

Season 2, Episode 4 God Speaks Through the Powerful Poems of Drew Jackson

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

Helen Lee, Seminary Now, Ed Gilbreath, Maila Kim, Drew Jackson

Maila Kim 00:01

Welcome to The Every Voice Now Podcast, where we bring voices of color into the spotlight. I'm Maila Kim.

Ed Gilbreath 00:07

And I'm Ed Gilbreath. In every episode, you'll hear from authors of color about the making of their books, as well as the challenges they had to overcome along the way. Hello, my dear friend, Helen Lee, it's good to see you today.

Helen Lee 00:27

Hi, Ed. It's always great to be with you. And I'm glad to be cohosting with you today. And we have a fabulous conversation ahead with Drew Jackson.

Ed Gilbreath 00:36

Yes, Drew Jackson is a pastor in New York City, he founded a church called Hope East Village, and he is also a poet. And he has a brand new book out with IVP, which of course is why we're here today.



Helen Lee 00:50

Yes, his book, God Speaks Through Wombs, just came out last week. It is incredible, and it's unique for IVP. It is a book of poems—many poems, like eighty or more poems that Drew has written in conjunction with a number of passages in Luke, the Gospel of Luke. It is the kind of book that will stop you in your tracks. And today, you're going to get to hear from Drew about how he crafted this beautiful book. And you'll also hear him actually read some of the poems with his own voice. So it'll be fabulous for our listeners today.

Ed Gilbreath 01:27

Yes, Drew is prolific, he's inspired. He's a very thoughtful young man. And I think our listeners are going to be very blessed by hearing him today. So let's get started. We are so excited today to welcome Drew Jackson to The Every Voice Now Podcast. Welcome, Drew.

Drew Jackson 01:57

So good to be here. So good to be here.

Ed Gilbreath 01:59

It's good to have you. So if we talk about nothing else on The Every Voice Now Podcast, we're going to talk about your ethnic identity here, and that journey—we're not afraid to figure out, you know, who you are, and where you come from. So can you talk a little bit about your ethnicity and any memorable moments in your ethnic identity journey that stand out to you?

Drew Jackson 02:23

Yes, so I am a Black man. And it's something that, since I came into this world, I've been aware of. I grew up in South Jersey, and in a place that was pretty diverse. So I had friends from different places, but I can remember hearing them talk about their countries of origin, right? Whether they identify as Italian American, or Indian American. And I always, for me, growing up, I always wanted to know, like, what country are my people from? Where are my people from? And I never could answer that question. And that was such an important part of my journey of



saying, wow, this is part of, not just my story, but the story of my people in this country, of being so dislocated from place. So this journey of just discovering, okay, "Who am I? Who are we?" has been such a part of this journey of understanding my own ethnic identity. And my parents were always very, very big on teaching, just teaching us Black history. So I didn't get it in the church that I grew up in, the church that I grew up in was as a pretty conservative Baptist church, but it was white led. So it was interesting in that space, but I didn't hear about anything Black history in that space, bits and pieces growing up in school—it was more in my home, and my parents teaching me and telling me their own stories, right? Of their own lives. And it was significant when my dad told me that he was at the March on Washington, right, that he heard Dr. King speak, he was a nine-year-old boy hearing it. And I think just, for me, that was, like, oh, this is just part of my lineage. This is part of my legacy, and owning this and understanding what it means to grow as a Black man and navigate the landscape of American life. So I think early on, those were some of the important things.

Ed Gilbreath 04:35

Let's talk a little bit now about your poet side. You say that your initial inspiration to be a poet came from your love of hip-hop. Could you tell us more about this journey from being a fan of hip-hop to becoming a poet?

Drew Jackson 04:52

So I'm the youngest of four boys, and I have early memories of riding in the back of my brothers' cars, my older brothers, and they're listening to hip-hop. I'm seven, eight years old, and I'm hearing, you know, Biggie and Tupac and Nas and Jay-Z, and all these different artists. And something about the way they used words and how they put them together was always compelling to me. There are, like, different kinds of hip-hop listeners. I've always been a person that listens to lyrics first before I listen to the beat. I talk a lot about Nas as an influence for me he came out with his first album that has made history in a lot of different ways when he was nineteen years old, his album Illmatic. And in that album, he basically describes himself as trying to describe his New York from looking out of his window growing up in the Queensbridge projects. And you can hear it as he's just putting language to the things that he grew up with, with the things that he's seeing as he's looking out of his window, descriptive in his language and imagery. And that was always compelling to me. And so I started writing my own hip-hop when I was in college, just sort of as something to do, writing, performing it. That sort of then morphed over time into sort of the poetry that I'm doing now.



Helen Lee 06:24

So help us understand how you went from dabbling in hip-hop writing to writing an entire book of poetry. How did you get from point A to point B? Give us a sense of that journey.

Drew Jackson 06:38

Well, I didn't set out to write a book. It wasn't—I didn't say, okay, I'm going to write a poetry book now. This was actually primarily a quarantine project. And I needed something to process, as an outlet, as a space. It was—writing poetry became a spiritual practice for me, more than anything. First, it was a place where I met God, it was a place where I was able to process my own emotions and things that were going on in the world. And, you know, being here in New York at the beginning of the pandemic, it was heavy here in the city, and there was just so much going on, and being in my apartment and just hearing siren after siren after siren outside, I just needed—I needed some sort of space to process. And so I started to read a lot of poetry during that time, reading the work of Langston Hughes, and people like Lucille Clifton, and Mary Oliver, and some other poets like that. But then I just started writing, writing as a way to process current events. But then it's sort of morphed into exploring my own curiosity around Scripture and poetry, and how those two things come together, and the place that poetry plays sort of within the biblical narrative.

Ed Gilbreath 08:10

So did you begin working on this after the pandemic? Or were you contracted before?

Drew Jackson 08:15 After.

Ed Gilbreath 08:16 After? Okay.



Drew Jackson 08:17

My journey with this is a bit interesting. So I started working on this, and I—"oh, this seems to be something that's coming together." I wasn't planning to show it to anybody. I showed it to my wife. And she was the one who initially encouraged me, like, this is, there's something here, you need to do something with this. So I have been writing some poetry on—just putting it out on social media in response to some current events. A friend of mine saw that, sent one of my poems to a poetry editor, who's also a fellow IVP author, Rachel Welcher. And so Rachel reached out to me and was interested in one of the poems that I wrote. I sent her the project—at this point, it was almost done. I sent it to her, and she got back to me and said, "Hey, this is, this is really good. You'll have no problem getting picked up by a publisher." And so she then was, like, let me put you in contact with some people. And so then it went from there. And so by the time I submitted it to IVP, the manuscript was done. And then the contract happened after that. So it was a bit different in the process than, I know, most authors, but yeah.

Helen Lee 09:29

So, clearly, we have Rachel Welcher to thank for the fact that we now have your book, Drew. And for our listeners, Rachel is the author of our book Talking Back to Purity Culture, and we'll make sure we include that in our show notes. But getting back to your book, Drew, this is a unique book, as far as I can tell. I'm curious, did you reach out to multiple publishers, or did we just happen to be the lucky ones?

Drew Jackson 09:54

IVP is the only publisher that I sent this to. I think part of that was because that was the contact that I got. It was, hey, here is this editor, send it to him and see what happens. And I tend to second-guess myself a lot, and my own—you know, whatever I'm working on, in a lot of different ways. And so I was like, okay, I'm not going to send this out to a bunch of publishers, they're just going to reject it anyway. So that was sort of my own thought process. And so it was the encouragement of other people, and then, specifically, Rachel putting me in contact with Ethan.

Helen Lee 10:31



Yeah, I'm so glad you did. And I remember when Ethan McCarthy, who's one of our general trade editors, received this proposal from you, he didn't know you. But as soon as he started reading your poetry, he was so excited about this book. And so it's really providential that he happened to be Rachel's editor, because Ethan is someone who has an innate appreciation for poetry. So he was the perfect editor to have sent this to, even though IVP typically doesn't publish books of poetry. So, again, I feel like it is amazing that we have published your book, and I want to ask you this: I think that other people who are wanting to write poetry, maybe get published—they just might feel daunted, especially if they haven't had any prior education in this area. So tell us if you had any formal training in poetry, or was this just birthed out of your love for words and your passion for spiritual formation and justice?

Drew Jackson 11:30

I don't have any formal poetry training. I think that was also part of my own hesitation of, like, I don't know what I'm doing. But, yeah, so—I mean, other than just kind of doing a lot of writing on my own, I don't have any formal poetry training.

Helen Lee 11:50

Well, I think that our listeners, especially those who aspire to write poetry themselves, will be so inspired by you when they hear you in the next segment reading your poems, and just hearing and being moved by the power of your words, for certain.

Ed Gilbreath 12:09

Well, we need to take a quick break. But when we return, Drew will do a reading for us. And we'll talk more about his book-writing process. So stay tuned. And thanks for listening to The Every Voice Now Podcast. Maila, it is incredible to me that IVP is about to turn seventy-five years old. Do you believe that? That's amazing!

Maila Kim 12:34

I know, that is amazing—I mean, considering that so many book publishers have come and gone during that time. And so, I'm so grateful to be part of such a long-standing legacy.



Ed Gilbreath 12:45

Well, it's a testimony to IVP's commitment to publishing quality books, not to mention books by a diversity of authors. And this has been IVP's MO for the majority of its history.

Maila Kim 12:57

Yeah, and we keep finding more voices of color to highlight each and every season. And so visit everyvoicenow.com to find out how you can get a great discount on today's featured book, and many more.

Helen Lee 13:12

Welcome back to The Every Voice Now Podcast. I'm Helen Lee. And it's time for our Behind the Word segment, where we will hear readings from today's guest, and then we'll find out more about what went on behind the scenes of writing those passages. And in this case, we'll get to hear not prose, but poetry. So Drew, what will you be reading for us today?

Drew Jackson 13:34

The first poem that I'm going to read is called "The Waters of My Weeping." And it is—it's a poem that was written in reflection on Luke 3:20. In this verse, Jesus finds out the news that his cousin John has been arrested. So I'll read it, and we can talk about it. The Waters of My Weeping. One of my brothers, my cousins, / added to the number of your incarcerated masses. / 1 in 3 of us. Unarmed? Yes. A threat? Yes— / to your abuse of power, and the way you sit / so comfortably in your palace, while we struggle / to eat out in these streets. / But in this hour, I weep. Again. / For this innocent man baptized / into your carceral system. Immersed / into this jail with no bail. / I am forced to witness this unholy sacrament. / This state-sponsored religious act. / And for what? Something about his person / disturbed you. Maybe by passing him through / these waters you will convert him to the faith / of unsacred silence. One way or another. / I'm sorry that it frightens you when we / fight for our humanity. But tonight, I cry. / These tears have become my food. I dip / myself in the pool of the waters of my / weeping. For my brother. For my cousin. / For all of us. Until they stop locking us up.



Helen Lee 15:37

I mean, it's just amazing to me how current and relevant everything you've written—I know it's based on that particular story in Luke, but it's so timelessly, sadly, relevant for today.

Drew Jackson 15:52

Yeah, I was thinking a lot about today. Part of what inspired me as I came to that portion of Luke was, one, just to remember that Jesus is a human being. And to think about that verse—it can sort of just be read past, like, it's just advancing the narrative along. But I just, I thought about Jesus being a human being, and this not being an isolated incident for him, but something that would have been very familiar to him as someone who lived on the underside of the Roman Empire, who knew oppression, who knew injustice, and who had probably seen his family and his neighbors arrested by the state before—like, this wasn't a new thing. Then thinking about my own story, and in particular, I was thinking about my experience. When I was working on staff with InterVarsity, one of the things I did was work with Black students in the greater Los Angeles area. And one of the most memorable moments in ministry for me was when we took a group of Black men on a weekend retreat, and we got a house up in the hills in Los Angeles, we were just like, we're gonna have a nice space together. And we wanted to make it intergenerational. So I flew out my dad, and my father-in-law flew out. And we just had this sort of space that was like---it was beautiful. But one of the things that we did during that time was [that] we created some space for lament. And as all of us were sitting together in that room, I asked the guestion, "How many? How many of you in this room know someone who is currently in the prison system?" And every single person in that room raised their hand. And it was one of those moments where we just looked at each other, and you have, just, grown Black men in tears, weeping, right? You know, I referenced that that statistic, I say "1 in 3 of us" at the beginning of the poem. And it's just that statistic that one in three Black men between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five are in the prison system. You can have one of two responses when you hear that statistic, right? It's either that Black men are just more prone to criminality, or something is definitely wrong with this system. I wanted to bring all of that into this, as I was reading, and allow Jesus to meet me in that space. And I think being met by the humanity of Jesus, and knowing that these are tears that Jesus knows was something that was really just powerful for me in writing this poem.

Ed Gilbreath 18:42

Let me ask you, Drew, is that your first time sharing that poem publicly?



Drew Jackson 18:47

I haven't shared it in a public setting like that. I've shared it on podcasts and things and had conversations, but not in a public setting, like a protest, or a corporate gathering of any sort.

Ed Gilbreath 19:02

Because that's what I—what I saw as you read, I could just see the faces and the people listening, perhaps, shedding tears. It's powerful. Thank you for sharing that.

Drew Jackson 19:16

No, thank you.

Helen Lee 19:18

Drew, tell us what it was like to write this poem. How was that creative process for you? Was it a struggle line by line? Or did it just flow out of your soul?

Drew Jackson 19:32

This one in particular was one that just came. Usually when I write poetry, I'm the sort of writer that I usually get the first line. And then I don't necessarily know where it's going to go. That's part of the joy of writing poetry for me, is that I like to see how it unfolds. I ask the question, What does this poem want to do? What does it want to be? Where does it want to go? But when I came across that verse, there was—I was just stopped in my tracks. And I immediately just wrote that, "one of my brothers, my cousins," you know, and "added to the number of your incarcerated masses"—that, for me, it was like, okay, I see what this poem wants to be, I see where it wants to go. And it just kind of came from there. And it was fun for me to sort of play with the overlap between this John the Baptist and baptism as a theme throughout chapter three, and then in the, you know, "baptized into your carceral system," and understanding that being, you know, calling it a "state-sponsored religious act," like, this is almost to say that the mass incarceration in the United States and just how incarceration plays itself out in empires in general, it's—it's almost part of the state religion. This is sacred to the state, right? And so it's



sort of just play on all of that, and how Jesus is really confronting that, how the kingdom of God confronts that and presses up against that. And so, yeah, it was deeply personal, but it was also fun for me to write in the sense of playing with the different themes and seeing how they will come together.

Ed Gilbreath 21:35

You write in your introduction, and I quote, "I believe that we need poetry in our time, as in every time, for the beauty it brings in the midst of brutality and also for its ability to cut into our hearts." Could you talk about that a little bit, especially for those who might be less familiar with poetry? Why is it an important form of writing for us as people of faith to encounter and engage with it?

Drew Jackson 22:03

Yeah, it does something different than reading prose. Poetry demands that we slow down. I mean, sure, I can read through a poem and zip through it. But it's an invitation, to say, actually, be present to your own self, as you come to this piece of writing, be present to the words on the page, be present to what's going on around you. And I think that one of the things that we need to really continue to recover in our time is the practice of presence, being fully present to ourselves, to one another, in an age where we're just, you know, scrolling through our phones and going from one thing to the next to the next to the next. And poetry is such a counter to that, where it's not something that is meant to be quickly scrolled by, it's something that is, you know, be still with this for a while. And I think that even for the church, in our reading of Scripture, it's important to remember how many of the biblical writers were poets. And not just-there's the Psalms, yes, for sure-but all of the prophets were poets in their own right. And even-we don't often think about or talk about Jesus as a poet, but in the ways that he told and crafted parables, there was something poetic about how he delivered those things. And so I think because poetry has a way of disarming us, like, I think that's why, as a tool of the prophetic, it's really powerful because we don't come to poetry with our guards up, ready to respond with an answer. We come to—we're meant to come to poetry opened up, to say, how is this going to meet me? And so when we come that way, then the poets, the poems are able to sort of speak truths that are hard truths, but I love what Emily Dickinson says about it. She says, "tell all the truth but tell it slant," right? You're coming at it from this slightly sort of skewed way, where it disarms the person, and they're able to possibly receive it in a way that maybe just kind of sharing a statistic or something wouldn't do.



Helen Lee 24:29

There's this whole cycle that's happening, I think, between the reader, your words, the Bible, that is a really interesting dynamic. That's what I experienced as I was reading your poems; I went to grab my Bible so I could be reading these passages alongside and back and forth. It was really amazing, such an incredible experience of engaging with Scripture in a new way and seeing it through your lens and your words. It was really very, very powerful. So I'm so grateful that you took the time to craft all these poems. Well, we're going to continue our conversation with Drew after the break and find out more about his personal writing habits, maybe a few quirks. You'll also find out how to get a special discount on Drew's newly released book, God Speaks Through Wombs. So stay tuned, and thanks for listening to The Every Voice Now Podcast.

Seminary Now 25:18

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Ed Gilbreath 26:26

You are listening to The Every Voice Now Podcast, and I'm Ed Gilbreath. Today we've been talking with Drew Jackson, author of the book God Speaks Through Wombs, which has just released! And keep listening to find out how you can get a special 40% discount on Drew's book at ivpress.com. But first, let's find out a little more about your writing habits and quirks, Drew. That's right—it's that special time where we dig a little deeper and get some of your



secrets, what it takes to write this many poems. So it's a little bit of a lightning round. So are you ready?

Drew Jackson 27:02

Yeah.

Ed Gilbreath 27:03

All right, all right. Did you ever encounter a struggle with writing these poems, or writer's block of some kind?

Drew Jackson 27:11

Absolutely. There's certain passages for me in Luke that were easier to write on, that came more naturally. And so I was like, do I have to write on this? Or can I, like, am I trying to write on every verse? Or am I, can I keep going? And so when I hit those spaces of writer's block, I need to walk. I pace when I'm trying to come up with ideas. So walking and pacing helps me to just kind of get the juices flowing.

Ed Gilbreath 27:42

Okay, you might be answering the second question, which is—and maybe you could build on it, if it's not—do you have any quirky or unusual habits or practices that you have developed in order to write?

Drew Jackson 27:53

So, I love to walk through the city. And so I'll just pull out my phone, and I'll start writing as I'm walking. So that's one of the things that I love to do.

Ed Gilbreath 28:04



Writing or recording?

Drew Jackson 28:07 Writing.

Ed Gilbreath 28:08

Oh, actually writing!

Drew Jackson 28:10

So I'll actually pull out, yeah, I'll pull out my phone, and I'll, like, write a line. And then I'll put it away and I'll keep walking. I'll pull it out, I'll write a line, and then I'll keep walking. Yeah, so—

Helen Lee 28:19

Wait, you do this in New York City? Because that feels like it would be hazardous to your potential health.

Ed Gilbreath 28:25

A little dangerous. "Hey buddy, watch where you're going!"

Helen Lee 28:32

You should carry a sign, like, "creating great art," like, don't bother me, get out of my way.

Drew Jackson 28:38

There's a particular place that I like to walk, which is down by the East River, which is a little bit more spacious.



Helen Lee 28:47

I meant to ask you this earlier in our first segment, but we had so much to talk about, so I didn't get to do that. But in your book, you mention your mom and the impact she has had on you, on your life. You mention her on your dedication page, written in her memory. And I wrote this down—you wrote in your introduction that her words continue to resonate in your soul. So if it's okay for me to ask you this, are there any particular poems in this book that made you think of her specifically as you wrote them, or that remind you of her in some way?

Drew Jackson 29:23

So many. I mean, she's all through these pages in different ways. I would say the one that really made me, you know, made me think of her a lot is the title poem, God speaks through Wombs, which is the second poem of the book, because it really sort of captures this idea of someone who has a marginalized identity and experience in this world, has been sort of discounted, or pushed to the side, and that being the person through whom God chooses to show up and act in the world. And so that particular poem is reflecting on Elizabeth and her story, and just thinking about my own mother and her being a, you know, a poor Black woman who grew up in the projects of North Philly. And just understanding the impact that she's had on my life and so many others that I know, is really—really, I was thinking a lot about her throughout this whole project, as, oh, God continues to show up in this way and continues to put on flesh in this world, through those that the empire, for whatever reason, has cast to the side and said, "you don't really have anything to offer."

Helen Lee 30:48

I think that the listeners might be incredibly disappointed if we did not ask you now to read your title poem, if you don't mind, as a way for us to close out today. It would be really wonderful to hear it.

Drew Jackson 31:03

This poem is called "God Speaks Through Wombs." We're in reflection on Luke 1:5-25, the story of Elizabeth hearing the news that she's going to give birth to John. In the days of



empires / and puppet regimes, / God speaks. / Through wombs, / wrested and discarded / because they were unviable. / This is what they do: / the Romes, / the Babylons, / the USAs, / the men— / toss to the side, as detritus, / what they've deemed unfit / to be utilized. / But God speaks through wombs, / birthing prophetic utterances. / The object of public scorn / given the power to name / the happenings of the Lord. / Elizabeth is her name. / Say her name. / It is she who will be / the one through whom / the covenant is kept. / She, like a priestess, speaks her word / while the leading male voices / are shut. Enough / of this unbelieving religion / that masquerades as faith. / Divine favor is placed / on what we have disgraced.

Helen Lee 32:33

What a privilege and honor to get a chance to hear you read this poem, and read the title poem for us. It's—thank you so much.

Ed Gilbreath 32:42

Well, we've come to the end of our time together, and what a beautiful way to conclude. But before we go, we want to give you a few moments to share with our listeners about any special projects you have going on, Drew, and how people can best reach you as well.

Drew Jackson 32:58

Yeah, so special projects that I have going on—well, I'm working on the rest of the Luke manuscript right now, so there's a second Luke book coming. So prayers for that would be helpful. You can find me on Instagram—@d.jacksonpoetics is where I live on Instagram. I also am involved with an organization called Made For Pax, which is a peacemaking and justice organization that is really committed to promoting the peace of Jesus in the 21st century through slow, beautiful, Jesus-centered content. And so you can find us on Instagram @MadeForPax, or check us out at madeforpax.org and find some of the stuff we've been doing there.

Ed Gilbreath 33:41

Thank you so much, Drew. It's been great to have you on the show today.



Drew Jackson 33:45 Yeah, thanks for having me.

Ed Gilbreath 33:46

And now we wanted to share with you all that you can find Drew's book, God Speaks Through Wombs, at ivpress.com. And if you use the code EVN40, you can get 40% off and free US shipping. So visit the IVP site to get a great deal on Drew's wonderful new book, and to bring some poetry into your life. Thanks, everyone, for listening to The Every Voice Now Podcast, brought to you by IVP. Our producer is Helen Lee, and our sound engineer is Jonathan Clauson. If you are enjoying our show, please share about it with your friends. We'd be grateful for your reviews and recommendations on Apple, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your podcasts.

Maila Kim 34:31

And we'd love to hear from you directly anytime. You can find us on Instagram and Twitter @EveryVoiceNow. Or you can email us with your comments, questions, or suggestions at evn@ivpress.com. And join us next time for another inspiring episode of Every Voice Now.

About the Guest

Drew Jackson is the founding pastor of Hope East Village in New York City. He also writes poetry at the intersection of justice, peace, and contemplation, with a passion to contribute toward a more just and whole world. He and his wife have twin daughters and live in Lower Manhattan. You can find Drew on Twitter @djacksonpoetics or at his website.

SPECIAL OFFER | Save 40% on Drew's book *God Speaks Through Wombs* and get free US shipping when you use promo code EVN40 at checkout.

About the Hosts:





Helen Lee, Producer and Creator

Helen is the associate director of strategic partnerships and initiatives; she has a B.A. from Williams College in bioethics, an M.A. from Wheaton College Graduate School in interdisciplinary studies, and an MBA from Babson College in entrepreneurship. She enjoys reading novels by authors of color, finding spots of natural beauty wherever she can, and listening to podcasts such as *Serial, The Rewatchables, Filmspotting,* and *The*

Disrupters. You can find Helen on Twitter and Instagram @HelenLeeBooks.



Ed Gilbreath, Co-Host

Formerly an editor at IVP, Ed is currently an executive leader at Christianity Today; he earned his bachelor's in communication arts from Judson University and a master's in philosophy of history from Olivet Nazarene University. He is also the author of two IVP books: Reconciliation Blues and Birmingham Revolution. Follow Ed on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.

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