

Sermon: "Preparing the Way for the Ones Who Are Not Here Yet."

Sunday, December 11, 2011

The Rev. Peter Faass, Rector

Christ Church, Shaker Heights

Advent III Year B: John 1:6-8,19-28

How many of you have heard the expression "going viral?"

It sounds like a medical term that an epidemiologist would use to refer to a biological virus. Yet the expression actually finds its genesis in the world of the Internet. Going viral is when information posted on the Internet has the ability to spread copies of itself very quickly. Going viral is the way to describe how thoughts, information and trends move into and through a human population via the web.

Do you remember the rather plain, shy, Scottish woman, named Susan Boyle who competed on "Britain's Got Talent" in April of 2009? On the surface Susan seemed like what is referred to in Yiddish as a nebbish – a person who is pitifully ineffectual, timid, or submissive. Because Susan appeared to the judges on "Britain's Got Talent" to be a nebbish they were pretty dismissive of her when she walked on stage to compete.

But then she opened her mouth and out came the most exquisite mezzo-soprano voice singing "I Dreamed A Dream" from the Broadway play "Les Miserable's." Her performance gave you goose bumps. It was an awe-inspiring, even a holy moment.

When the video of Susan's performance was posted on the Internet it went viral receiving millions of viewings, or hits, within a week. The success of that video propelled her from the obscurity of a small Scottish village onto the world stage. The outcome was that Susan received a lucrative recording deal, an active performance schedule and a total makeover.

Susan was a messenger, even if an unintentional one. Her witness was a powerful reminder that each of us, no matter how uninteresting we may appear on the surface, is a valuable child God who has gifts to offer.

Today's Gospel story is also about a messenger whose performance went viral: John the Baptizer.

From the Gospels of John and Mark we know this about John the Baptizer. "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light." (John 1:6-9).

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." (Mark 1:4-8)

John's message of foretelling the coming of Jesus the Messiah, his preaching the repentance of sins through the radical act of baptizing, and his outlandish outfit and diet caused his message to go viral, well a least viral in terms of first century Palestine.

We know John's message went viral because his message and performance were so awe inducing that they caught everyone attention. John's thoughts and information about him and his behavior moved into and through the human population of Palestine very rapidly. The scripture tells us that, "people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him." (Mk. 1:5) And that the "Jew[ish authorities] sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" (Jn. 1:19)

Even two millennia before the Internet, word of mouth about something amazing could set a message on fire and see it go viral. This happened with John the Baptizer and it would do so again with the One he was sent to prepare the way for, Jesus the Christ.

While John's viral message did not occasion a total makeover of his looks, like it do for Susan Boyle, it did achieve a greater objective, which was to grab the attention of a moribund, institutional religious life, and the alienated, indifferent population it was meant to serve. Getting the attention of these two groups prepared the way for Jesus - the main act - to proclaim his viral message that would shake up that religious institution and population and begin a movement to reform and re-energize them. How did John capture the religious authorities' attention?

Well to start, John was the son of Zacharias who was a priest. The Jewish priesthood was a hereditary position in the lineage of Moses' brother, Aaron. Because his father was a priest, John was also a priest. But he was a rather unusual one, which is why the priests from the Temple came to check him out. They were doing a purity check on him. This can be likened to when a Bishop drops in to observe a new priest on Sunday morning.

The Levites who came to check on John were emissaries of the Pharisees who were the Jewish sect that were committed to keeping the purity of the Law. The Levites and Pharisees would have been very concerned about monitoring false messages and bad scriptural interpretations, lest they infect the people and cause dissent. John was clearly

preaching a very radical message that was not in alignment with the official understanding of the Jerusalem establishment.

Alarmed by what they heard in his viral message, the Pharisees sent out the Levites to check out John who they believed was a false prophet.

The presence of both the priests and the Levites indicates to us just how suspicious orthodox institutional religion was of the unusual message John preached. John did not conform to the normal idea of a priest. He did not conform to the normal idea of a preacher or prophet. Therefore the religious authorities looked at him with annoyance, disdain and even fear.

Orthodox, institutional religion has always been suspicious of something new just because it is new. And when a new message has gone viral, demanding change and a new way of doing things, institutional religion has more often than not worked to squash that message. It tried to do so with John the Baptizer. It tried to do it again with Jesus.

But the viral word of God cannot be squashed. On Palm Sunday the crowds heralded Jesus with shouts of Hosanna. Irritated by this behavior the Pharisees asked Jesus to order the people to stop. Jesus replied, "If these were silent, the stones would shout out!" (Lk. 19:40)

If the messenger and the message are truly of God, than nothing can stop it from being proclaimed.

In the past few days a message about change from a man of God has gone viral on the Internet. It is a message that is eagerly being heard by some and is being seen as threatening by others. It is a message of challenge to the orthodoxy of the mainline institutional Church. In other words it is a message to us.

This message was posted and reposted innumerable times on Facebook this week and it appeared on the Episcopal Café website Thursday. The messenger is Evangelical Lutheran Bishop Mike Rinehart. Rinehart proclaimed his message in a Lutheran newsletter called "Connections." The title of the article he wrote is, "Insiders and Outsiders."

This is what he proclaimed:

"My theory" he writes, "is that the mainline churches have ceased to be relevant to the culture, because insiders trump outsiders every time."

"Decisions in the institutional church are made for the benefit of those inside rather than those outside the church. In every single decision, even the little ones, insiders trump

outsiders. Take hymns, for example. Musical decisions are not made considering what will attract spiritually hungry outsiders, but what will please the card-carrying, bill-paying membership. Most church outsiders don't care if you ever sing "How Great Thou Art." They won't be slightly offended by a guitar in church. Time and time again church leaders receive heat from church insiders upset about this or that, because the insiders are trying to recreate their childhood church experience or simply have a rigid idea of what church is supposed to be. Church leaders cave in to these insiders because [they] control the purse strings."

The reason Rinehart believes the problem is happening?

"Church structures were set up to preserve what exists, not change it. These stable structures work well when society is changing slowly, imperceptibly. If something is working, protect it at all costs. But what if it is not working? What if the rate of societal change skyrockets, and old patterns and structures no longer work? Peter Drucker once said, "When the rate of change outside the organization exceeds the rate of change inside the organization, the organization is doomed."

Here is Rinehart's solution:

"So here's the plan. New policy. Every decision, every single decision made by staff, council [Vestry] and every committee is made on behalf of those not yet here. Every sermon choice, every hymn, song and musical choice, every building and grounds choice, every spending choice is made with outsiders in mind."

"When we become a church for the world, the outsider, when the pain of staying the same (and dying of irrelevance) for those already here exceeds the pain of changing (and sacrificing old ways) for those not yet here, we will be the church for which God incarnate came to this earth and gave his life."

Rinehart concludes by saying, "That's it. That's all I've got. If I'm wrong, fire me now. I'll die on this hill."

Rinehart's is a prophetic voice in the wilderness crying out, "Prepare ye the way for those who are not here yet." We would be wise to heed his viral message. God's voice is clearly present in it.

May the very stones cry out this challenging message of hope for our future, so that we may prepare to welcome the Christ in the one's who are not here yet.

Amen.