

## APPARENTLY, WE BELIEVE!

(01/08/2023)

Scripture Lesson: Psalm 18:6  
James 5:13-15  
John 14:14

*“I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God;  
incline your year to me, hear my words.”* (Psalm 17:6)

*“In my distress I called upon the Lord;  
to my God I cried for help.  
From his temple he heard my voice,  
and my cry to him reached his ears.”* (Psalm 18:6)

*“Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.”* (James 5:13-16)

*“If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.”* (John 14:14)

This is one of my favorite times of year to preach! On the secular and liturgical calendars, we celebrate the New Year, with all its unpredictability and promise. Today, the first Sunday after Epiphany, raises the question of what an epiphany is and whether we have ever had one. Ecumenical Sunday and the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity occur in January. During January, the church celebrates Jesus' baptism, leading us to reflect on the role that baptism plays in our spiritual journey. Martin Luther King Day calls us to address the evils of slavery and work for a kinder, more just, more inclusive world. February marks the anniversary of my ordination. And then we have Valentine's Day, celebrating the power of love in our spiritual life.

But this morning, I am going to talk about football. Well, not football exactly. More about what football teaches us about ourselves. More specifically, what a particular moment during a recent football game, a particular event, taught us about ourselves.

This past Monday evening, Darlene and I settled down with a few nibbles to watch Monday Night Football. The Buffalo Bills, who have been playing very well this year, were playing the Cincinnati Bengals, who have also been playing very well this year. The game was in Cincinnati. Both teams have excellent quarterbacks, excellent receivers, and great defense. I won't bore you with the details, but the game was of some significance to both teams in relation to obtaining a bye week and home field advantage in the upcoming playoffs.

The Bengals, for whom I was rooting, jumped out to a 7-3 lead in the first quarter. Then came the play. At 8:55 p.m., Tee Higgins, a wide receiver for the Bengals, broke through the Bills' defensive line and came face to face with Damar Hamlin, a Bills safety who was in a linebacker slot. Damar made the tackle standing up; he stopped Tee in his tracks and wrestled him to the ground.

The hit was not a particularly hard hit. It was certainly not in the category of the bone-jarring hits that we used to glorify. Neither player engaged in a cheap shot, nor did either do anything that warranted a penalty. There was no helmet-to-helmet contact.

Following the play, Damar stood up, took a step back, and collapsed. He really collapsed.

The players on both teams immediately recognized that something was seriously wrong. They could tell by the way Damar fell and because he was not moving at all. They screamed to the sidelines for help. The trainers, doctors, and medical personnel from both teams raced onto the field. It was difficult for us to see because of the players surrounding the intervention, but the medical personnel immediately administered CPR, stimulated his heart with a cardiac defibrillator, and administered oxygen in a frantic attempt to get Damar breathing and to get his heart working again. An ambulance pulled onto the field. They quickly put Damar in the ambulance and took him, still totally unconscious, to Cincinnati University Medical Hospital Trauma Center, where he was placed in Intensive Care. They took his mother, who was present watching the game, to the hospital so she could be with her son.

By rewinding the tape, Darlene and I were able to see the initial hit. Tee Higgins simply led with his right shoulder, which struck Damar Hamlin in the chest. It was later speculated that if the impact occurred at the precise moment between heartbeats, it might have disrupted Damar's heart rhythm. When this happens, sometimes the heart resumes beating on its own; in rare cases it doesn't. This is when the person needs a cardiac defibrillator and/or CPR to get it beating again. Despite the immediate interventions, there was no evidence that Damar was regaining consciousness. This was obviously a matter of life or death for this young man.

What happened immediately following the debilitating blow to a twenty-four-year-old young man in excellent shape who was living his dream was deeply touching. The players from both teams came together. They hugged. They cried. They kneeled. And they prayed.

The sportscasters, Joe Buck and Troy Aikman, along with Lisa Salter, who did the sideline reporting, were stunned—both by the tragic circumstances that were unfolding before their eyes, before our eyes, and by the players' response. Troy Aikman, a Hall of Fame

quarterback, said he had never seen anything like this before. As I watched, it seemed to me that all the players were praying, either individually, in small groups, or as a team. They prayed standing up; they prayed kneeling down; or they simply walked around silently mouthing prayers for their friend. What we saw was a deeply moving expression of brotherhood, of caring, of love.

The camera panned the stands. The spectators at Paycor Stadium stood in silence, stunned. This was not what they had come to the stadium to see. Their hearts went out to Damar, to his mother, to his family, to his teammates. One Bengals fan wrote with magic marker on the back of the sign he was carrying, “Pray for Buffalo #3. Pray for Hamlin.”

The officials stopped the game. The two head coaches, Sean McDermott of the Bills and Luc Taylor of the Bengals, embraced, talked with each other, and talked with the officials. Sean McDermott said, “I have to go to the hospital to be with Damar and his mother. I can no longer coach this game.” Luc Taylor heartily agreed that this was what Sean needed to do, and they could not continue the game. The players retreated to their locker rooms to be with themselves and with each other. It was quite apparent to Joe Buck and Troy Aikman that the game had to be suspended. None of the players could possibly continue to play not knowing if their teammate, their friend, their brother was alive or dead.

Suddenly, the game was no longer important. The score wasn't important. The standings weren't important. What was important was Damar Hamlin, this young man's life, his health, his recovery. What was important was his mother, his family, his friends. As Troy Aikman said, “This puts things in perspective.”

I would like to make two points about what happened this past Monday night. Or maybe more. But two in particular.

First, I was deeply touched that what happened to this young man brought everyone together. We became one: White--Black, Bengals--Bills, players--spectators, Protestants—Catholics--Muslims—Jews, probably even Republicans and Democrats (though I'm not sure about this)—we all came together in our care, our concern, our compassion for this young man and his family. Our hearts also went out to Tee Higgins. Even though he had done nothing wrong, he had to feel terrible about what happened. We all came together. For one brief moment, we all came together. It was touching. It was beautiful.

Then I thought, things like what happened to Damar Hamlin happen to many people. They happen to young people and old, men and women. They happen every single day in our state, in our country, and throughout the world. Why don't we care about these people as much as we care about Damar Hamlin?

In the moment, we all had feelings for Damar Hamlin. Where are our feelings for these other people? What about the civilians in Ukraine? In South Sudan? What about the women and girls in Afghanistan? What about people living in parts of our own country that have suffered from hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, and fires? What about the police officers who were attacked in New York City on New Year's Eve by a homegrown Islamic terrorist from Maine? What about the four young undergraduates at the University of Idaho who were recently stabbed to death? What we felt, what Darlene and I felt in that moment for Damar Hamlin, we should feel for all people and animals that are suffering.

The Buddhists call us to recognize and honor our interconnectedness, our interrelatedness, and the compassion for all sentient beings that accompanies this realization. I think we saw an example of that on Monday night. We realized that we are truly connected with each other on a very deep level, on a metaphysical level. If only we felt this, if only we experienced this more often than we do.

Think of what often happens when an adorable little four-year-old white girl is kidnapped or goes missing. It is all over the newspapers and television. We are riveted to the screen, to the news. What happens when an adorable little four-year-old Black girl is kidnapped or goes missing? It never makes the newspapers. There is no outpouring of caring and support across the country. Black people have made us aware of this pattern, this discrepancy. They ask us to consider what it means. Does it mean that Black lives don't matter, or that they don't matter as much? Does it mean that our care, our compassion, only reach so far?

My second point concerns the matter of prayer. On Monday night, every player and coach on both teams joined their hearts in prayer. The spectators in the stadium stood in prayer. The millions of people who were watching the game on television, people like Darlene and me, felt a prayer rise up within us. Everyone said a prayer. They did this spontaneously and naturally. Our prayer may have been something we said, or it may have been a feeling, a reaching out to God that arose from the movement of the Holy Spirit within us. But it was a prayer.

You know me. I am a thinking type. When I am confronted with strong feelings, my natural go-to defense is to think about what is happening. So, I know you will understand how I processed what I saw going on this past Monday night.

Approximately twenty years ago, a survey revealed the following:

1. 90% of people in America believe in a God of some kind.
2. 90% believe in the power of prayer, believe in the efficacy of intercessory prayer.

3. 40% have confidence in organized religion, in religious institutions.
4. 30% are active members of churches and attend church regularly.

When I read this survey, I was surprised that 90% of Americans believe in God. Then I realized that there are many different understandings of God. Some people think of God as their “Higher Power.” Some find their God in nature. Some believe there is “something else” behind this visible world, this world of space and time. And some believe in a God that is the object of belief and worship by adherents of an organized religion.

I was also surprised that 90% of us believe in the power of prayer, believe in the efficacy of intercessory prayer. To test this, over the space of several years I asked the students in my classes at Assumption College, “If you received word that your best friend had been in a terrible automobile accident, was in Intensive Care, and was hovering between life and death, what is the very first thing you would do?”

Well over 90% of the students said that they would immediately think, feel, or say a prayer. They would say, “God, please keep my friend alive!” “God, please help her!” I know that my survey was not valid because my sample was somewhat skewed—Assumption College is a Roman Catholic liberal arts college. Practically every student in that school grew up within some religious tradition, be it Roman Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu.

Okay. But what about the players on the two teams? What about all the spectators in the stadium? What about the millions of people who were watching the game on television? Did all of us grow up within a religious tradition? I think this is becoming increasingly rare, partially because of the answer to Question 3 in the survey—Do you have confidence in organized institutional religion? I think our young people have seen enough of the shadow side of organized religion to harbor serious doubt about whether they want to affiliate with a church, synagogue, temple, mosque, or a gurdwara. (I bet I caught you on that last one—a gurdwara is a building where Sikhs gather for worship. I just learned that this past week, so I am showing off a little.)

We bemoan the demise of organized religion. The total membership of mainline Protestant churches is decreasing every year. Attendance on Sunday mornings seems to lessen every year, certainly every decade. We bemoan the ascendance of our secular, materialistic society, the loss of a Sabbath. And yet . . . And yet . . . when we see what we saw this past Monday evening, when our hearts naturally and instinctively not only reach out to this young man, his mother, his family, his friends, his teammates, our hearts also naturally and instinctively reach out to God. So, apparently, no matter what the surveys say, we believe! We believe in God, and we believe in the power of prayer! As the psychologist of religion C. G. Jung has said, “The soul is naturally religious.”

By the way, Damar Hamlin is doing very well; he has made a miraculous recovery. As of Saturday evening, he was no longer intubated; he was breathing on his own; he was talking with family and his care team of physicians and nurses at Cincinnati University Hospital. He Facebooked his teammates, who cried and cheered. His neurological system is intact, and it seems he has a good chance of making a complete recovery. The physicians at Cincinnati University Hospital attribute it to the immediate intervention of the medical personnel that were present at Paycor Stadium and are present at every NFL game.

Of course, being a minister, I had another thought about how and why Damar has made such an amazing recovery.

There is another world, a realm beyond the realm of space and time. This world, this realm, which we could call the kingdom of God, or which we should probably call Mystery (with a capital “M”) gave rise to the world we inhabit and infuses it with its spirit. We are closer to this Mystery than we are to ourselves. It is nearer to us than we know. And it connects us with each other in a deep, in a caring, in a compassionate, in a loving way. I guess we could call this deep connection prayer.

Sometimes this prayer rises to our lips; sometimes we experience it as a feeling. Unfortunately, we are so busy with our mundane everyday life, that we forget that it exists, that we forget that it is always present as a resource within, between, and among us. However, we do turn to it in moments of extremity. As the war correspondent Ernie Pile probably said, “There are no atheists in a foxhole.” When our back is to the wall, we turn to God in prayer. And, as the Psalmist tells us, as Jesus tells us, as the apostle James tells us, when we do, God is there.

I can understand why so many people in our country and in other countries have turned their backs on organized religion. We have not only not done a good job of living and sharing the treasure that we have; out of our hubris, our inflation, our quest for power we have wrought evil upon our fellow human beings and upon nature. I am sorry that more people don’t go to church, especially churches like ours, open, affirming, welcoming churches that are humble enough to know that we don’t have the Truth, but we are committed both individually and as a community of faith to search for it.

I’m sorry more people don’t come to church because we who are members of this community of faith, those of us who have made a life-long commitment to this search, to this pilgrimage, have an advantage. We know there is a God, and we are constantly trying to deepen our relationship with this God. We strengthen this relationship every week; we draw strength and guidance from this relationship. We embrace the language of worship and prayer, the language of mystery, the symbols of transformation that are not only in our religious tradition;

they are within us. Someday, those who are not on this pilgrimage may discover what they're missing—the resources to help us both live this life fully and, at the same time, to prepare for our death.

When I watched what was unfolding this past Monday night, I was deeply touched. I was heartened by how quickly, how naturally, how instinctively, everyone turned to prayer. The following evening, on NFL Live, which is broadcast nationwide, Dan Orlovsky, a former NFL quarterback and current analyst for ESPN, said the following:

*People talk about offering thoughts and prayers for Damar. People say, "All we can do is pray." The Buffalo Bills said, "We believe in prayer."*

Then Dan said,

*It is in my heart that I need to pray. And so, I would like to say a prayer right now.*

Lauren Rutledge and the other analyst, a former football player whom I did not recognize, voiced their assent, and bowed their heads with Dan in prayer. Dan Orlovsky then prayed--openly—on national television. He said,

*God, we come to you in these moments that we don't understand, that are hard. Because we believe that you are God, and that coming to you and praying to you has impact.*

*We're sad; we're angry; we want answers. But some things are unanswerable. We just want to pray. We truly come to you and pray*

*for strength for Damar,*

*for healing for Damar,*

*for comfort for Damar,*

*To be with his family to give them peace.*

*If we didn't believe that prayer works, we wouldn't ask this of you, God.*

*I believe in prayer.*

*We believe in prayer.*

*We lift up Damar Hamlin's name in your name. Amen.*

It was, as you can tell from my voice, from my tears, another beautiful moment. It was a beautiful prayer. It was a heartfelt prayer. It was not eloquent or poetic; it was simple and powerful. It gave voice to what Dan and so many of us were feeling. And he said it on national television! I didn't know you were allowed to pray on national television.

When did we become afraid, embarrassed, self-conscious about praying? As you know, I may not be the most enlightened, most woke, most liberal person you know, but I aspire to be. I hate to discover that I agree with my brothers and sisters on the right, but is it possible that we liberal, super-sensitive, super-woke people, in our attempt to not give offense to anyone, have

thrown away our souls? Have thrown away our hearts? Have thrown away what we have that we need and that the world needs?

We in this church believe in the power of prayer. And I have a hunch, just a suspicion, that the prayers of the millions of people who reached out from the depth of their hearts to Damar Hamlin, made a difference in his recovery.

Deep down. Deep down, we all believe.

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