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God, whose fingers sculpt sun and moon and curl the baby's ear;
Spirit, brooding over chaos before the naming of day;
Savior, sending us to earth's ends with water and words:
through your word, startle us with the grace, love, and communion of your presence,
that we may live to the praise of your majestic name. Amen.

Psalm 8 using Hymn 25- Read Responsively

We end Matthew's gospel with the passage we will read. Usually referred to as The Great Commission, you may recall this passage. To place us in context, right before this reading, Matthew tells us of the resurrection. The women at the tomb are instructed to go quickly and tell the disciples, "Jesus has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." And we know that the women do what the angel tells them to do. Listen to the word of God:

Matthew 28:16-20

28:16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.

28:17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.

28:18 And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

28:19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

28:20 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Proclamation of the Word

Perhaps you have had a chance to see the movie *The Shack* or to read the book which came out 10 years ago.

Mack is man with some demons. Plagued by the emotional and physical abuse of his own alcoholic father, he has been distant from God for much of his life. Mack is married to Nan, a woman of strong faith whose personal name for God is Papa. She has a loving, warm relationship with Papa while Mack is a distant, doubter racked by his own pain, guilt, and shame. Something tragic happens to their child, a violent death, and Mack is sent further into his own despair, anger, and pain. Then he has an experience of God's presence that may be dream or brought on by an accident, but none the less real or TRUE. Such are the mysteries of God's ways.

In the Shack, we go on a healing journey with Mack as he meets God. What is unusual about his meeting with God is that his long-held image of God is set on end. He first encounters a Black woman who resembles the sweet neighbor lady whom he knew as a child. The neighbor knew Mack was an

abused and frightened child, she was always kind to him and even went as far as to say, "Fathers don't beat their children." That is not what love does. So it is no wonder that God shows herself in the likeness of this neighbor woman. She tells him that she did not think he needed a father right now. A couple more people show up, a man who looks Middle Eastern, and a woman who is exotic, maybe Asian. The woman says, I guess we should make introductions.

"I have a lot of names...you can call me what Nan does- Papa."

"Are you saying you are..."

"I am"

"The"

"I am that I am. Look a there I go quoting scripture. You met my Son."

Mack had been brought to Papa's house guided by a young man, the son. Then he meets Sarayu whose name means "breath or wind" like the Holy Spirit. Mack meets the Holy Trinity of God. He continues,

So which one of you...? "I AM" they say in unison. "And you have no idea how much I love you," says Papa.

This is a start of a journey of healing and trust that forms as God builds a relationship with Mack. He wrestles with forgiveness, doubts, anger at God, and faith. Mack meets God in three persons, and moves to faith. The Holy Trinity, it is so much more than a doctrine of the ancient church, it is a window into the mystery of God. *Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God almighty, God in three persons, blessed trinity.*

Father, Son, Holy Spirit or Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. Or as the theologian Augustine calls God: Lover, Beloved, and their Mutual Love. God in three persons, yet one. The Trinity. Jesus himself gives the great commission to his disciples on a mountain sending them to all the world to make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, teaching them.

But making sense of God is not easy---even those disciples who had suffered with Jesus, seen his many works of mercy and love, and followed him struggled with their own doubts, even at the very end. After the resurrection, they meet Jesus there and

28:17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.

Worship and doubt. They sound like opposites and seem like contradictions. But even the disciples had their doubts. Mack is in good company with his own struggles. I had never noticed that before--"they worshiped him; but some doubted." all in the same encounter with Jesus. I don't know about you, but that gives me great comfort. Even the men who walked with Jesus had doubts, but this is not the first time. In fact, in Matthew 8 Jesus is in the boat with the disciples when a storm comes up, and

he sees their fear asking, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" Then later in chapter 17 the disciples cannot cast out a boy's demon. When they ask Jesus why they could not, Jesus says, "Because of your little faith." (Mt. 17:14-20)

What I find interesting is that they kept following Jesus in spite of their occasional lack of faith. It was a part of the journey, but did not define it. God gave them faith and a will to follow any way. Maybe you and I need permission to talk about faith and doubts- seeming contradictions.

At a recent graduation baccalaureate service, Pastor Janet Hunt tells of Jessica, a

high school senior who stepped to the podium to tell her faith story. Only unlike the witness of many on occasions such as these, her story was not one of unwavering faith. Rather, Jessica spoke of how she took her faith for granted as a child and so was unprepared for the day when her academic learning and her own life experience called it into question. Indeed, she spoke specifically of her anger at God when a good friend was diagnosed with cancer. And she spoke of spending a long night with this life-long friend watching as he peacefully took his last breath. She spoke of how her prayers moved from anger to acceptance to gratitude and she spoke of how she came to understand God as one who walked with her.

Hunt writes, *"She is 18. Her words were honest and mature and faithful in a way one does not always hear. In fact, astoundingly, just a few minutes later a clergy colleague stepped to the pulpit to speak to these soon to be graduates about the importance of faith. Only, in direct and disturbing contrast to Jessica's powerful witness, he spoke of a time when he was called in to pray with and for a friend who had cancer and of how the cancer left him never to return.*

Ouch.

Though perhaps it was not meant in that way, one could be left understanding that if one only has enough faith, God will give you whatever you want.ⁱ

What I appreciate about what Matthew tells us about those disciples on that mountain, is that while they were gathered together, some doubted. Yet, they were all commissioned to go forth and do God's work. Doubt and Faith can sometimes co-exist. There is no either-or, absolute, it is a part of the journey sometimes. And while some doubted, some had faith...faith is lived out in community. We can believe for one another.

I like the way Beuchner puts it, "...if you don't have any doubts, you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving."ⁱⁱ

The disciples give me hope. They are not perfect, only God is perfect. But what we do know is that perfect love can cast out fear.ⁱⁱⁱ

1 John 4:18 "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love."

Mack, our main character from *The Shack*, is one who finds faith, but not on his own. He needs others, the faith of his wife, the friendship and faith of a neighbor who cares for him. And then he experiences of the love of God shown to him through 3 persons: Papa, Son, and Sarayu, who form a relationship with him in love. God is love in relationship.

Writing in the 4th Century, maybe Augustine was right- calling God the Lover, the Beloved, and their Mutual Love. When Jesus was on earth he called others into that Love to receive it and share it.

And on that mountain Jesus was commissioning his students, his disciples that day, to go forth to invite others including us into relationship with God, to be a member of God's self, the body of Christ. Many, including some of us, are hurting, struggling, and in need of hearing from God, "You have no idea how much I love you."

It is our job to share that news. God does not desire slaves or minions- these were not orders from a General, but a calling, an invitation to all of us into a loving relationship with God's self who is LOVE, the most real love.

Matthew tells us that God came to us in the birth of Jesus, so we might know the love of God. Jesus is *Immanuel* "God with us" and he ends the gospel with I am "with you" to the end. We have the power to share the good news, but we also have a promise- that Jesus will always be with us.

That is good news- news that we are commissioned by a great God to share!

In the name of the Lover, the Beloved, and their Mutual Love...

Benediction:

We have been given Power and a Promise- the power to go make disciples and a promise that God is always "with us"

Jesus said, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

ⁱ Janet Hunt, "But Some Doubted..." at dancingwiththeword.com.

ⁱⁱ Buechner, Frederick, "Doubt" in *Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABC's of Faith* (Harper: San Francisco, 2004) 85.

ⁱⁱⁱ 1 John 4:18