

“Jesus — A Free Agent” based on Luke 19:28-40

Preached by Rev. Jonathan New

First Congregational Church (UCC), Burlington, VT — April 1, 2012

All kinds of writings from biblical times have turned up in the past fifty years; some are just being translated. Now, a letter’s emerged giving independent confirmation for the events of Palm Sunday. Believe it or not, it also proves conclusively that, even in Jesus’ time, talent agents promoted personalities. I read, now, from my own translation, though I’ll admit my Aramaic’s a bit rusty:

From: Burning Bush Talent Management, Jerusalem

To: Mr. Judas Iscariot

Dear Mr. Iscariot:

Thank you for contacting us regarding our management services. We’ve had our eye on Jesus of Nazareth for some time. His popularity’s soaring. Charismatic and intriguing, he has a commanding presence and a way with words; not to mention he’s single — a definite asset with the ladies. The word on the street is he’s restoring sight to the blind; casting out demons; feeding crowds with a few loaves and fishes; walking on water; even raising the dead. We give you credit for keeping him in the public eye. Now you need professional image control.

At your request, our talent scouts were on hand today when Jesus entered Jerusalem. They say the people are mad about him. Waving palm branches, dropping their cloaks on the road in front of him, cheering him on. Jerusalem is ready for him. The question is: Is he ready for Jerusalem?

Jesus played the crowd well, making that symbolic trek to Jerusalem, reviving hopes for a triumphant king who would enter the capital and win back the city for Israel. No wonder a throng gathered, shouting to this would-be monarch, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” They were longing to catch a glimpse of a giant-killer, like King David, a man to take on Herod and maybe even Rome. Enter Jesus!

But in his wake was a question: “Who is this?” A king, a prophet, a revolutionary? All of the above? They are confused. We are confused. And rule number one in image management is never to leave the people guessing about who you are!! Burning Bush Talent can get you back in control by focusing on the following three areas.

First, the colt problem. Despite the old prophecies about the king who rides a colt, they aren’t in today. People of influence ride horses. Commoners may have spread jackets before him, but the Jerusalem elite didn’t exactly roll out the red carpet. If it’s power he wants its power he’s got to show. As his agent, Burning Bush would recommend the immediate purchase of a fine steed. We offer full equestrian services and gear. And we’ll cover the cost until he begins to make himself... profitable.

Second, the followers. These fishermen, tax collectors, harlots, and assorted lepers are tarnishing the fragile image Jesus must cultivate. We can provide disciples, fans, and other hangers-on with style and renown from Jerusalem’s top families and fashionable clubs. Surround Jesus with people who look good and they will make him look good.

Third, the name. Jesus “of Nazareth” only says where he’s from not who he is or could be. Yes, “Jesus” means “He saves.” But saves what? Who? “Jesus, the Messiah” or even “Jesus, Son of God” sends a powerful message and instantly creates an image. Whether he’s really the son of God doesn’t matter; act like it’s true and it will be true to the populace.

Now is a critical time for your friend! The pitfalls due to lack of management and dangers on account of mismanagement are numerous. You have done well so far, but Jesus is not in some backwater town preaching to the Gallilean fisherfolk. This is Jerusalem. It’s the big-time.

Some don’t appreciate the attention he’s getting. We refer you to the unfortunate case of John the Baptist (whose head ended up adorning a silver plate in Herod’s palace) to impress on you the gravity of Jesus’ situation. If John had worked with Burning Bush Talent, he would still be in locusts and wild honey today. It’s one thing if Jesus arrived simply to speak to the king prophetically. It’s quite another for him to ride in, take charge, and be king. So, Mr. Iscariot, we applaud you for seeking us out while there is still time to shape and market Jesus’ image.

The people are ready to pin their hopes on Jesus. He could have them in the palm of his hand. But one false move and they may turn against him. And if he is going to keep the authorities at bay, he’s got to keep the people’s good will.

Burning Bush Talent recommends one simple strategy: Jesus should be whoever the people want him to be. He has the chance to rule people’s hearts, and that will make him someone Herod and Pilate must treat carefully. With our help, Jesus could carve out a powerful place for himself in Jerusalem’s political and religious landscape.

In the meantime, at all costs, he should avoid any altercations with the authorities. Though the people say they want someone to take on the powers that be they don’t really like disturbances to the status quo.

We hope you will convince Jesus to sign on with Burning Bush Talent. Place your friend’s career in our experienced hands and we’ll transform his shining light into the brilliance of a star! Sincerely, Your Friends at Burning Bush Talent Management.

PS — Your fee for helping us sign a new talent is 20 pieces of silver. You can’t beat that, can you?

You’ve probably guessed this is no authentic first century letter. I hope my tongue-in-cheek approach hasn’t made too light of a serious fact: Many of the same people who shouted “Hosanna!” when Jesus entered Jerusalem by week’s end were screaming “Crucify him!” They were eager to call him prophet, revolutionary, Messiah-king. He was all of these... and more. A revolutionary who struck at the religion of his time not a repressive government. A Messiah who entered the city humbly, ushering in, not a reign of warfare, but of peace. A prophet who spoke God’s truth and was God’s truth. The people had the chance to discover Jesus’ true identity, but when he didn’t meet their expectations, didn’t follow their job description, they turned these very hopes against him.

May this passion week open us to a broader understanding of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. As he enters our own lives, may he arrive amid “Hosannas!” But let us offer these greetings, not because he fulfills our personal expectations, but because we know who he truly is and the good news he proclaimed; one who would not be managed by us or anyone — a free agent whose agenda was God’s alone, offering God’s prescription for what ails us. May we

allow Jesus the freedom to be who he is, that our lives might be blessed by the surprising things that can come to pass wherever he arrives.