



Check-In and Check-Up



A Sermon By
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Grace Episcopal Church
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There's three minutes remaining in the championship game of Luther Bowl (a flag football tournament for about 12 seminaries from around the East Coast). The Virginia Theological Seminary Fighting Friars are down two touch-downs it's fourth down and we have the ball on the 20 yard line. The ball is hiked. I run around in the end zone pretending that I knew what the play was and I see the quarterback throw the ball. I watch as it whizzes past my friend Wesley's hands and I knew the pass wasn't meant for me, but without thinking I dive, catch the ball and do a really fancy roll in the end zone as my team goes crazy. We've made it a game. Our defense takes the field and on the first play they sack the quarterback in the end zone. Safety! This means that all we have to do is score one more time and we will be the champions! The offense hustles back on the field... and the time ran out while we were on our 2nd down with 5 yards to go. 2nd place.

As we slowly walk back to the cars from the historic fields at Gettysburg where the tournament takes place I begin to feel my body ache. Once I sit down in the car and we start the two hour drive back to Alexandria I can feel a specific pain in my right knee and a sore left collarbone. I didn't feel any of these pains while I was busy playing and running around the field, but once I slow down and stop my body can communicate with me to let me know its hurt.

Isn't that the often the case when we slow down? How many of us have had the experience of getting sick while on or after vacation? Or after a busy time at work or the end of a semester. Often times a couple doesn't realize that their marriage has been struggling until after their children have left the home and their lives aren't so busy. Sometimes we are just so busy we don't realize that we haven't spoken to a loved one or family member in months. Sometimes we don't even realize when we've drifted away from God.

While slowing down can be scary because there's a level of unexpectedness it is so very important for us to do on a regular basis, to check in with ourselves, to check in with each other and to check in with God.

In our Old Testament reading today we find the prophet Isaiah speaking on the behalf of the people of Israel. He says to God, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence." They are desperately missing the presence of God in their lives. The Israelites in Jerusalem have just returned from being displaced by the Babylonians and have returned to a city that was under Persian occupation. There's constant conflict about status, social standing and political and religious authority. The Israelites feel helpless and powerless.

They also acknowledge that they have sinned and broken covenant with God and that is part of the reason why God feels so distant, it is not God who has shifted, but the Israelites. In verse 5 Isaiah states, "You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned because you hid yourself we transgressed." If we look deeper into Isaiah we learn that the sin that Isaiah is referring to here is the unjust dealings of one another the lack of harmony in the Israelites common life together and the lack of care for the widow and the orphan. What's lovely here is that the Israelites know that God is good and just and merciful. They know they have sinned, but they also know that God is the one in control not them. Towards the end of the passage today we have the beautiful words - "Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are the work of your hand". Isaiah acknowledges that God is the one who gives meaning to our lives and that God also is not inclined to leave us in our sins and iniquities, but constantly recognizes us as God's creations made in the divine image.

We in the Episcopal Church let alone in America as a whole really don't like to pause and take time to look at our sin. If we do, it is likely to be on an individual level rather than a corporate level. We don't take the time as a community to see where we are failing, who is falling through the cracks and where are we falling short in our covenant with God. Our covenant looks different than the Israelites because of Jesus' fulfillment but at the heart it still reflects God's truest desires for us, Love God with everything you are and Love your neighbor as yourself. We don't like to view ourselves as sinful and cut off from God, but how do we know if we are deeply connected to God if we don't check in? If we don't slow down and stop... otherwise we are pretty darn good at fooling ourselves that we've got it together and that we are walking rightly with God.

We have got to check ourselves.

This is what is great about the season of Advent, of which today is the first Sunday. It is our opportunity for our annual check in. We can ask ourselves how is my relationship with God? How is my relationship with my neighbors and how are my relationships with my family members. If you're a keen observer you may want to challenge me on a this approach to Advent... you may say, Anna, aren't you describing Lent? Lent is when we talk about sin... not Advent, advent is when we get ready for Christmas... the joyful celebration of Jesus' birth.

You may be right that that is what the church likes to often brand Advent as, but the reality is that we are not waiting for the Messiah to come like Israelites. We are not waiting to be redeemed from our sin and death. We are not waiting for God's incarnational son, Jesus Christ. Jesus has already come. Jesus has already redeemed the world, God's creation and us. It's already been done. We are saved from sin and death at this very moment.

Yet, Advent is still about waiting as our Gospel message for today points out. The Gospel of Mark says, "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father," and it closes with the command to "Keep Awake." We are not waiting for the birth of a baby in a manger, because that has been fulfilled, but we are waiting for the second coming of Christ which has been promised throughout the New Testament and through the many apocalyptic readings we've had over the past several weeks. Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead ... and it is here that we need to make sure that we are in right relationship with one another and with God.

Advent is a glorious season, despite all this talk of sin, one of my favorite and I urge you to find away to make this advent season unique. Use your advent wreaths as opportunities to check in with yourself, with God and with your family as you light your candles each night. Take time to do a deep inventory of your relationship with God and your community, perhaps maybe even taking an opportunity to engage in the gift of reconciliation which the Episcopal Church offers, but is not widely used. Talk to Amanda, Richard or Andrew if you are interested in something like that. As busy as this season can be in our society I urge you to find some time to slow down and to stop. To take that time to let your body tell you where you may be hurt. Listen to your body, your mind and your soul. Engage in this time to check in and remember that we are clay and God is the potter... God is absolutely able to mold us into something beautiful if we allow ourselves to rest in the Father's hands.

Amen.