayu reinforces this for Mack by saying that “evil is a word we use to describe the absence of Good, just as we use the word darkness to describe the absence of Light or death to describe the absence of Life. Both evil and darkness can only be understood in relation to Light and Good. They do not have any actual existence...declaring independence will result in evil because apart from me, you can only draw upon yourself. That is death because you have separated yourself from me: Life”

Sitting in the shack with Mack and his Companions, challenges one to rethink some aspects of one's understanding of God, relationships, good and evil, forgiveness, faith, empowerment and hope. We meet a God who is refreshing and challenging; a God who can bring incredible good out of unspeakable tragedies, a God who reminds us that faith does not grow in the house of uncertainty; a God who is a verb, alive, dynamic and active.

Now it is time for me to return once again to The Shack and join Mack and his Companions as we continue the conversation.