

The Thorn of Sacrifice
Luke 19:28-42
Second Baptist Church, Memphis
Palm Sunday
April 1, 2007
Dr. Brent Beasley

Martha Koystra. She's all over television, bookstores, magazine stands. Everywhere you look she's dispensing advice about designer decorations and entertaining in your home. She's certainly been in the news a lot over the last couple of years with some legal problems. Never heard of Martha Koystra? How about Martha Stewart?

Nobody understands the marketing power of a name better than those in the entertainment industry. That's why we'll see Demi Moore in the movies but not Demetria Guynes.

It's why we might listen to Sting but not Gordon Matthew Sumner, Bono but not Paul Hewson.

We might read a novel by Toni Morrison but not Chloe Anthony Wofford.

We might watch Jennifer Aniston on *Friends* reruns but not Jennifer Anistonapoulos.

Names have power.

If you were a marketing executive at Nike scouting for a fresh face to be a spokesman, and you had a choice between offering

a multi-gazillion dollar contract to an Eldrick or a Tiger, whom would you choose?

Eldrick Woods had last year one of the best years on the PGA tour of any golfer in history—I believe 6 consecutive PGA tour wins, Player of the Year, Masters champion. He's one of the greatest golfers of all time. But Eldrick doesn't really work for him. Tiger does. Tiger has power.

[Homiletics, March-April 2001]

We're talking about power today, but we are also talking about the thorn of sacrifice.

It was the Passover time-- remember that first Passover when the blood of the lambs saved the Hebrews from death. The destroyer passed over those who had lamb's blood on their doorposts.

Well, this was the Passover time again. The time that the blood of the unblemished lamb was shed for the sake of the people. It's Passover time. And Jerusalem and the whole surrounding countryside are crowded with people-- maybe as many as two million.

It was the law that every adult male Jew who lived within twenty miles of Jerusalem must come to the Passover. But not just these Jews, but Jews from every corner of the world made their way to Jerusalem for the greatest of their holy days.

Jesus couldn't have chosen a more dramatic moment. It was a city surging with religious expectations.

As Jesus and his disciples were approaching Jerusalem, Jesus sent some of them into a village to get a young donkey-- a colt - for him to ride. Luke says that as they were untying it, the owner asked them what they were doing. The disciples replied, *The Lord needs it.*

The original wording of the instructions Jesus gave his disciples was: *If anyone asks you why you are taking the donkey, you are to say, 'Its Lord is in need.'*

The language Jesus used was that of a king. It was an ancient law that required a citizen to render to the king any item or service he or one of his emissaries might request. So when Jesus made such a request, he was speaking as a king. He was speaking as one in authority. He was speaking as one who had rights to any possession of his subjects. One who had power.

So the disciples brought the donkey back to Jesus, and he rode into Jerusalem. One way of looking at Palm Sunday is as a kind of last hurrah.

There was kind of a festive air about the whole thing. It was sort of like a parade, in a way, a festival. At least among the faithful there was a sense that a great day had arrived and Israel's ancient dream of a messiah was going to be realized at last.

Some of them cut branches from the trees and spread them out in front of Jesus and the donkey-- a kind of poor man's red carpet treatment. Maybe they were palm branches. The Gospels don't say what they were exactly.

Some of the people who were there got so carried away by what was happening that they took the clothes off their backs and spread them out on the road in front of him along with the branches. So there were shirts and shawls and cloaks spread out there in the dust.

And maybe you and I would have taken off our blue blazers and sweaters and spread them out there with everything else, if we had been there, because it was such a moment of hope and passion.

Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! is how they hailed him as he rode by.

He was certainly a different sort of king as he trotted along on his little donkey with a few old coats thrown over its back for a saddle. But the people cried out anyway because it was in the name of the Lord that he came. There's power in a name.

He was the anointed one that Israel had been waiting centuries for.

He was the holy one who would bring peace and justice to a world where, then as it is now, there was little peace and little justice.

He was the blessed one who would heal the sick and restore sight to the blind and somehow make sense out of life, which a lot of the time seemed to make no sense at all.

[Frederick Buechner, The Longing for Home]

He was, for that brief moment, a celebrity.

We live in a world today that is dominated by the power of fame. People like Paris Hilton and Anna Nicole Smith prove that you can actually be famous just for being famous. You don't have to any discernable talent.

Once, not so long ago, a person was considered famous only after making a life-changing discovery or after orbiting the earth three times or after displaying extraordinary talent or after achieving some other great, historic accomplishment. Today you can be a celebrity if you merely spend time with other celebrities.

Jesus was getting the celebrity treatment here. He was having an Elvis moment. There are some connections between Elvis and Jesus. Certainly a lot people worship Elvis. Think about these connections: Jesus said, *Love thy neighbor*. Elvis said, *Don't be cruel*. Jesus is part of the Trinity. Elvis' first band was a trio. Jesus walked on water. Elvis surfed. Jesus is the Lamb of God. Elvis had mutton-chop sideburns. Jesus is alive. Elvis is ... alive? But we don't want to go there, even if it is April Fools' Day.

Of course, all these hysterical, screaming fans lining the streets thought they were applauding Elvis Jesus, or Tiger Jesus—the powerful, triumphant, miracle-working hotshot from Galilee.

What they got was Lamb Jesus.

They had Tiger expectations.

And it must have been all but unthinkable, even among those who had reason to expect it-- like the disciples who had been told by Jesus three times-- that in less than a week the one who came in the name of the Lord would be abandoned by virtually everybody, including the ones closest to him, and put to death in what even for its time was a cruel and sickening way.

When the Pharisees heard the people hailing him as “Blessed” and “King” they were so outraged by what they took to be the blasphemy of it that they told Jesus to shut them up. *I tell you what, Jesus said, if these were silent the very stones would cry out.*

You picture parades you have seen with the heroes of the day raising their arms to acknowledge the cheers, nodding and smiling to the crowd. There is none of that here. You don't picture Jesus nodding or smiling or raising his arms. He doesn't say much.

Then, as he draws near Jerusalem-- he comes around a bend in the road or reaches the top of a hill-- suddenly he sees Jerusalem. The great ancient city sitting high on a hill. Jesus looks at it and weeps.

He does not, as you might expect, weep for what he knows is in store for him there. He weeps for the city. He says, *Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace. But they are hid from your eyes. For the days shall come upon you when your enemies will cast up a bank about you and surround you, and hem you in on every side, and dash you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave one*

stone upon another in you; because you did not know the time of your visitation from God.

Jesus weeps not because he knows, as he predicted, that Jerusalem is going to destroy him. He weeps because he knows that Jerusalem itself is going to be destroyed.

Jesus looks at the city and weeps. He doesn't weep often in the Gospels, but he weeps here. The palm branches. The Hosannas. The shouts of expectancy and joy.

But Jesus weeps.

They did not recognize the time of their visitation from God.

He knew they were looking for Tiger, but they were getting a Lamb.

They were cheering a powerful Tiger. But Jesus knew that in the end they would be killing a sacrificial Lamb.

I wonder if Jesus ever weeps when he looks at our cities. Or when he looks at our churches. Or when he looks at our lives.

He wept over Jerusalem because he saw God's plan gone wrong. Jerusalem was supposed to be the holy city-- the city set aside for God's chosen people. And yet it became the city that crucified Jesus, God's son, because they did not recognize the time of their visitation from God.

They were looking for a Tiger, and they missed the Lamb.

Jesus was less interested in insurrection than he was in resurrection. He had no intentions of becoming a powerful media created darling, signing autographs, playing to his adorable fans, wielding his power and influence.

Jesus wept over Jerusalem because they did not recognize him for who he was. And forty years later it was completely destroyed-- the whole city, including the temple-- torn down stone by stone.

They weren't expecting the Jesus they got. So they didn't recognize him when he came. Isn't that tragic? But it's true that we pretty much see and hear what we expect to see and hear.

There once was a little boy who decided he wanted to find God. He knew it would probably be a long trip, so he decided to pack a lunch: four packs of Twinkies and two cans of root beer. He set out on his journey and went a few blocks until he came to a park.

On one of the park benches sat an old woman looking at the pigeons. The little boy sat down beside her and watched the pigeons too. When he grew hungry, he pulled out some Twinkies. As he ate, he noticed the woman watching him, so he offered her one.

She accepted it gratefully and smiled at him. He thought she had the most beautiful smile in the world. Wanting to see it again, he opened a can of root beer and offered her the other. Once again she smiled that beautiful smile.

For a long time the two sat on that park bench eating Twinkies, drinking root beer, smiling at each other, and watching the pigeons. Neither said a word. Finally the little boy realized that it was getting late and he needed to go home.

He started to leave, took a few steps, turned back and gave the woman a big hug. Her smile was brighter than ever before.

When he arrived home, his mother noticed that he was happy, but strangely quiet. *What did you do today?* she asked.

Oh, I had lunch in the park with God, he said. Before his mother could reply he added, *You know, she has the most beautiful smile in the world.*

Meanwhile, the woman left the park and returned home. Her son noticed something different about her. *What did you do today, Mom?* he asked.

Oh, I ate Twinkies and drank root beer in the park with God. And before her son could say anything at all, she added, *You know, God's a lot younger than I had imagined.*

Usually we see what we are looking for; we see what we want to see.

I can't help but wonder if Jesus looks down at us sometimes and weeps-- looks at our country, our cities, our churches, our individual lives-- and weeps—not because of anything we have done to him. I imagine Jesus sometimes still weeps for us because so many of us do not recognize him. We recognize

celebrity and fame. We think it's all about power. But, in the end, it's all about sacrifice.

We find salvation not in the Tiger but in the Lamb.

The only way to the crown of glory is through the crown of thorns.