

Baptism of Jesus

There was more than one bird at the river that day.

Truth is – when John’s hands, firm and rough, pushed his head down, down, under the water,

Something warm was brooding over its face.

When the cool shock of it covered his ears, and the sounds of the hot air-world died away, until the only thing he could hear was his own pulse and that other-worldly music of this underwater womb....

For those seconds (or was it minutes....time seems so...so...fluid when worlds are changing....)

In that underwater time, the wings of his own heart beat like wild things

And churned, churned those Jordan depths until the past – that had both blessed and haunted him

And the future – unknowable but beckoning, magnet-like – come and live – come and die...

Flowed together, drenching him in the very real and present need of a thirsty land. Right here, Right now. I do what I can do. That’s all the present asks. That’s all the Presence asks.

Yes. And the rustling, rising confidence in his Spirit grew....with the building pressure in his chest, the need for air – building,

So that when his head finally broke the water’s surface and he gasped, drawing in sweet, sweet air...lungs full of life

It was like a giant bird had taken flight

And the sound he made as he rose, drenched and gasping, was the sound of something newly born and free.

The dove, and the Voice – one with his own. Oh yes, there was more than one bird at the river that day.

It was always the stories of birds that he loved the most. Even as a little boy. Birds. They seemed to be there for him when he needed them. Sometimes he’d find a feather – just at the right time. The sounds of their songs marked the movement of his day:

- the shy twittering of the little ones who knew the dawn had arrived – new it before the rest of the sleepy world
- - and then the rooster. So proud to announce the sunrise – no shyness there!
- - the silent, watching predators who could bear the strength of the mid day sun, waiting to feed on those who could not
- - the scavengers in the market place, hopping and hoping for crumbs from the evening meal
- -and the screeching of the impossibly bright tropical evening birds who gathered the twilight in by their wings at the edge of town
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Birds. Sang out the rhythm of the day. He loved them all. –

When Jesus was very little, they still lived in Egypt. He had good memories of that time, even though his parents didn't talk about it after they moved back to Israel, and settled in Nazareth.

There had been different birds there. At night, the family would sit around a fire with the other Jews in that camp, and they'd tell stories.

Joseph would say *"Come here, my boy – what adventure will we have tonight?"* And Jesus would settle in, sitting in the dust at Joseph's feet, leaning back against his legs, breathing in the stories along with the wood smoke and his father's honest sweat. He'd say *"Tell me about the time...."* And they'd be off.

Ravens. He loved the stories of the ravens. The time they fed Elijah. The time of the great flood, when the raven was first from the ark after it came to rest. And the dove – coming back finally with hope in her beak.

Delicious stories! He loved them all.

Even the chickens in the yard had their stories. "In the beginning" Torah says "God's Spirit brooded over the face of the waters". That's like a mother hen, he'd think. *"Remember that, son, when you are collecting eggs with your mother"*, Joseph said. They all laughed then, and Jesus nodded, touching a place on his hand where just that morning a mother hen had shown him what protection sometimes felt like.

So many stories! Sometimes the wood smoke and the sound of the voices became distant, and he'd fall asleep....going to that dreaming place where the stories outside mingle with the stories inside

And tiny beaks begin to peck at the shells that separate the two.

Then, his parents would pick him up and tuck him in and the night would do its dark and mysterious work

Until the twittering once again foretold the dawn.

Eagles – now eagles, are birds of the day. The great prophet Isaiah loved eagles. It was all through his scroll. God is faithful – like a mother eagle with her young, it said.

One day, Joseph showed him what that meant. Pointed them out. See? Up there! It was a mother eagle teaching her baby to fly. He looked up to where his father pointed

And there

At the top of a very tall tree - he saw them.

The mother. The baby.

She pushed that little one closer and closer to the edge.

And then, with one final shove of her beak, over, into the nothingness below.

Jesus held his breath.

The baby made a few feeble flaps, then froze in terror, falling....toward the jagged rocks below.

He couldn't look He couldn't NOT look.

And then –

The mother swooped down – perfect timing – and caught that little one on her wings and carried it back safely to the nest.

Jesus couldn't move.

Finally he let out his breath – a grunt that came from his belly, and beyond.

He didn't realize he'd been holding his breath until he let it out again. It was though he'd been underwater.

Joseph touched his arm. *"She'll make her do it again, you know"* he said, and began to sing:

*And I will raise you up on eagles' wings, bear you on the breath of dawn
Make you to shine like the sun
And hold you in the palm of my hand"*

Some day my son, it will be safe to go home to Israel. Herod can't live forever. God, like the eagle, will carry us home.

With his mother, the story was a bit different. She liked to play a game with him as they worked together.

"Tell me what the dream of God is like" she'd say, and they would make up says to dress the dream in words. Her own favourites were from an old song. She'd sing it, and get a...look...in here eyes.

"God will scatter the proud in the imagination of their hearts" She'd say. *"God will put the mighty to rout, and lift up those of low degree"*

And Jesus would try: *"the dream of God is like a big banquet where there's enough for everyone, and no one is turned away"*

He thought of that one day when there hadn't been enough food in the camp, and what there was, had gone to feed the Egyptian soldiers. He helped Mary stir the barley and add more water to make it go further, all the time smelling the meat roasting on the fires of the soldiers. *"Sometimes, mama"* he said *"I don't think I like the Egyptians"*

She took him aside. *"Soldiers are one thing, son, some day we'll all learn better than that. Listen. The Egyptians have much to teach us. I've learned from them about healing herbs and practices unknown to our people. They, who so long ago were our enemies, have offered us sanctuary here and **saved your life. That's what the dream of God is like!**"*

There, in Egypt, it was impossible to keep the food laws of their people. She'd say *"Honey, my little dove – it's not what goes into your mouth that honours or dishonours the Holy One – it's what comes out."*

Some of their fellow refugees despised the Egyptians in spite of (or maybe because of) being sheltered in their land. They told the old stories of being slaves in this land centuries before; how the Egyptians had treated them so cruelly, and how Moses, Miriam

and Aaron had led them across the Reed Sea to freedom. How God led with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, and rescued them with a strong and mighty arm.

Oh – the stories were grand! He loved to listen. Once, Mary caught Jesus playing Exodus. He was Moses, of course, and as his stick Egyptian soldiers entered the mud puddle serving as the Reed Sea, he laughed as the water took the stick soldiers under. She took him aside. Again.

This time, her eyes, black like a raven's wing, burned with a light that had nothing to do with the heat of the sun. There was no tenderness. She held his arm tightly and lowered her face to his own.

NO ONE can be free until we are all free.

Do you understand????

God's dream is for us all. Egyptians too. We never rejoice at suffering. Enemies or not. They are God's people and so they are our family. Yes???

Yes, he said. Yes.

And solemnly he took the sticks out of the puddle, laying them on a rock for the sun to warm and dry.

When they returned to Israel – for Mary and Joseph, it was going home. For Jesus – it was a trip to a foreign country. He knew he'd been born there, but all the life he could remember was in Egypt. He spoke the language of his own people, but Egyptian came more easily. And sometimes, he didn't understand the accents of the older people in Nazareth.

Nor did he understand the way they looked at him. As though – something was expected of him. He didn't know what.

It was only then that he heard and understood the stories that as a small child he'd been sheltered from. Why they had fled, who Herod was, and the obscene fate of those baby boys. And slowly....slowly...it dawned on him. Like something moist and dark unfolding spiked wings within him.

He realized why it was that some of the women looked at him with such....pain? anger? Hope?

He was the age their sons would have been. He had lived. Their sons had not. And even more horrible, it had been HIM Herod was after.

They lost all those baby boys. They had died in his place. Their bodies, broken their blood shed – for him.

It was unbearable to know that. Unspeakable. How does a person live, knowing such a thing? That someone has died in your place....

He wanted to scream. He wanted to fix it – to save them – to make it right.

But for the life of him, how could he? A simple human being of flesh and blood what could he possibly do that would matter?

He was haunted by those baby boys...carried them like a fire in his heart. The cries of the night birds became their cries. Sleep was rare and he couldn't talk to anyone about it.

It all swam together into a chaos of despair so deep, so paralyzing that he failed to notice the wings brooding, hovering above and within it, waiting to create yet again.

Finally he settled into a non-existence of work in the carpenter shop, and he thought, well, that's that.

And then along came John. That old buzzard.

Everyone was talking about him, and one hot afternoon, Jesus closed up shop and went to find out what all the fuss was about.

"I'll just go and see" he said.

Jesus heard him before he saw him; there he was, at the riverside, - not much older than he, but he looked...so old. LOOKED ancient, and called up things more ancient still. Stirred up memory, like mud and fossil footprints on the Jordan's muddy floor. Memory of a dream and a covenant and a time when all will be well.

His riverside ranting was ruffling feathers in official circles...but the poor? They flocked to the banks of the Jordan. His words called to Jesus as nothing ever had.

Deep calling to deep. Beak, pushing him to the edge.

All afternoon that guy preached! The heat was intense, but Jesus didn't move. Sun hot, the sweat ran into his eyes – was it sweat? Maybe it was tears - and the desert sun made everything shimmer in a haze that made him wonder what was real. On and on he preached...calling them back to the covenant, forward into servanthood, as old Isaiah had dreamed

Offering to wash off the filth and grime clogging the most intimate cracks and creases of a once proud body of God's people.

And Jesus felt the nudge – stronger and stronger toward the edge of that nest, but something held him back. Finally...the sun was setting – they'd been at it all day – and Jesus found a place to sit.

There, sat a little girl, eating her evening meal. Two sparrows on a stick, roasted over a crude fire. Hardly more than a mouthful, each of those birds. They were so small and so was she.

And suddenly he wanted to cry. Cry for the little girl whose belly would still ache with hunger after this meager meal...

Cry for the others, who didn't even have this much,

Cry for the sparrows themselves, whose lives had been so brief and in the end so violent,
to feed a girl who never gave them another thought.

And cry – really cry – for those little Bethlehem boys who had died in his place.

He wanted to save them all. He wanted to make everything right.

But no matter what happened now, those babies were still dead
And their parents would never be the same
And he was alive.

He was alive.

He moved toward the edge of the nest...the river. The beak no longer needed to push. He
chose to step in.

And as his foot felt the first splash

He felt them with him. The hurting ones, the sparrows, the babies....

And he made a vow.

This – he said – is for them.