

The Queer Sunrise of God

Long before I became a Christian, I would stand on the beach in Florida, where I grew up, watching the sunset over the Gulf of Mexico. The sun would spill a radiant concoction of red, orange, pink, purple, through the clouds and out over everything in heartrending glory. The sunsets on the beach are the one thing I still miss about Florida. And years before I believed in God, the beach was the one place where I consistently encountered the Divine. While my friends waded and collected shells, I would wander a ways down the beach, just for a minute, and stand in the wet sand, arms out, completely overtaken by the immense sky, the dark wind and waves under the emerging stars. In awe of how small I really am in such a vast creation.

And God divided the Day and Night, Sky and Earth, Land and Sea: these are some of the binaries named in Genesis. Yet it is no coincidence that I felt God's presence most strongly standing on the shore where Land and Sea mix, staring at the horizon, where Sky meets Earth, watching Day slowly and beautifully mingle with Night. Who among us would question that those natural transitions, those beautiful marginal spaces, are of God? But still, we seem trapped by that last binary: "Male and Female He created them."

We have rigidly and violently restricted ourselves to a heterosexual cisgender binary. Western culture, especially, imposes sanctions on how we all must look, dress, act, and love, based on our bodies, to the exclusion and deadly harm of queer people everywhere. We fret and kill over divisions of sexuality, gender—also race, ability, religion, national borders, all the while effectively shunning parts of God's image.

As you may know, I am a queer, transgender woman. And wow, there are days I want to deliver a U-Haul full of queer theology to so many churches and politicians. Queer theologians have been quick to point out the double standards in our interpretation of scripture, Genesis in particular. In the words of trans Lutheran pastor Asher O'Callaghan:

Rebecca Jane Bedell

In the beginning, God created day and night. But have you ever seen a sunset?!?! Well trans and non-binary people are kind of like that. Gorgeous. Full of a hundred shades of color you can't see in plain daylight or during the night.

In the beginning God created land and sea. But have you ever seen a beach?!?! Well trans and non-binary people are kind of like that. Beautiful. A balanced oasis that's not quite like the ocean, nor quite like the land.

What O'Callaghan says beautifully is that God's creation is always one step beyond what we can describe, and what a blessing that is, to never finish exploring God's creation.

Surely the author of Genesis didn't need to list off beaches, estuaries, river deltas, marshes, for us to discover those within "Land and Sea." In this same way, "male and female" is a rhetorical shorthand, implying a spectrum beyond definition. Indeed, Jesus, fully human and fully divine, queered the ultimate boundary: between life and death.

Surely ours is a God who ruptures binaries, drastically, and with fanfare.

I have segued through every shade of gender in the past five years, from confused boy to queer-identifying male to non-binary to woman. The transition process demanded the utmost spiritual determination, but I knew I had no choice but to honestly affirm my mind and soul. When at last I completed the main physical and legal milestones, I rewarded myself with my first tattoo: a sunset, or sunrise, depending on what you see—that's how nostalgic I am for that Florida symbolism. My parents didn't approve of the tattoo, but that didn't really matter: they didn't exactly support me being a woman either.

I was raised in a secular, liberal household, with not much mention of God except as a delusion other people wasted their time worrying about. How ironic, then, that when my parents refused to meet my needs, it was in God that I found affirmation for my boundary-breaking queerness. How bitterly ironic that, when my parents refused to let me live at home the summer after graduation, it was my campus pastors who took me, a near stranger, into their two-bedroom apartment for three months: a truly holy and reckless generosity. I have always had the fierce support of a broad and vibrant queer community—but I was surprised and humbled also to find such a depth of humanity in

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God's love, even while much of society and some of those closest to me are hell-bent on dehumanizing me.

I came to worship one January evening, about a year after coming out as a woman. I hesitantly accompanied a close trans friend of mine to a small Presbyterian service in Princeton. I was stunned by the inclusive community I found, with no shortage of prominent queer members. My ingrained view of all Christianity as a backwards, toxic cult was scattered to the winds. I ate, just as we do in Pres House, a generous hunk of fresh-baked bread as my first Communion, and have been falling head over heels into the faith ever since. It was another discernment deep within me, just as irresistible as my gender, and even harder to explain—especially to my parents. Becoming a Christian was the last thing they expected of their queer deviant son. But I share this to show how transformed our faith is when we actively include those who are cast out elsewhere.

I have been fortunate, from Princeton to here, to find church communities where I bring all my queerness, my messy doubt and disruptive yearning, to the table in full view. And what a blessing, for my queerness and faith are bound together. We cannot know God without knowing ourselves. The Reverend Elizabeth Edman, in her book *Queer Virtue*, makes the radical case that queers have a lot to teach the church about community—not the other way around. Queer people, Edman argues, are really good at self-knowledge, precisely because for us it is so high-stakes: we risk our homes and families, our physical survival, all in order to love and know ourselves honestly and show that authenticity to the world. Queer people discern a truth within ourselves, and take on immense risk by declaring, “I know who I am, despite what the world says.” And isn't this what Jesus' followers declared? That they were beloved and of God's image, despite being brutally persecuted by an empire for saying so? To follow a God willing to die for each one of us? These are strange and daring beliefs, my friends. Edman reminds us that authentic Christianity does—or should—mirror this queer discernment: to choose every day to love recklessly, to be what the world doesn't want you to be. But she believes, as I do, that queer folks actually do this better than much of the church.

The solutions are obvious, yet harder than anything: Bring all of who you are, as we say at Pres House. Openly affirming each other's whole selves makes all of our relationships healthier. Before my transition, I didn't feel like I fit anywhere; I felt fearful of men, who I was supposed to be like; threatened by women, who treated me as a threatening man; and nervous around other trans people, who I was squeamish about being associated with. Coming out has not just revolutionized how I see myself, but shown me the crucial importance of embracing everyone as a manifestation of God's image, and fighting for all of us whose sacredness is denied, whose needs are unfulfilled. We must engage in the hard work of uplifting all of our intersecting identities: queer people of color, especially, who suffer multiple overlapping oppressive forces. We must respect all of our identities as distinct, but never dehumanizing.

This theology is not just for queer people. Hey, it's not even just for Christians—it's about how we recognize and empower each other. But for those of us who are Christians, and know we are all made in God's image—this is a theology for coming together as one body in the holy spirit. If we are capable of witnessing to the sacred diversity of our queer siblings—and I know we *are* capable—then our Christian ethic demands that we do the same for every marginalized community who is being denied abundant life. Disabled and chronically ill people, and sexual assault survivors, who are all rendered invisible in health care decisions that profit only those whose needs have never been at risk. Homeless people we turn away from, sex workers, everyone who is seen as unclean for surviving in ways you and I will never have to. Black and brown youth, and asylum-seekers, who are persecuted and killed because of where they were born. I could go on. But friends, there is no limit to God's image. We do not get to choose who is welcome in the grace of God, a queer God who lays low the powerful while exalting the lowest among us. If queer and trans people are the beaches and sunrises of humanity, we are certainly not the only ones. We do not all have to be queer to see that none of us fit comfortably in the binaries and borders we build to confine each other. We are not all queer, but we are all queerly beloved by God.

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It is time to go forward together into a beautiful, risk-taking, boundary-crossing love that can encompass all of us, a love as vast and many-colored as God Herself. Surely ours is a queer God, incomprehensible, whom we encounter as on a shoreline, overwhelmed with the Divine, all of who we are reflected in a sunrise of boundless beauty. Amen.