

# Second Sunday of Advent

10.12.2017  
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## Introduction

The gospel reading from the second week of Advent 2017 point towards John the Baptist – a wild man with unusual words who was, nonetheless, a man revered by many. Who are these voices today?

It is usual today to hear voices that come from the edges, but it is also usual to find muscle-memory excuses to excuse ourselves from listening to these voices. Perhaps the voice is accused of being too shouty.

(There are reasons to shout)

Perhaps the voice is accused of being too expert.

(The word Expert means: to test, to experience, to attempt)

Perhaps the person behind the voice seems questionable.

(Questions reveal much about the secrets of the questioner).

For the second Sunday of advent, we'll reflect on John the Baptist in connection with another wild voice, Emily Dickinson, who was born on December 10th, 1830.

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## Text

Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.  
As it is written in the prophet Isaiah:

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way;  
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight,’”

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

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## Comment

Today, in 1830, Emily Dickinson was born. She would write that her life was like a loaded gun. She wondered if you grew by melody or witchcraft. She spoke of hope being a thing with feathers. And she knew two kinds of loneliness. Her focus on her art is like a blade, or a lightning bolt.

She wrote fine letters, plenty of them, so if letters are a measure of love, then she loved a lot. She certainly loved her sister-in-law, her Irish maid, her big dog.

She spent a lot of time alone.

Her poetry is baffling and brilliant. With words and dashes, with rhymes and half-rhymes, she defined a poetic school that is, at times, like music, at other times like a punch. I avoided the recent film, not because Cynthia Nixon isn’t brilliant, but because I couldn’t imagine imagining Emily on something as straightforward as a screen. Her work goes beyond dimensions: in its incomprehensibility, in its incision, in its deathtongue and in its love of bees and purple.

She didn’t leave the townland of Amherst often. She didn’t need to — she had hell and heaven enough:

The soul has moments of Escape —  
When bursting all the doors —  
She dances like a Bomb, abroad,  
And swings upon the Hours,

Dickinson shows us what is uncontainable in us — those wild worlds. In games about fantasy dinner guests, I always wonder if I’d have the courage to summon her up. What would she eat? What would she say? Where would she come from, she who even God wouldn’t tame?

It takes courage to live a life with integrity. With Emily Dickinson’s birthday in mind, I read Mark’s gospel today. Mark is no fan of ease. And when Mark writes John the Baptist in his deserty landscape, I find myself praising the uncontainable characters of the world, those wild ones who have always had the courage to say what they need to say. They feast on strange things, they gather unexpected people around them: people who do not understand what they are hearing, but know they need to listen.

And so John is in a wild place and people are coming to him. People from the countryside and the city come to hear this man with a blade for a tongue and eyes like fire, the man who eats things that sting and dresses in skins. He liked bees too, or at least their honey. His eyes see the sky split open, and he is searching for a person who can hold power in one hand and peace in the other. He isn’t interested in self promotion, only in apocalypse: the carpet lifted, hidden things being shown.

Would I invite John to dinner? God no. What would he say, sitting at my table in his skins, licking honey from my knives.

But I need John and his sharp tongue.  
And I need Emily and all her heavens and hells.  
Their wild words help me survive a wild world.

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## Response

Who are the people whose powerful and wild words make you pay attention today?

You may wish – in a group – to reflect on the resistances to such voices. Are these voices discredited because of their origin, their tone, their language, their syntax, their grammar?

Resistances can sometimes – not always, but sometimes – be an indication of a refusal to engage. How can we put down our arms and listen?

After examining your resistances, listen again: What are those wild and powerful voices saying? What do they know? What are they calling us to?

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## Prayer

In the name of the Bee  
and of the Butterfly  
and of the Breeze.

In the name of locusts  
and wild words  
and wild honey.

In the name of bombs  
and breathing  
and brilliance.

In the name of escape,  
and engagement  
and armour.

In the name of everything  
and nothing  
and whatever will save us.

In the name of this small moment.  
Yes, this small moment.  
This very small moment.

Amen.

*(Today's entry is also an entry written for "Keep Watch with Me", an Advent reader curated by Michael McRay and Claire Brown. [You can sign up for this series of daily readings by clicking here.](#))*

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Season: Advent

Themes: