

He stood on the stage in Brazil in front of 100,000 people. Maybe even 200,000. Who knows exactly? Other numbers they would be able to count more accurately. The massive live streaming across the internet. The colossal TV partnerships around the world. The most viewed event in history was the funeral of Princess Diana. It's estimated Joshua Kayhill will easily double if not triple that tonight with his World Sermon. We are past the opening prayer. We are past the A-list celebrities and musical guests. Past the stand up comic. Past the USA's Vice President's introduction that bounces between urgency and sycophancy. Past the celebrity prayer peppered with fireworks. Finally, Joshua takes the stage to the rolling thunder of applause, whistles and screams. He stands with his shoulder length, light brown hair blowing in the wind. He stands in his blue jeans and long white, button down shirt with no collar. Untucked. The wind blows his hair in his mouth as he begins to talk. But it's not his own hair, it's extensions. And it's really not even the wind. It's probably a fan machine on stage. He lifts one hand and the crowd noises stop down to anticipatory silence.

When he speaks, he speaks, "Fear not."

Though I'm half a mile away, I can see him better than most through my scope. The cross around his neck bounces in and out of his shirt with his big gestures and theatrical body language as he gives his sermon. *Sermon*. More like fortune cookie snippets strung together with a "Jesus says" or "God wills" or "Faith demands" connecting them. Fortune cookie fortunes. Bumper stickers for the sheep. I slip my finger around the trigger.

"Fear not the ignorance in your icons,"

Ten years ago, this guy was a bartender with a rather good blog about customer service.

"Fear not your icons as they widdle down the truth."

A bartender named Don.

"(something-something) . . . Love . . ."

Then came his motivational speaking engagements.

". . . Heal the world . . .(something about everyday people) "

That really took off for him. Books. TV interviews. Endorsements. But it wasn't until he started adding religion and God to his speeches that he just exploded. A household name. A must have for any awards show. He sat down front for the State of the Union. He stood up proud for the worker protests in Beijing. He comforted families after the school shooting in Rhode Island. He held a candle at the memorial for Flight 188. He was the gregarious conjoined twin with the world conversation on just about anything. He was everywhere.

"As I am the Shepherd (something about caring for the masses)

I never liked the Shepherd reference for Jesus. It implies his followers were sheep. Unthinking, gullible sheep. But I don't have any problem with Kayhill saying it. I check the flags for wind. They aren't moving much. I adjust my sight.

"(something about being blind) . . . and Faith will open your eyes."

Then the video came out of the time he walked on water. And that got eleven billion views on YouTube.

“Jesus loves you. And you. And you. And you.”

None of that is a secret. Everyone knows he was a bartender. Everyone knows he didn't talk about religion until later in his life. Everyone knows his name was Don. But they call him Joshua now and they love him. Worship him. He is the self-proclaimed Champion of Mankind. A manufactured messiah. I breathe in slow. Feel the pulse in my finger.

Why do they believe in him? Because he told them to.

Why do they do what he tells them? Because they believe him.

Personally, I still can't get my head around it.

“Drink Pepsi, God wills it. (something about satisfying the thirsty)”

I breathe out slowly and pull the trigger in between heartbeats.

In the empty apartment, I am set up across the room, far from the window. My scope trained expertly on him. To make a shot almost half mile away one must be meticulous about elevation and wind and pressure and ammo. I am. Three weeks ago I shot a steel target the size of a playing card 21 times in a row from 1,000 yards. I am very good at what I do. Kayhill is 825 yards away. The rifle pops out its bullet with a jolt.

I miss.

An amplifier from his accompanying band explodes behind him and splits as it tumbles on the stage. David looks over his shoulder casually and raises a hand to stop his security about to rush up.

I line up another shot quickly and through the scope he somehow looks directly at me and just subtly shakes his head.

I pull the trigger.

He just shrugs and walks calmly off stage as the band's keyboard explodes behind him, raining black and white keys in the back of the stage. The crowd erupts in chaos. 200,000 people screaming and crying and shouting.

What the heck is going on?

They don't know what's happening. Neither do I. I jump down the staircases and blend into the mayhem.

“I remember that,” Joshua tells me from across the table, “yeah, the band was not happy with you. Shooting up their equipment.” He said it absently as he was fingering through a small selection of cross necklaces, trying to decide on one.

We are sitting in a large ballroom at a Chicago Hotel. Surrounded by his frenzied marketing team. Maybe a hundred people buzzing around like crazy as they plan their event tonight. Another massive broadcast. The broadcast is scheduled for 8pm at Wrigley Field. But already there is a huge crowd outside the hotel, shutting down all the streets in a ten block radius. The security detail that grabbed me up took forever to get through the crowd and into the hotel.

"I don't know how their equipment got hit."

"Come on, we both know it was your bullets."

He holds up an amethyst cross necklace and shows it to a female handler a few feet away. She subtly shakes her head and he goes back to choosing.

"It was, yes. I mean I really don't miss and I never miss twice."

"Right. You didn't miss. At least, technically. I just moved the bullets. I wasn't ready to die."

He said it flatly. I just stared at him. Not sure what to say to that.

"Why am I here?"

"I *wasn't* ready to die."

In the ballroom was a blur of marketing and religion. Huge crosses. Sandwich boards that say God's Love is Everywhere. A giant, inflatable Pepsi can. Dozens of bibles opened up with highlighted passages all over a table. In the corner a team was making buttons next to a mountain of t shirts. A small video studio set up in the corner had some big name reporters talking to their cameras. His security paced back and forth through the ballroom. Headsets on half the people chattering away. A car-sized dry erase board with the words **THIRD TESTAMENT potential book names**. Underneath that:

Ascensions.

Illusions.

Adorations.

3 Corinthians.

Luminarians.

Arbitrations.

Designations.

Litigations (crossed off)

Genesis 2, Electric Boogaloo (crossed off with a big smiley face)

"Jaimie's here with some options," One of the handlers says to Joshua.

"Good, I told you I want a bit more blond. And hey, write that on the board."

"What's that, sir?"

“Options. I like that.”

A woman opens a case of hair extensions, blond to light brown. At the same time a scrawny little intern writes “Options” on the board.

“What’s happening?” I ask him, very lost and overwhelmed at this point.

“That’s a great one. Darcy, another book name, Overwhelm. I like it.”

I didn’t even say anything. How did-?

“Things are moving fast now, you have to keep up. Yes, someone put a bounty on my head and you tried to kill me. The bullets in Brazil. The car bomb in Seattle. And I know you were in Athens when those cops jumped you before anything could happen. You have an agenda, man.”

“Um. Ok. Sorry?”

“Hey, no worries. I get it.”

I look around at the room. Like they are prepping a reality show. Some hokey game show. And I decide I find Joshua is a little condescending.

Joshua snaps his fingers and points at the board, “Darcy, Condescension.” Darcy and his PR guy stop and look at him oddly as the room gets a bit quieter. “Right, that’s bad. How about, Descension?”

Some claps and nods and the name goes up.

I tell him, “Stop doing that.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. Reading my thoughts or whatever.”

“Sorry, I try not to be so obvious but we are on a clock and things have to happen quickly now. So it’s cool. You’re doing great.”

“What am I doing?”

“Well, trying to kill me for the last two years.”

“In all fairness, I haven’t been doing that great. Since you’re still, you know . . .”

“Breathing, right. Let’s change that.”

Joshua stands up as Jaimie places a blonde hair extension against his head. He checks it the mirror and gives her a double thumbs up.

“Walk with me.” It wasn’t a request.

We start walking through the ballroom. His security looks very displeased with me.

“Your security guys aren’t liking me.”

“They’re a screen door on a submarine. Not your fault. Don’t worry about it. So I know we just met, but let me just ask you, is it weird to have a birthday that changes every year? My team is split on that.”

“Like you were born on Feb 29th, leap year, like that?”

“Kinda. We are thinking of making my birthday Black Friday. But that comes after Thanksgiving and Thanksgiving is on a different date every year. But theoretically everyone would still know the right day of the year, it’s just the date would change.”

“Well, Easter is different every year.”

“Exactly! Exactly what Mark said. Yeah, we’re doing that. Sweet.”

“That could be another book on your board.”

“What?”

“Theoretical.”

Joshua contemplates it. “Maybe. Maybe, I need to think about that one. But I like where your head is at.” We keep walking and I notice his blond extensions are in. When did that happen?

We are heading to the back of the room. Joshua is high fiving and shaking quick hands on the way out. An assistant holds a mirror for him to check himself out as we get to the double steel doors.

Emergency Exit Only.

Still looking in the mirror, he asks, “What’s the bounty? Is it money? Or an island? A Golden Fiddle? What are you getting?” Jaimie is fixing his hair as Mark is talking on the headset and a pair come walking up with a megaphone and a leather jacket.

“Don’t you want to know who?”

“Oh I know who. I just don’t know exactly what you get.”

“Ok. Uh, \$1 actually. I just asked for a dollar.”

He looks directly at me and we are stopped in a moment. Everything seems quieter and the frenetic energy seems to take a brief break as he finally focuses on me, smiles a proud, fatherly smile and nods approvingly. “That’s why it has to be you.”

I feel tears welling up as warm shame slips down my back.

Since I am probably 200 of his 11 billion views, I decide to ask him, “During that flood, did you really-“

“No. I didn’t walk on water. That’s not possible. I walked on the backs of dead bodies that floated by. “

“How’s that poss-“

“They were big bodies. But dead all the same. Was it a miracle? You tell me. But that girl was drowning and with the current and how far it was, I never would have made it in time unless I walked on those bodies. They floated by at exactly the right time. They held me exactly as long as they needed to. Miracles are impossible coincidences orchestrated by God. That’s the truth and the science and the faith of it all. That’s the real Holy Trinity. Miracles are impossible coincidences orchestrated by God. Some people choose to just chop words off that sentence until it fits their narrative. They widdle it down to what they can handle. What can you handle? But that’s rhetorical. I gotta go.”

Is that the truth?

I add (with science and faith) cross of “im”

I look at him, bewildered at thtruth and simplicity of it.

“I’m a teacher, man. Also-

At the same time we say “simplicity” he turns to Greg, Simplicity!

Mark puts his hand on my shoulder and tells me, “you’ll wait here for thirty seconds,” and then hands me a shotgun.

“Wait-“

“It has to be done. It’s okay, you got this buddy,”

Two people from his team help him slip on a black leather jacket with *Champion of Mankind* written on the back in gold letters. And he’s out the door, leaving me with his team. I think I might be on his team now.

I ask Mark, “All these people have seen me.”

“So?”

“Well, what if it comes out he brought me here to kill him?”

“Yeah, so?”

“Wouldn’t that kind of make it fake?”

“Yeah.”

“What if people found out this was all orchestrated?”

“These people believe in him. They love him. They find out this was all set up, they’ll just think, that’s how it was supposed to be. It won’t matter. At all. Just part of the great and mysterious plan.”

“So he just says God’s will and anything is justified?”

“Almost. One thing you need to understand. It actually has to be God’s will.”

“Yeah? Like drinking Pepsi?”

“Well, one, we have bills, two, God likes Pepsi better. But Joshua’s done with that now. He needs to be. He’s too big. It’s time.”

I can hear the roar of the crowd on the street as they start chanting. Through his megaphone he wishes them well, talks about loving God and says something about the best deals are going on now at Best Buy. Mark practically shoves me out the door. I feel like I'm not quite in control of what I'm doing. The sun is setting behind me. On the street there is a sea of people in front of him. He stands on a small platform. TV cameras, microphones and signage is all around. I feel myself moving toward him. This can't be how it happens, I think. Weren't they still planning in there? How could he be so cool only moments before he is to die. His back is to me. This will be almost cowardly.

"I won't save you! You will save me!" He yells. "And you and you and you"

I raise the shotgun and he spins around, spreading his arms.

"And you," he says quietly.

I pull the trigger as soon as he sees me and his stomach and chest explode in a leaded zephyr of gore. Killed instantly, he falls back and ever so briefly he flashes me a double thumbs up as he is falling. Then slumps to the ground, eyes frozen open, lifeless. Silence washes over the crowd as they process what just happened. A cop spins around and points his gun at me as I drop the shotgun. He gets off two shots quickly with me square in his sights. I spin away and see the drumset behind me rupture with the first bullet and the microphone explodes with the second bullet as he inexplicably misses. I turn slowly back, expecting to see him rushing toward me, but he kneels down to Joshua's body. I rush over as well. The crowd looks from afar, but it's only me and the cop kneeling over Joshua's burst body. His skin already seems grey and his expression is frozen blank and he simply stares up, dead to the world.

The cop gets up and moves toward the crowd to help keep them back, leaving me alone with his body. Where is Mark? Or anyone from his team? Why am I not arrested yet?

Joshua's hand claps on to my arm (he's alive??!!).

He pulls himself up a few inches and says with a grimaced smile, "Real quick, the last book for me, tell them to call it Zephyr. That's perfect. Good job, buddy. "

And then Joshua died.

Again.

"Come with me, man," Mark says as he pulls me up by my elbow. "We gotta get you out of here."

"How? How am I not shot? Not arrested?"

"Go home, collect your payday. It's cool."

"I just killed . . . I think I just killed . . . oh Jesus, what have I done." My head was spinning.

"Hey, I said it's cool. Go home. But I need you back here in three days."

"Why three days?"

Mark cocked his head and gave me an exasperated look, "dude . . ."