

PSALM 116:1-7

I love the Lord because he has heard my voice and my supplications. Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live. The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me, I suffered distress and anguish. Then I called on the name of the Lord: "O Lord, I pray, save my life!"

Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; our God is merciful. The Lord protects the simple. When I was brought low, he saved me. Return, O my soul, to your rest, for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you.

MARK 9:14-29

A great crowd was gathered around the disciples and some scribes were arguing with them. When the crowd saw Jesus, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. He asked his disciples, "What are you arguing about with them?"

Someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought you my son: he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so."

Jesus answered them, “You faithfulness generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me” And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell to the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth.

Jesus asked the father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And the father said, “From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water to destroy him. But if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.” Jesus said to him, “If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes.” Immediately the father of the child cried out, “I believe, help my unbelief!”

When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, “You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again!” After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out and the boy was like a corpse so that most of them said, “He is dead.” But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up and he was able to stand. When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, “Why could we not cast it out?” He said to them, “This kind can come out only through prayer.”

FLASHBACK

Psalm 116:1-7

Mark 9:14-29

It was just two weeks ago tonight when the images of a Buffalo Bills defensive back collapsed after making a tackle and lay prone on the field encircled by emergency personnel while players from both teams gathered in circles with tears running down their faces; many on their knees in prayer. All this with a stretcher and an ambulance waiting nearby. No one knew exactly what had happened, but everyone in attendance and those watching at home knew it was critical. The home fans who been standing and cheering the Bengals on only a moment ago were now standing in utter silence; their joy and enthusiasm evaporated in seconds. It was a scene that will be etched in our memories forever.

And now 14 days later, the media is still updating Damar's condition. During the entire first week, the local news outlets were scarcely reporting anything else. And it was also being headlined by the national media. People from all walks of life—children and adults, black people and white people, football fans and non fans alike gathered for vigils outside University Hospital. Donations on Go-Fund-Me exploded to over eight million dollars in just several days for Hamlin's charity which buys

Christmas gifts for disadvantaged children. Everyone was breathlessly awaiting news from his doctors. First, we were assured that he was blessedly alive; then that he was ventilated, but breathing on his own; and then finally that he had regained consciousness and was asking questions. “Did we win?” he wanted to know. We had all been praying and we all rejoiced when we learned that Damar was being discharged and sent back to a Buffalo Hospital. And now he is rehabbing both at home and at the Bills’ facilities. Miraculous!

How could we have not been affected by this? It truly transcended all of the petty squabbles we normally engage in. Democrats, Republicans and Independents all rose above arguing and pounding their partisan chests. It was a national phenomenon. It was a daily topic in all of our conversations and remains so today. Needless to say, there has been a lot going on here and it is worth our while to explore its spiritual implications.

Our scriptures for this morning almost eerily reflect what we have witnessed in the Hamlin event. In both narratives, death is close by and I ask you this: If you have ever been around death and dying, have you not experienced it as a profound emotional experience? Don’t you need to talk about it over and over? It’s as if repeating the story will purge it from

your inner world. For it grabs us at the deepest levels of our being because it is an encounter with the Void and the profound mystery of death itself. And like the psalmist, if we have been the one close to the edge, the relief and gratitude overwhelm us.

We all know this too. The grief we feel when we lose someone or when a Damar-like incident occurs causes Flashbacks to earlier experiences in our lives that we are never able to purge from our emotional bones. And there they will rest until jumping out causing us to relive the whole history over again.

I will give you a personal example. A few days after the Hamlin near tragedy, I was talking to my older son and he reminded me of something I believed I hadn't thought about for years. It occurred well over 30 years ago when he was seven or eight and I was coaching his Glendale youth soccer team. And we were involved in a scrimmage with the other Glendale team when one of my players—just like Damar—collapsed several yards in front of me. I ran to him and saw that his lips were turning blue and he was foaming at the mouth. The young player's name was Stewart and he was lucky because my assistant coach was doctor and one of the mothers from the other team was a pediatric ER physician. Stewart was in cardiac failure and they were there within seconds to apply CPR.

They revived him by the time the ambulance and his parents arrived. It turned out that he had a congenital heart defect which they could treat with medication. And talk about lightning striking twice, his sister was pulled off the bottom of the swimming pool the next summer and also revived. She too had the defect.

For me, it was one of the most emotional experiences of my life. When his parents arrived, I held Stewart in my arms and handed him over to them. And when Sam, my now 40 year old son reminded me of this incident, the Flashback was immediate and the tears began rolling from eyes. It was there in the closet I thought I had locked and out it leaped!

This is exactly what happened in our passage from Mark. The boy Jesus healed probably had epilepsy and after Jesus commanded the demon to come out of him and never return, the young fellow was presumed dead...until Jesus took his hand and brought him to his feet. And every person in that crowd which had gathered experienced precisely what everyone at Paycor Stadium and those watching at home felt. It's universal and it can change you.

In reflecting upon this, I want to make two points to take away. First, grief has a life of its own and we cannot simply shrug it off or push it into a remote corner of our lives. No, we have to deal with it. When the tears

come, don't hold them back. We have to talk about it and process what it means in our lives. If we don't do this, it goes deeper inside of us and can lead to both emotional and physical problems. Events like this bring it all back and when that happens, we must talk about it again and let the backwash of tears flow once more.

The second point is that the outpouring of support that Damar received from maybe millions of people bears witness to the fact that no matter how divided we think we are in this country, these prayers that we offered united us at a level that rose way above all of the garbage that makes us enemies with our neighbors who dare to hold different political beliefs. There is nothing that really prevents us from being brothers and sisters other than our own prejudices and pettiness.

When the disciples asked Jesus why they couldn't exorcise the demon, Jesus answered that this type of illness could only be healed by prayer. It seems as if that applies to our partisan and unholy struggles as well. It is indeed by prayer that we can be in partnership with our friends and our perceived enemies to work together in solving the world's dangerous problems. Let us not only pray for peace, let us act in peace.

Reverend Thomas Dunlap January 22, 2023

