

“The Baptized Why”
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Matthew 3:13-17

[Spoken word poetry is a style of entertainment involving performance-based poetry—which means poetry that is written to be performed rather than to be read on the page. It focuses on the aesthetics of word play and story-telling. Here in the United States it has roots in the Harlem Renaissance and civil rights movement of the 1960s and remains a popular form of storytelling and protest.]

Two weeks ago, we gathered here to celebrate the birth of a baby in a manger—
a perfect little stranger who somehow brought danger
to the very ones God longed to save.

Then we heard the story of the Magi, those wise guys with stars in their eyes
and strange gifts in their bags,

men who asked for directions and still arrived late.

But this was no ordinary baby shower.

This baby taught us that power breeds fragile egos
and it's the powerless who hear heaven's song.

Today we come and the baby in a manger is all grown up
and come to be baptized
and of course I want to know why . . .

You know my question will always be *why*;

for I do not buy easy answers any more than I take the easy road.

I do not buy easy answers any more.

It's not my style, I was recently told.

I've been told I walk a slippery slope.

I've been told that by not accepting this book lock, stock, and barrel,
that I am barreling down the road to hell

and how in hell could I pick and choose what is true?

It is true I walk a slippery slope and I have to admit

I like it.

I like the sudden drops

and the way your breath catches when the ground gives way
to a truth you didn't know was there.

I like the slippery slope for I trust the mountain beneath the snow.

So beneath the snow of wisdom's cry, I bring my offering of why.

Why would the Son of God need to be baptized?

In this case Why must wait for Who

for who, exactly, was Jesus?

Was Jesus both human and divine,

as church tradition teaches,

both God and "a wretch like me?"

We are told he was without sin.

Is that because there is no room for brokenness in the wholeness that is God?

If so, is there no room for me?

Or is it because he was tempted, like me, and said "no" . . . like me . . .

occasionally.

I'd rather believe that he was perfect because he was divine.

Of course, I want to be perfect.

No, if truth be told, I just want to be right, which is far from perfect.

But I'd rather believe Jesus was perfectly divine than perfectly human and still . . .

perfect.

It lets me off the hook just a bit,

frees me from the tyranny of the perfectionist fit.

But I am back to the question:

Was Jesus both human and divine?

And how do you predict when they contradict?

How could he be infinite and impotent?

How could Jesus be God if broken

and how could he be human if not?

How could Jesus be God

if lonely, like me

helpless, like me,

be God and be . . . like . . . me?

Acknowledging my slippery slope sliding ways,

I know which I choose to believe.

If I cannot believe Jesus was God *and* man,

and I lack the faith in our fathers to get it right,

then I pick the human in this theological fight.

If Jesus lived this extraordinary life, I want to believe he wasn't a ringer.

If Jesus loved without limit and welcomed without question,

I want to believe it's because he saw people as they were, on earth,
not because he had known them
bathed in starlight before their birth.

I want Jesus to be human because then I *don't* get let off the hook
when it's my turn to welcome and to love.

We're told that Jesus' baptism wasn't for cleansing sin.

This is why the baptism we do here does not save a child's soul—
we believe that child has no sin, is already whole.

It is not rescue but welcome that we offer.

Welcome to the world, little one so fresh from heaven.

Welcome to the community, the people of God,

for being with the people of God eases the longing
we all endure and forget—

the longing for the unity with all creation we knew so clearly
before our first breath.

Welcome to the church,

where we strive to shine a mirror of heaven's light
and even though we often fail

(we pale in comparison, our light too dim,
our love of might by pseudonym)

even when we get it wrong,

we get a few things right.

To everyone we offer the welcome of the water.

Maybe this is why Jesus came to be baptized.

Maybe he came because he couldn't stay away from the water.

Maybe the water, fluid and free like time-less-ness and wind,
reminded him of home—

the home he shared with God, with the saints,

maybe even with you and me in our purest state.

Maybe he came because the water washing over him felt like

being wrapped in a blanket of stars

and getting a goodnight kiss from God.

Or maybe he had never known God's kiss.

Maybe he was like me, sometimes,

unsure of his calling, voices calling in different directions,

pulled apart by demands and commands
and understand I speak only for myself.

But if Jesus was like me, it could be.

It could be that doing his father's business,
which seemed so clear at age twelve in the temple,
turned murky as he matured.

After all, we were all sure at twelve of things we cannot still claim
to believe.

Maybe he came to the water in search of answers,
in search of his cousin who seemed to know who Jesus was
even if Jesus didn't.

We all need to be seen as we are and as we may become
especially when we don't feel becoming.

If you have been baptized, do you remember it?

Do you remember the feel of the water,
like God's love, going drip-drip-drip all over your head?

Or do you remember only the photo,
the stories you were told of your welcome?

Maybe you remember the gathering at the water's edge of nature's cathedral
and singing "Wade in the water. Wade in the water, children."

This child remembers at age eight stepping down into the baptismal pool,
so afraid it would be over my head
like so much of my church's teaching,
but I looked into my daddy's eyes and knew he would hold me close . . .
me, with the pink bathing cap my mother made me wear for it was winter
and she feared the cold (and so much more);
me, with the trembling feet for I feared the water.

If truth be told, I am still . . . afraid . . . of water.

Still afraid of baptism's water and what claim it might stake on me.
Still afraid of God's love going drip-drip-drip when I need immersion.
Still afraid of God's love immersing me when all I can handle
is drip—drip—drip.

Still afraid that when I rise, I will not hear those words I long to hear:
"This is my child, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased."

I have been baptized in whys and come up gasping
for air and affirmation
only to see a sky untorn, no descending dove,
to hear nothing but my frantic breath

echo on the distant shore.
 I have walked away, dripping with water and sarcasm
 (God must be too busy finding parking places or rigging football games).

And other times I felt the blessing, tasted the water in my mouth,
 welcomed the vision as the voice echoed in my irregular heart.
 You are my beloved child.
 You are my beloved child.

Maybe that is why we come again and again to this place—
 this table, this font, this sacred space
 made sacred not by wooden cross but by sharing loss.
 Yes, we pronounce good news of great joy which shall be to all people
 but we also announce bad news of great sorrow
 which comes to all people without fail.
 Here we share our burdens and find that by sharing we lighten the load,
 we break the code of silence that bends and condemns us
 to lonely closets of pain and shame.

Those lonely closets are opened as God's voice is heard,
 pronouncing that we are claimed and loved and pleasing
 in all our humanity, like Jesus,
 and maybe even in our—divinity? like Jesus?

After all, we were created in the image of God.
 Does that not make us at least with the potential of the divine?
 Does that not make us at minimum a reflection, a refraction,
 a transubstantiation,
 my body and blood become Christ?
 broken but made whole
 and beautiful at the broken places.

I believe our Eastern siblings (and their Western cousins) have it right
 when they say: Namaste.

The Divine in me recognizes the Divine in you.
 "I honor the place in you in which the entire universe dwells.
 I honor the place in you which is of love, of truth, of light, and of peace.
 When you are in that place in you, and I am in that place in me, we are one."
 This place where the universe dwells,
 this place of love and truth and light and peace,

do we in the church not call this place . . . God?

Today we remember Jesus' baptism—

we do it every year without fear of repetition

for who could get bored of a heaven opened wide

and a parent's pride and proclamation?

We need a re-creation every day because every day God opens the sky

and says "You are my beloved," but not to Jesus . . .

to me with my fear of water

and my mom with her fear of cold

and you with your fear of being bold.

Every day the heavens are opened for you.

You are my beloved child.

You are my beloved child.

May we know it.

May we speak it.

May we live it.

Amen.