

Which way will be our way?

**A sermon by Joe Hoffman
Palm Sunday, March 16, 2008**

I woke up this morning to the sound of the train coming through the valley and into the station. And to the sound of birds cheerfully singing. I was aware of the wind blowing. And I was glad for such simple gifts that suggest life is good.

I especially appreciate these little things after a hard week. Many of us come today aware of a grief we feel at the death of Andy Summers on Thursday. We have lost a friend, a passionate person for love, for laughter, for justice and truth. We lost a friend in the period of two weeks – an unexpected and sudden illness that caught us by surprise. We carry our grief and it will take time for us to ease that pain.

We enter Holy Week not so much eager for a parade and a celebration, but tired and wanting life to once again find some peace, some balance. We enter Holy Week wondering what the story of Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey can say to us as we need some rest, some healing, some time to be quiet and remember a good friend. Some of us enter Holy Week wondering if God is still God when the life of such a vivacious and charming person has been taken away.

But I am glad it is Holy Week. Because today we need the story of this day. We need to remember that Jesus rode into Jerusalem with friends all around him, laughing and singing and dancing. It was festive because it was about life. It was about living a new reality into being. It was about letting God be God, and letting life be all that God had imagined it could be.

There were two parades that day. Two processions into the city. Most of the people were gathered on the other side of town, watching as Pilate came in with the cavalry. A show of military force. There were horses, foot soldiers, and all the trappings of power with helmets, weapons, shining shields, and so forth. A reminder that the Roman Empire was the power to honor. And that the head of the empire, Augustus, was indeed known as the son of God, the savior of the people. The imperial processional was a parade of power and the embodiment of an empire theology. Put your trust in the empire and all will be well.

The second parade was Jesus and his followers. The Jesus procession was one of peasant people celebrating an alternative reality. It was a counter protest, it was an intentional, planned political demonstration. The point of the protest was to say – the empire is not the power of life. God is the power that brings life and God's community on Earth does not resemble the empire at all. Jesus was employing a strategy that was imagined in the Jewish scriptures – such as in Zechariah

– “Tell the daughter of Zion, look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey ...” (Zech. 9:9)

The confrontation of this day would culminate by the end of the week with the crucifixion of Jesus. The issue at hand was over power and domination that had been legitimated in the name of God. In the words of Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, Jesus, a revolutionary against the empire, would be sacrificed so that “the dominant system of political oppression, economic exploitation, and religious legitimation” would not be threatened. (pages 7-9, The Last Week) Jesus and his followers sang a new reality. They sang of peace. They danced for joy. They dreamed of a world where wars would end and all people would have the basic necessities of life. They dreamed of the world that God imagined.

There were two processions that day. And the people had to decide – which one will we participate in. And that is still the decision we all must make. Which world order will we help to bring forth: the domination of the empire that uses violence, coercion, and the taking advantage of the poor and marginalized to maintain control and order, to maintain the power structure that benefits a few at the cost of the masses; or will we help bring forth the world that embraces each life, that values the power of community in relationship, that trusts in the power of love and the possibility of peace. Which procession will we participate in?

That is the story we begin Holy Week with. And as I read this story, I have to think of Andy Summers. I have to give thanks for a man who chose to follow the procession of Jesus. A man who, if he were here tonight, would most likely be walking from St. Eugene’s Catholic Church to downtown and then to our Friendship Hall on a pilgrimage for immigrants. A man actually who was scheduled to take a group of students to Guatemala today for 8 weeks to learn more about community and life from a different place in the world. A man who supported Witness for Peace. A man who saved many lives along the way with his compassion, his wisdom, his encouragement amidst civic and religious empire ways. A man who was not afraid to speak truth to power – to take faith into the political arena and call for another way. He was, in his own way, a person living in the ways of Jesus, protesting and calling forth life from the social order of domination that prevails.

I heard Steve Runholdt, minister at Warren Wilson Presbyterian Church, say that Andy was seldom happier than when he was out protesting for peace and justice. The one exception was getting to spend time with his grandchildren. It was in his heart and soul to spend his life finding another way – a way of peace.

But Andy did more than protest. Like I imagine was the case on that first Palm Sunday, Andy was joyful in this work. To bring forth the realm of God is joyful work. It calls for dancing and singing. Or in Andy's case, it calls for playing the saxophone, it calls for a little jazz, it calls for a new tune and some friends to play it with.

I don't know why Andy died now, died so young, died so full of life still. But I am grateful for the courage with which he lived. The courage to share in the Jesus procession. The joy to play Jesus jazz. The daring to dance the Jesus dance. The gratitude to share Jesus grace.

Holy Week comes early this year. As did Andy's death. This is the first time in 90 years that Holy Week has come this early in the year. And it won't be this early in the calendar again for another 200 years. Because of this unusual shift in the calendar, this year Holy Week coincides with the 5th anniversary of our imperial invasion of Iraq in the name of God and freedom. We are presented with the opportunity once again to choose which procession we will participate in. Will it be the procession of the empire, or the Jesus procession of peace?

There are also close to home ways to join the Jesus procession. My friend Tony Sayer, a United Methodist pastor, and a person who, more than twenty years ago was very influential to me in answering a call to the ministry, has written a guest editorial in the paper today to question the city's decision to force Zacchaeus House out of their house on South French Broad Rd. due to code violations and safety concerns. He realizes the need for rules and honors that – and I appreciate his saying that in the editorial. But he also pushes it further by raising the ironies. He points out:

“Here, Christians who in various ways have been told they cannot worship openly in public, are now being told they cannot worship in private either.

Here, a group that understands itself to be a community, is being told, no, it is a business and ought to behave like one.

Here is a neighborhood where drug trafficking, and prostitution are an obvious and ongoing problem, yet what the city chooses to crack down on is prayer and hymn singing.

Here a congregation essentially without cars is being told it cannot worship without parking spaces.

Here are homeless people being told they cannot worship in the closest thing to a home they have.

And all of this is playing out as we approach what Christians celebrate as Holy Week, which begins with Jesus looking upon another mountain city and saying sadly, “Would that you had learned the things that make for peace.” (Asheville Citizen Times, front of Forum Section, March 16, 2008)

Holy Week is a time in the Christian season not to just remember an old story, but to ask ourselves again – which procession will we be part of? What will we invest our lives in? Which way will we follow? From which source of power do we most benefit? Which way will give us the life we long for?

I don't know why Andy died this week. I don't understand the mystery that is God. But I know that Andy lived life to its fullest. He has touched the lives of so many people by his way of living. By his love. By his joy. He brought humor to whatever the situation. He brought the power of his presence. And in doing all of this, I never knew him to let go of the way of Jesus, the way of life, the way of justice and peace. He brought a vibrant spirituality into the public arena – and made it fun.

Holy Week is our week to reflect prayerfully and passionately on our faith. It is our time to once again decide – which way of life will I follow – and to bring all of my heart and soul to living that way. And Andy has joined the company of saints that brings light to our way. If we look closely, I bet we can see that twinkle in his eye. If we listen closely, I bet we can hear a new, spirited saxophone playing in the heavenly jazz band. If we pay attention, I bet we can sense his presence with us as we keep on keeping on with Jesus.