

It's a great Advent when I get to talk about John the Baptist two weeks in a row! I did that last Sunday at St. Cyprian's in Hampton, and here he is again, offstage this time, but still so present in that poignant question delivered by his disciples, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" It may seem an odd question, if you remember that even before his birth, the embryonic John was sure enough that Jesus was the one that he leapt for joy in his mother Elizabeth's womb when Mary, carrying embryonic Jesus, arrived for a visit. (That's just before she sings her famous song, the Magnificat).

But that's in the Gospel of Luke, so last liturgical year! We're in Year A now, the year of Matthew, and in that gospel John arrives on the scene all grown up: camel's hair, locusts, wild honey (we heard that passage last week). He talks about the one who's coming to baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, and later hesitates when Jesus comes to be baptized, saying "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But there's no "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" as in John, so his question isn't as strange in Matthew's telling. (Another interesting thing about Year A is that next week, on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, instead of hearing about the Annunciation or the Visitation as we do the other two years, we'll hear Matthew's brief nativity story—spoiler alert).

But beyond differences among gospels, John's question to Jesus is legitimate in another way: it's coming from prison. We've jumped forward 8 chapters since last week, and John has been arrested by Herod, and he probably guesses he's not getting out alive. Things look different alone in his cell than they did surrounded by crowds on the banks of the Jordan. Facing his powerlessness, facing his fear, his dark night of the soul, it's natural for him to wonder if he was right about Jesus—if he's really the one, the real deal. Those times of darkness and doubt and need come for all of us, don't they? And it's just like Jesus not to answer John's disciples directly, but to point to the signs of the kingdom breaking in, Isaiah's prophecy fulfilled in their hearing: the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And John's imprisonment and coming execution are all-too-relevant to Jesus in another way. As he says, John's the one about whom it is written, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you." In his arrest, imprisonment and coming execution, John is still the Forerunner.

So perhaps it's in that spirit of suspecting what's in store for the Baptizer, and for himself, that Jesus talks to the crowds about John. "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at?" Not a weak reed, not someone dressed in soft robes. As I told the folks at St. Cyprian's last week, I have always loved John's fierceness, his truth-telling, and his humility—and it sounds like Jesus loves those things too. In fact, I had planned to start my sermon last week by comparing John to someone else who shares those qualities, a perhaps unlikely kindred spirit: Fred Rogers.

I've always remembered a group of colleagues lamenting John's yearly appearance in the lectionary, and one of them saying, "Whenever someone gets angry, I lose interest." But Mr. Rogers taught me to *respect* human emotions, even the challenging ones. One of my favorites of his songs comes from a real question a child asked: "What do you do with the mad that you feel when you feel so mad you could bite?" I was going to share a line of his that I've shared here: "The values we care about the deepest, and the movements within society that support those values, command our love. When those things that we care about so deeply become endangered, we become enraged. And what a healthy thing that is! Without it, we would never stand up and speak out for what we believe."

That line was in my head because I knew that St. Martin's and St. Cyprian's shared some history of standing up and speaking out for what we believe. When I was reading up on our story in preparation for our 55th birthday last year, I learned that at one point we had a partnership, with pulpit exchanges, talks, and shared services. So last week before visiting their pulpit, I called Pickett Miles, our former rector, to ask him about it. He told me how he and St. Cyprian's then-rector Joy Walton were inspired by the Birmingham Pledge, a commitment to strive to eliminate racial prejudice in one's own thoughts and actions and discourage it by others at every opportunity, treating all people with dignity and respect. Pickett recalled preaching a sermon inspired by the movie *Cast Away*, about how hard it is to make headway away against the wind and water when you're on your own.

The other thing I did before going to St. Cyprian's was to see if I could listen to their rector Ron Ramsey's sermon from the previous week. So last Saturday, just before Warren and I were about to head out to see the new Mr. Rogers movie, I found Ron's sermon on YouTube, and he said, "This week I saw the movie *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*. Fred Rogers' message echoed the prophecy and hope we see in Isaiah." I LOVE that almost twenty years after *Cast Away*, St. Cyprian's rector and I were both inspired by another Tom Hanks movie! And I loved when someone showed me the plaque on the wall last Sunday: "St. Cyprian's and St. Martin's—Bridge Builders, Rowing Together to Overcome Racism."

On Monday, I had another synchronicity at our Benedictines group, feeling God speaking my language. Tom Hale shared a reflection from Padraig O Tuama, writing about John the Baptist and another of my heroes, Emily Dickinson, born on December 10, 1830: "It takes courage to live a life with integrity . . . 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 . . . Their loyalty is to telling the truth, rather than making people feel comfortable. Their wild words help me survive a wild world."

“Go and tell John what you hear and see,” Jesus tells the Baptist’s disciples. So what I hear and see on this Gaudete Sunday, when we light the rose candle to remind us of joy, is God stirring us up, tiny moment by tiny moment, with that speedy delivery of bountiful grace and mercy. I rejoice in St. Martin’s prophetic past—and present, and future. I rejoice that more than 2000 years after John stood by the Jordan baptizing people for repentance, this morning we baptized Jonathan Gale Fritchey. I rejoice that God keeps giving us chances to channel the mad that we feel into standing up and speaking out for what we believe, rowing together towards that better world that Isaiah and Mary and Elizabeth and John and Jesus dreamed of.

In closing, here’s the prayer Padraig O Tuama wrote for his reflection, weaving together some of Emily and John’s imagery.

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.