

“The Calm Before the Storm”

Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14; I Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17; 31b-35

Maundy Thursday, April 2, 2015

Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor

Over 80 people surprised her with a 50th birthday celebration on the lawn. Among them was her aunt: 70 years young, vital, ebullient, joyful, happy to be present for this celebration of her favorite niece. Three weeks later came the devastating diagnosis: stage four cancer, metastasized to the brain. The birthday girl was my wife, Carol; the favorite aunt, who died three weeks ago today, was Mary Ann Williams.

Things were just coming together for the multigenerational family. Employment had stabilized and extended care for the sick family matriarch had settled into workable routine. Then, her son-in-law fell, broke his ankle, had surgery and died five days later from a pulmonary embolism. Richard James’ funeral was last Sunday.

It was a quiet Monday morning after a busy church weekend for an active church family when the phone rang. *“We’ve just sent Adam to the hospital with seizures”* said the voice on the other end. Thus began the week Adam spent in a New York City hospital recovering from two seizures. The neurologists and endocrinologists never agreed upon a diagnosis for the seizures which, thankfully, have not returned. Adam is my younger son and it was I who received the call.

The calm before the storm. Waiting for the other shoe to drop. That dread that we discover when, in retrospect, we can see that what we thought was the light at the end of the tunnel was actually an on-coming train. We’ve all known it and been through it.

And survived it. Human beings are amazingly adaptable creatures. The Disney movie “Tarzan,” made into a Broadway musical, weaves many themes into the old and well-known story. One of these is the adaptability of people, as Tarzan survives his parent’s death, to be adopted by a gorilla mother and absorbed into a gorilla family.

On this night when Jesus will soon be arrested, there is calm in the Upper Room. Jesus has gone there, most scholars believe, to share the Passover meal with his disciples. It appears that Jesus knows that the calm will not last. His conversation with Judas that was added to tonight's reading points to that. Yet in the foot washing of his disciples, Jesus models service. Irrespective of the storm that is to follow, Jesus shows us, paraphrasing the Ghanaian folk song, *"how to serve the neighbors we have from God."*

Jesus reveals his own adaptability. His three year ministry of teaching and prophecy is coming to an end. Knowing what is to come, he might have run away; or lashed out at Judas; or—in the words of the spiritual Pastor Hal has taught us so well—*"he could have called ten thousand angels."* He did none of these things. He took his medicine—more accurately, our medicine—and was faithful to the end.

In that faithfulness we find the origin of this night, Maunday Thursday. Mandatum novum—a "new commandment"—when he tells the disciples *"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*

Even knowing the storm will eventually come, we can savor the calm Jesus offers. We can remember that in this sacred meal we have a promise of his real presence with us, in good times and in bad. We can be "in the moment" (as it is said), appreciating all that it took Jesus to stay in the moment when worries and fears were swirling about. We can do all we are able to live the love that he commanded.

And when our calm is shattered by the storm we are assured that the One who promises to be with us always knows exactly what it takes to stick with us until the end.