



Book Expo 2006 – Books of Inspiration **Martha Simmons**

KENNEALLY: I want to turn now to someone who really is an expert on preaching, and that would be Reverend Martha Simmons. Welcome, Reverend Simmons. A native of Tchula, Mississippi, and the seventh of 11 children, Martha Simmons is considered an elder among women preachers in America. For more than 20 years, she has preached in pulpits across the country and across denominations. More than a decade ago, *Ebony* magazine named her on its honor role of Outstanding African-American Women Preachers in America. In addition to being known for her oratorical skills, she has also served on more than 12 nonprofit boards, and over the past decade has become the primary chronicler of African-American preaching through books, lectures, and her work at the helm of the *African-American Pulpit Journal*. She is also editor of *Preaching on the Brink* and *9.11.01: African-American Leaders Respond to American Tragedy*.

She's here today to speak about a book coming up this fall, *Preaching with Sacred Fire: an Anthology of African-American Sermons 1650 to the Present*. And just as we did with Jay's introduction, I'd like to give you some idea of what that preaching sounds like, so if we could hear the second track on that CD.

(recording plays)

M: (inaudible) always see the wakings of the (inaudible). Now and then, God lets us see the thrashing of the sword (inaudible).

SINGERS: You talk about heaven, heaven. Everybody talk about a heavenly (inaudible).

F: When Jesus asked the question, my God, my God, why has thou forsaken me? God did not bother to answer. Ah, there was silence.

SINGERS: Talk about heaven, heaven (inaudible). Everybody talk about a heavenly (inaudible).

(end of recording)

KENNEALLY: Well, I think that gives us a rousing way to start with Reverend Simmons. And welcome to Beyond the Book. What's remarkable about your

collection is that it really does begin at the beginning for African-American experience. I want to ask you about those very early days of slavery and what you found through the sermons the role of the church was for that community.

SIMMONS: Even though the book title says that it begins in 1650, there weren't any sermons by African-Americans that were printed from 1650 to 1750. The reason we started there is because we thought it was impossible for America to understand this preaching if you didn't understand how the preachers were formed and what it was like to step off of a ship from Africa in chains with your family either having been split, or perhaps they died along the way, and what that led you to become in terms of how you approached the divine. That's why we started with 1650 to kind of give some background on the formative years.

In terms of the preaching, by the time you get to 1750, African-Americans have found ways to interact with American culture. So the preaching is American, and yet it still has many traces of Africa in it. There's a sense in the preaching that regardless of what we're up against, somehow we still believe that God is good and God is able, which for me, reviewing a lot of this preaching and looking back at some of the circumstances, I found remarkable, I really found remarkable.

Sojourner Truth, one of the preachers of this time, started to do some writing after they had taken her son, who was free, and sold him back into slavery. And she, along with some friends of hers who were Quakers, were fighting to get him back. In the midst of that, Sojourner Truth was still out preaching, and even before women were able to vote, Sojourner Truth was out preaching, first all saying, I have the nerve to stand up and be a black woman preacher, but also to say, before the word was known, I had the nerve to stand up and be a womanist, or a feminist for some, at a time like that.

So I found the preaching astounding in the early years because of the circumstances under which the people did it. And for me, going through thousands of these sermons, there was a lot more truth-telling, a lot more truth-telling than what I've seen now.

KENNEALLY: Clearly, the role of the preacher and the sermon has changed in the 300 years since the very first ones were given, so I'm going to fast-forward you to today, and I'd like to hear your assessment of the role of the church in the African-American community and the role that preachers play.

SIMMONS: The role of the church in the African – the church has always been central to the African-American community because it was the only place for a time in history where African-Americans had some semblance of power. They could often say whatever they wanted to say, for the most part. There've always been restrictions, and I think there still are in terms of how some preachers operate. But it's always been central. Culture, of course, has made it the case that now the

church is not as central as it used to be, because there are competing interests. But it's still central to the majority of African-Americans, because faith is still central.

In terms of the difference in the preaching, media is the difference. Media is the difference. Once upon a time, you could be a great orator and die without very many people knowing that you existed. Now, you can be a mediocre preacher, but if you're media savvy, the whole world will know your name. You don't have to have as much to say. You have to have better media people. I think that that's having a very interesting impact on preaching, in addition to this book.

I lead the *African-American Pulpit Journal*, which is the only preaching and ministry journal that's nondenominational for African-Americans in the country. So for the last almost eight years, I've gotten a chance to see – because we allow people to submit sermons for consideration for publication, plus we go out and ask for sermons. And it's been amazing to see what people are talking about now and how much it's driven by the media and what they believe will sell right now, as opposed to 100 years ago and the issues of the day.

KENNEALLY: Media we think about today that involves the Internet and television and those kinds of visual media, but sermonizing is fundamentally an oral medium. And I was fascinated, you were telling me earlier about some of the recordings that came out, a series of recordings that were produced in the 1920s and 1930s. They're riveting to hear. And they reinforce your point, which is that a sermon should never be dull.

SIMMONS: In the African-American community, unlike some other communities –

(laughter)

SIMMONS: We don't believe that there's anything wrong with preaching being exciting. We believe that there's something about the divine that ought to excite you. If winning the lottery excites you, time spent with God ought to at least bring you close to that kind of experience. And one of the things that we found while we were doing some of this research is that there were preachers in the 1920s and 1930s who started to record sermons. Most of these preachers now have been totally forgotten by everybody, including the African-American community. I didn't know the names of some of these people until I started to do the research and found out that the sermons have been re-recorded and placed on CD. And I was stunned by the sermonizing, just stunned by some of the ways people put together sermons back then. There was a gentleman in the late 1920s, early 1930s, by the name of A.W. Nix, and A.W. Nix had a sermon called *The Black Diamond Express to Hell*, which he did in six parts it was so famous.

KENNEALLY: Station to station.

SIMMONS: The way he would begin each part of the sermon is with the phrase, Next station! And he does this throughout the sermon, and the stations are, of course, what you would expect for that timeframe. The stations are Drunkardsville, Lyington, Gossip Junction. You can't put this recording down. And he became so famous – the recordings back then were only three or four minutes, but he became so famous that he had to keep doing it and he could only keep your attention by adding another station. So, on version six, I think it is, he goes into, instead of Gossiptown, it's Confusionville, and then there's Plotter's Junction. The people are always plotting against the church and plotting against the preacher. And then there's Thievestown.

And finally, there was a gentleman by the name of J.M. Gates, who impacted Aretha Franklin's father, C.L. Franklin, Malcolm X's father, who was a Baptist preacher, and no one has heard of this man since he died in 1945. J.M. Gates was the most famous. He actually recorded 200 sermons before 1935. Gates was so famous that Nix decided, OK, I've got to take a look at what he's doing and do some of that. So what Gates did was, he actually had people, while he was preaching, sitting in the congregation who would hold conversations with him. How does that work? It was fascinating.

So what Nix did was with The Black Diamond Express to Hell, by the time you get to version five, I think it is, he has added a woman in the congregation by the name of Miss Hardboil. And Miss Hardboil talks in the middle of the sermon. She'll say, look, at those stupid people up there being taken in by their preacher. Well, of course, as with any good story, ultimately the preacher is able to win her over and she's glad to get off the Black Diamond Express to Hell, and the church says amen. Just wonderful, riveting preaching that speaks to the genius of so many of these people who were not lettered.

Then there were the orators who were very lettered, like Frederick Douglass. Most people don't know that Frederick Douglass was an ordained preacher, but he was, and that's where he got his start. So the African-American – there is such a rich tradition of people who were formally trained and people who were not, but all had in common an enthusiasm and an excitement for the time that they spend with the divine and how that's to be communicated to people.

So the recordings were fascinating, and we're hoping that after the book is out for about a year, that we will develop a CD because you've got to hear this. You've got to hear it.

KENNEALLY: And what's important about hearing it, I think, is to be able to grasp that history. The fact that this is the first such collection is remarkable itself, and that it's possible to forget some of these characters, and that must be something that you are really excited about being able to offer to the African-American preaching community, let alone the entire nation, a chance to remind themselves of what they've been through and to recognize that they're not alone, if you will.

SIMMONS: It literally broke my heart about six years ago when I started working with preaching and chronicling sermons. I'd call people and say, we need to print a sermon by so-and-so. And nobody knew where the sermons were. They were gone. Some of the earliest sermons by Martin King's father, they're gone. So many other preachers – and their names are in the literature. It'll say Reverend So-and-So spoke to 5000 last night, black and white on this issue, and the sermon's gone, because the African-American community has been and still is a primarily oral community, and no one realized the importance of putting the material in print.

Gardner C. Taylor is considered the greatest African-American preacher in terms of oratorical skill that is currently alive. He's considered – we all know Martin King's name, but Gardner Taylor is considered a better preacher. There's only one sermon in existence by Gardner Taylor's father. One. And the father was actually better than the son. But it's gone.

So when we got the opportunity to put this in print, we said it's got to happen. This is tragic that this much history has been lost. And the other thing we realized is that as we started to talk to people, go to people's basements, people's attics and things like that, is that if you didn't get a hold to some of this material in the next 25 years, you were going to lose another entire generation. Just gone. Because people don't know the importance of it. They don't see it so much as history that I need to share with someone. They're like, this is just a preacher I heard growing up.

And so it became a mission for me and Frank Thomas to make sure that as many people as we can put in print, we put them in print. There are at least another 150, 200 people whose sermons we want to include, and although I'm a preacher and so is Dr. Thomas, we know we're going to be cursed out because of some of the people we couldn't include. But we at least put down enough information, we hope, to tell other people where to start finding some of these preachers.

But it became a mission because it's not just African-American history, it's American history. If you could see some of the sermons and hear these preachers talk about everything from why women ought to vote, all women, not just black women, but why women ought to vote to what it means to have the right to an equal education. It's fascinating especially during these times when we're discussing immigration and what rights should people get, just fascinating reading. So we knew we had to save as much of it as we could.

KENNEALLY: Well, thank you for that effort, and continue that mission.