

“The Church Goes To Green Bay.”

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

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Very Recently while I was on vacation, Salem UCC’s senior pastor, the Rev. Jim Hoppert, took me with him as his guest and together we made a pilgrimage to watch the Green Bay Packers in their training camp at the Hutson Center, right next door to Lambeau Field. Because Rev. Hoppert and I both share a love of sports, he didn’t have to twist my arm when he extended the invitation to me. I was only too happy to accompany him to the old stomping grounds of Vince Lombardi, of Bart Starr, and the site of the famous “Ice Bowl” of 1967!

We took the tour of Lambeau Field, even walking down in the tunnel at field-level.....past the media room and the Packers locker room....and we walked through the very tunnel that the players themselves walk through just before they are introduced and go running onto the field.

We toured the Hall of Fame, too.....taking in the exhibits of memorabilia representative of glory (and gory) days gone by.

But for our purposes here this morning, I would like to tell you about what I observed when we saw the Packer players going through their paces in their summer training camp.

It was especially interesting to watch the young rookies giving it everything they had, gunning on every play....each one hoping to still be on the team’s roster come Labor Day. They all looked so young!

(I know...some of you think that I look young! Well, just go get a close up look at an NFL player and compare and contrast him with the middle age guy in your pulpit and you’ll see what I mean!)

The Packers were on the practice field there at the Hutson Center, all decked out in their yellow gym shorts. It was a morning practice, so no pads -- just helmets. The offense wore the white road jerseys, while the defense wore their green and gold home jerseys.

I saw Donald Driver go running downfield at supposedly “half speed” -- but it didn’t look like half speed to me. I’ve seen race horses run *slower* than that! Aaron Rodgers threw Driver a pass that resembled something like a rocket being launched into space.....and Driver caught it...making it look so easy. Then, with the football tucked under his arm, Donald Driver went trotting triumphantly back to the line of scrimmage....but by running next to the fence where the “rail birds” (fans) were watching, and flashing us his smile and hamming it up a bit. He sure knows how to work a crowd!

This was Green Bay Packers training camp, and every single move made by every Packer player did not go unnoticed by the fans -- or the coaches. For two whole work out sessions each day, every player in a Packer uniform was living in a gold fish bowl.....under the constant gaze and scrutiny of everyone present. Evidently, training camp is a big deal.

It **is** a big deal! But now let me ask you: Once training camp is over, is that all there is? The Packers all disappear?

Of course not! Because it is then time for the regular season to begin! All of the pain and sweat of training camp comes to fruition when the Packers suit up into their game uniforms and walk out of the locker room, go down the tunnel, and are introduced as they go running onto Lambeau field.

You see....there **is** life after training camp! It's called "the regular season." Without the regular season, the whole idea of training camp is pointless.

But here is what we need to see: While the Packers were going through all of the strain and pain and uncertainty of training camp, what did they have all around them? Watching them with great expectation and hope? Cheering them on?

They were surrounded by a "great cloud of witnesses." Some fans dating back to the Dan Devine era. (Remember him?) Other fans who might have even been at the Ice Bowl. They were also surrounded by coaching staff and administrative staff, perhaps one or two of them even left over from the Mike Holmgren era. I've heard that sometimes even retired Packer players show up on the sidelines and watch with great hope, this new breed on the field.

While the players were on the practice field being prepared for the after-training-camp-life....the regular season....they were constantly surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses representing many, many years of Green Bay Packers history. And...this great cloud of witnesses was hoping for the success of every single player on that practice field. This was a friendly crowd, not a hostile one. Write that thought down on your memory banks.

Remember my sermon from last week...*This is Faith...?* By faith, Noah built an ark. By faith, Abraham packed up his camels and donkeys and went where God sent him -- even though he didn't have a clue about the neighborhood he was moving into! The author of the book of Hebrews is telling us about all of these great people of faith.

Then we pick up in chapter twelve, verses one and two where he writes: *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.* (Hebrews 12:1,2) (NRSV)

Just picture this.....we are *surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses!* You see, this mortal life....this life that we are in now...is training camp. It is where our souls are being prepared for eternity. That's why it often hurts so much....and why there is so much uncertainty in it. That's why life is full of aches and pains and bruises. That is why we get tired and discouraged.

Each one of us is a player out on the practice field....and we are experiencing each of the many triumphs and disappointments that go along with this training camp we call "life."

But through all of it, we are being watched and cheered on by a "cloud of witnesses." Moses and Daniel, Isaiah and Jeremiah, and all of the other prophets. By Abraham and Sarah, by Isaac and Jacob. By the Apostle's Peter and Paul. By our parents, our grandparents, and great-grandparents. We are surrounded by the saints all across the ages, each of whom is pulling for us to get through life and into the glory of eternity.

You see, there *is* life after training camp! There *is* life after life! I haven't been there yet and neither have any of you, but I am confident of its existence. Logic and reason demand it, as does the hope of the Holy Gospel.

This is not a text for the skeptic, or for the agnostic. This is a text for believers. The author of Hebrews is addressing the already-convinced. The regenerate. The biblical writer is making a very clear-cut case that the church on earth is engaged in something that is real, and that those who have gone before us watch us from the sidelines.

There was a special segment on National Public Radio sometime back. It was a collection of sound effects gathered by Abinadi Meza, an artist based in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Meza had been in a bar in Dublin, Ireland. A man at the bar contended that Ireland was the home of "the world's loudest bat." Quite a boast. Meza was fascinated. The world's loudest bat. Here was the problem, according to his Irish bar mate. The bat screeches at a decibel level which the human ear cannot detect. Dogs and some other animals can hear it. Special scientific devices can measure it, but there is a range of sound that humans cannot hear, and this bat's screech fell in that range.

If humans could hear the bat, contended this man, it would be like having a jumbo jet taking off next to our ears. The man's testimony was enough to send Meza out with electronic gear to try to find this bat, and capture its sound. Meza was not successful. However, using his special equipment, he was able to record all kinds of other annoying sounds around Dublin usually filtered out by our limited range of hearing. That is, they were sounds that were normally outside the range of pitches audible to human ears. He played a collection of these specially recorded sounds on the program, "All Things Considered." This variety of high-pitched whines and screeches undoubtedly caused many listeners of NPR to be grateful they were not able to hear everything their dog hears.

Here's the point: Just because we cannot hear a sound does not mean that it does not exist. The fact that we cannot hear it says more about our limitations than it does about the sound.

So it is with things of the spirit. Just because something cannot be verified empirically, does not mean that it doesn't exist. (1)

My whole point here this morning is that I'm hoping you'll leave this sanctuary feeling encouraged.... believing that we are surrounded by the Church Triumphant, all of whom are pulling for us....and that we need not fear our own mortality.

Remember when I said that the Packer players at training camp are surrounded by a friendly crowd, not a hostile one? So are we! All of those saints who have gone on before us are in the bleachers of our lives rooting for us. So are the angels of heaven.

The day will come when our "training camp" will end. But take heart. The best is yet to come! We will leave our mortal practice facility and walk across the parking lot to the eternal stadium. We will "suit up" in our resurrection body, and then we will walk down that tunnel toward the bright light of a new day. We will hear the Lord call our name as we go running out of the tunnel and on to the playing field of heaven. Amen.

(1). Illustration by King Duncan