In “A Wizard of the Earthsea”, master storyteller, the now late Ursula Le Guin, introduces us to the greatest wizard who has ever come from the fictional isle of Gont when he is but a child.

Born to a blacksmithing family on an island known for goatherding, the young man born with an incredible, if unrestrained, strength for magic has a considerable chip on his shoulder when he arrives at the Island of Roke, a school for wizards intricately imagined long before J.K. Rowling ever conjured a Hogwart’s for Harry Potter.

Sparrowhawk he is called because he can call wild birds of prey out of the sky to alight on his wrist like trained falcons.

He shows off by learning at twice the rate of other students. He makes few good friends and at least one persistent enemy.

Having been tutored by the Master Summoner in lessons far beyond the wisdom of his years, on a heated dare to prove his strength, Sparrowhawk calls up the spirit of one long dead, and in doing so unleashes an evil into the world which he cannot control and which will stalk his every step.

This incident of unleashing leaves the young sorcerer scarred with permanent claw marks across his face and shaken to the core about the use of his powers.

In a different story, in a different book, John the Baptist cries out in the wilderness preparing the way for the Lord.

He is baptizing repentant sinners for the forgiveness of sins. He preaches of the one whose way he prepares:

“His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”
We might hear from this text that there is good and there is bad.
There is wheat and there is chaff,
and woe be to the chaff.

The cousin of John, a man named Jesus, is among those baptized.
Those reading this book of Luke know that this is the one whose birth was foretold of by an angel
and was attended by a hoard of angel-bidden shepherds
claiming they had seen the Messiah.

When he is praying by the side of the water after being baptized,
“the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove.
And a voice came from heaven,
‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’”

In Luke, prayer often leads to moments such as this one,
when God’s holy presence in Jesus is revealed
and made known to those around him.

From this moment to Peter’s naming Jesus as Messiah,
 to the transfiguration on the mount with Moses and Elijah, to,
I would argue, Jesus commending his spirit to God on the cross,
in Luke, when Jesus prays you can expect
the goodness and glory of God to shine in powerful ways.

In the same way that the night reveals the bright shining stars
that are always overhead but unseen until the cover of darkness,
prayer appears to be an element that reveals
the glory and guidance of God when it may otherwise seem hidden.

After his harrowing encounter with evil, Sparrowhawk goes on to become a full wizard,
but at a much more subdued pace and in a much humbled manner.

When he leaves Roke, he tries to take a position on a forgotten isle
but he finds that the evil he has unleashed
hunts him, and so, he must run, across the seas to save himself
and to save all of Earthsea which he has now put in peril.

It is only when he turns to face the evil
that he discovers any lessening of its power over him.
It retreats when it is hunted, yet will not be vanquished until the wizard can learn it’s true, secret, hidden name. For all creatures of Earthsea have a true name in the language of the Making, to which they will come when called, like the birds from the sky.

Across the farthest reaches of the sea past the farthest known islands, the wizard chases the evil until he meets it finally face to face on an island built by its undead shadow.

On he marches toward his foe, and in one clash the evil calls out the true name of the wizard and the wizard calls out the true name of the evil form, and from their lips come the same name,

--the wizard’s own secret name, “Ged.”

Now, I don’t actually know much about farming or grain processing, let alone farming or grain processing of the ancient near east.

Yet, from what I can gather, the wheat and the chaff from John’s sermon are actually part of the same organism --the same plant. We might even say they’re two sides of the same coin.

The winnowing fork is used to dig and toss the plant so that the wheat will come up and the chaff will be separated, lost, thrown out, burned up in the fire.

I don’t know about you, but that’s a lot more what my life is like. Some of the people I love the most have been the source of the most heartache. Some of the mistakes I have made have taught me the dearest lessons. Some of my biggest strengths are also my biggest challenges. Sometimes it’s pretty hard to tell the wheat from the chaff, and most of the time I’m pretty sure I’m made up of both.

What if the winnowing fork of God isn’t separating out all the bad people from all the good people?

What if it’s cleaving our hearts open to let all the chaff fall out?
What if the truth is we can’t walk through this world doing only good or removing ourselves from all that’s bad?

What if it’s all a messy tangle of both and we belong to it all?

What if God’s judgment, often enough revealed in prayer, is less about a holy elevator that takes us up or down at the end of this life, and more a means of burning away all that we no longer need, that does not spring forth from love, or that does not serve the highest good of all creation?

I do not believe joining a church or being baptized will make you holy. I do believe that baptism can be a way of standing in the truth - that just like this world we live in, just like the community from which we seek to draw support, we are a mixed-up mess of broken and blessed, and yet we belong.

We belong, we belong, we belong to and with the Beloved One, Jesus, who took on our human form and knelt just the same in the waters of baptism in solidarity and kinship with us in our mixed-up brokenness and blessedness and with the mixed-up brokenness and blessedness of all creation that we might know that we are beloved and made whole just as we are through the incarnate grace of God who makes us all one.

In baptism and in our everyday ways of claiming our faith we can find courage to face our own shortcomings and grow.

In baptism and in our everyday ways of claiming our faith we can find support to mend our broken relationships.

In baptism and in our everyday ways of claiming our faith we can find the assurance that with Jesus we belong, we belong, we belong with one another, with all creation, and with the holy glory, goodness, and grace of God.

May it be so. Amen.