

Economy won't dampen Osteen's message of prosperity

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By GARY STERN

Considering that he is fast becoming the most popular preacher in the country, Joel Osteen doesn't act or sound like a preacher at all. He has no seminary training and can hardly talk about any religion other than his own brand of creamy, fat-free Christianity (all the hope, none of the sin).

He prefers telling endearing domestic stories about himself and his 21st-century friends and relatives to rehashing the dusty tales of Scripture.

When he preaches at the new Yankee Stadium on Saturday, becoming the first nonbaseball attraction there, he will be his humble, likable, wavy-haired self and nothing more.

"I feel like I don't need to preach. I just want to talk to the people," he said. "My gift is to help encourage people. I'm more than happy to leave other things, other areas, to other pastors, who have different gifts."

Supernatural rise

Osteen has become so big, so fast that analyzing his appeal has become something of an academic field. Having preached for less than a decade, Osteen, 46, presides over a Houston church in a former basketball arena that draws 40,000 people on Sundays. His televised sermons are seen by more than 7 million Americans a week and millions more around the world.

He's had two best-selling books and a third, "It's Your Time," will come out in November. He's only been preaching on the road for five years, but is taking the stage at the new Yankee Stadium before A-Rod for what he calls "A Night of Hope." He appeals to conservatives and liberals, Texas Republicans and Nancy Pelosi, Pentecostal Christians filled with the Holy Spirit and atheists filled with none.

"I wish I could explain it better," he said of his appeal in a recent interview with The Journal News. "I don't have an answer. I guess it's that my message is positive and hopeful. People stop me on the street, whether they are bikers or bankers. I've had atheists tell me that they watch me on TV.

"It's got to be God," he said, "because it's not me."

Tulane University's Shayne Lee, an expert on superstar evangelists, said Osteen is young, fresh, likable and doesn't have the baggage of the televangelists of old.

"He understands the importance of TV and uses the language of contemporary American society - the language of psychotherapy, the language of Americans who watch Oprah and Dr. Phil," said Lee, whose new book, "Holy Mavericks," profiles Osteen and four other pastors with national followings. "Osteen understands that his brand is not to condemn, but uplift. If the caricature of the typical evangelist is a fingerpointing loudmouth, Osteen seems so trustworthy that he's the boy next door."

Osteen is well-known, and somewhat controversial, for preaching that putting one's faith in God will bring spiritual and material rewards. He likes to say that God wants us to experience a life of abundance, a belief system often described as a "prosperity gospel." One might think that the recession could put a crimp in such a gospel. But Osteen isn't buying.

"I know the recession is causing anxiety and worry, but my message is to stay positive," he said. "Faith is about believing and hoping and expecting. Don't get bitter, negative, discouraged, when we know God is so good. We know from Scripture that we all have trying times, but if one door closes, God will open another."

Osteen will bring this message to Yankee Stadium, which he's renting for about \$1.5 million. "God will do what we cannot," he said. "He will do the supernatural."

A gift from his father

The story of Osteen's rise is hard to explain but easy to summarize.

His father, John Osteen, founded Lakewood Church in Houston in 1959 and built a congregation of about 6,000 people. For 17 years, Joel was his father's AV guy, running the church's television ministry.

In September 1999, Joel preached for the first time. The following week, his father died. Joel took over as pastor, his training consisting of having listened to his father's sermons.

The new pastor preached in his own style, telling stories and building people up. The church grew.

Only six years later, in 2005, Lakewood Church moved into the 16,000-seat former home of the Houston Rockets basketball team. Almost 40,000 people attend weekly services, and Lakewood is famous for its diversity.

"Our music is not traditional hymns," he said. "My message is not about doctrine. I don't have to get 50 references from Scripture in a sermon for it to be a good sermon. Churches that are helping people live out a Christian life are growing and flourishing."

Osteen doesn't believe that faith is declining in America, as some national studies seem to show. He believes that many spiritual people with Christian leanings may not say they are religious because they've left "traditional, denominational" churches.

"I want to be careful not to criticize anybody or be negative," he said, hesitating a bit. "But we need to change with the times. That doesn't mean the old times weren't good. I mean, my dad's style was different. My style is to get up there and inspire."

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