

## **“Look Busy”**

*Reading: Romans 13:10-14; Matthew 24:36-51*

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One summer while I was in seminary I worked at the West Glacier Mercantile, a small grocery store just outside the western gate of Glacier National Park. If you're ever in the area, stop by and tell them hello from me, and I guarantee no one will have any idea who you're talking about. As I said, it was a small grocery store, so pretty much everyone did whatever needed to be done, so we all ran the till and stocked the shelves and cleaned the floors. But sometimes there weren't any customers around, and everything had been cleaned, and everything was pretty much stocked. Then what do you do to fill your time? You're still on the clock, still getting paid, but don't really have any work to do. I can remember sometimes sweeping the floors again though they didn't need it, or maybe going back to restock the coolers even though I'd done it a few hours ago. Most of the time, though, I remember going up and down the aisles and making sure all the products on the shelves were lined up and facing the right way. But even that only takes so long, and I can remember some awfully slow nights of standing around waiting for something to happen, trying to look busy while I ran out the clock.

Of all the seasons of the year, I think maybe Advent is the season above all others that calls us to be aware of the passage of time. We often lament the passage of time during autumn as the leaves change and the woods begin to sleep and we're keenly aware of the days slipping into winter. But Advent is different. It's not just that time is passing, it's that time is taking us somewhere, and as we journey we are called to reflect on what we are doing with those days. Advent is specifically about waiting. In the springtime we think about planting and cleaning and new life, in summer we think about growing plants and beaches and vacations and fun, in the fall we think about harvest and hot cocoa. We tend to think about our activity throughout the seasons – and that's true of the seasons of the church, too – but Advent is specifically about waiting.

This is a season in which the goal is in sight and we're clearly on our way to get there, but we're not there yet and in fact we're encouraged not to rush to that goal. We have an eye toward the celebratory feast of Christmas, the remembrance of Jesus' birth, but we also have an eye toward the great feast that will mark the return of Jesus one day. We're waiting for both, and we don't rush either one because our waiting tells us so much about our journey of faith. If we can't wait on God, we don't really trust God. That's what faith really is: it's not blind belief regardless of evidence, it's waiting, because we trust in the character and power of our God enough to wait on Him rather than rushing to find some other option for our hope. That's a far cry from our world, where we stampede on Black Friday and then complain loudly about the commercialization of Christmas and the appearance of Christmas decorations before Halloween. Advent is a much-needed antidote to the world's gluttony and lust for immediate, constant spectacle. And so we wait.

But it's not just about running out the clock. Waiting and killing time are not the same thing. Our waiting as people of faith has a certain character to it: we don't wait because we have nothing better to do and nowhere else to be, we wait because we are expecting the coming of our Lord. During Advent we proclaim the first coming of Jesus at Christmas, but we also proclaim His imminent return. We wait with a purpose.

Maybe you've heard or seen the phrase on a bumper sticker: "Jesus is coming back; look busy." I assume it's intended to be satirical, but it's not completely inaccurate. We're called to wait with a purpose. We don't sit and twiddle our thumbs, saying that there's nothing to do because Jesus is coming back and He'll sort it all out for us. We don't bustle around filling our time with busy work, merely *looking* busy, which is always the temptation before Christmas as we have decorating and baking and celebrating to do. We're called to wait with a purpose. Don't just look busy, *be* busy.

Jesus had something to say about this, as we read in our reading from Matthew 24 for today. It's not a very Christmassy passage, but it's very appropriate for Advent because it's all about the arrival of Jesus and the setting right of all things. Just before the verses we read, Jesus talks about wars, earthquakes, persecution, false prophets, sudden terror, and the passing away of heaven and earth. He's talking about the sorts of things that will happen before His return at the end of the age. It's tempting to make a list of the sorts of things He says and then pull out a newspaper to see how many of them we can check off, but that's exactly the opposite of what Jesus is trying to tell us to do. After He gives us the list of signs, He tells us that no one knows when the hour will be, so don't be deceived by people who claim they do. It will happen suddenly and unexpectedly, so don't waste time trying to read the tea leaves or making elaborate charts to figure it out ahead of time. The point is that pretty much every time could fit the bill – there are always wars and rumors of wars, and God's people are always being persecuted somewhere – so rather than spending time prognosticating and predicting when the end will be, get ready for it.

Stay busy, in other words. Don't think that you can waste time for now because the signs aren't quite right yet, so we still have time to waste. No, stay busy doing the work God calls you to do. It is not like a slow night at that grocery store, where the work is all done and you know what time your shift is over, so you can just kill time until you clock out. We're not sitting around waiting, we're *busy* waiting. The "faithful and wise servant" is not the one sitting around doing nothing when the master returns, nor the one sitting around debating when the master will return, nor the one off doing their own thing instead of the master's work, nor the one off having a good time at the master's expense, thinking the master won't find out. No, the "faithful and wise servant" is the one busily doing the work the master left them to do until the master returns, whenever that might be. Jesus is coming back, be busy.

So what's the difference between being busy and merely looking busy? You probably already know, if you're honest with yourself. Another job I had years ago during summers in college was to work with the engineers at a furniture factory, and one of the main things we did was to follow the various models of furniture down the assembly line and try to get accurate measurements of each type of material that went into them so that the company would have more accuracy in ordering and pricing and so on. So I ended up spending a lot of time walking around with a tape measure and a clipboard, and let's face it, as a college student I learned pretty quickly that I could almost always look busy if I had a clipboard. I did the job they hired me to do, don't get me wrong, but again, sometimes I ran out of work to do, and I'm sure I'm not the first person to realize that taking notes on a clipboard almost always makes you look like a person who knows what they're doing. Contrast that with something like a hammer: you can't just walk around carrying a hammer all day and expect everyone to think you're busy doing real work. At some point you'd better pound a few nails, or it will quickly become clear that your hammer is just for show. Don't just look busy, be busy. Don't spend your days

watching the skies, looking at the signs trying to figure out when He's coming back; recognize that the signs are already here and be busy working for God's kingdom now because His return is imminent.

I love the irony in the fact that it's also in Matthew's gospel that we read the story of the Magi, the Gentile wise men from faraway lands who did in fact literally watch the skies. It's one of the favorite stories we tell during Advent and Christmas, of how sometime after Jesus was born, probably a year or two, a group of wise men from the East followed the signs in the heavens showing that a king had been born. When they arrive in the capital city of Jerusalem looking for Jesus, they instead find King Herod, who tries to deceive them into being his spies to find out where this threat is located. But the wise men listen to God's instructions rather than Herod's, so they and the child Jesus make their escape from Herod's wrath. In the biblical story, the Magi are themselves a sign of things to come: they are the first representatives of non-Jews coming to worship Jesus, a sign of the gathering of the nations together into God's family. So their response to Jesus is an example of what it means to recognize the signs that God is working: get moving, come to Jesus, bring your gifts to Him and lay them at His feet, extend the invitation to those who are far away, and listen to God's words rather than the commands of humans.

So why don't we do that? Why don't we stay busy doing God's work while we wait? Maybe we don't stay busy because we don't think there's anything worthwhile to do. Maybe we think the work is all done, and we look around us and don't see anything that needs doing, so we just walk around with a clipboard and doodle. But maybe the reality is that if we really looked in some of the unseen corners of our world – unseen to us, maybe, but not really that well hidden – maybe we would find a lot more work for our hammers than we realized. Maybe we would find a lot of our neighbors in need of love and hope. Maybe we would find a lot of people crying out for justice. Maybe we would find a lot of forgotten people aching to be remembered by someone.

Or maybe we don't stay busy because we aren't sure if the boss is looking, or if the boss cares. Maybe, like that wicked servant, we think it's been so long since Jesus arrived the first time that we've got plenty of time before He returns, so what I do now doesn't really matter because I've got time to get things right. But no one knows that day or hour, whether it's the hour of Jesus' return or the hour of your death. This gets right to the question of faith: do I really believe that Jesus is coming back? Do I really believe in the power of God? Do I really believe He will do what He says He will do, in my life and through my life and in the lives of others? Because if I do, then I will be busy doing His work.

Or maybe we don't stay busy because we're exhausted and overwhelmed, and the thought of being busy doing God's work is honestly too much for us. Maybe we do see the work and we do want to be faithful to Jesus' call, and we don't want to waste time with busy work, but the real work just seems too big and I don't know where to start. I can't solve all the world's problems, so instead I run myself ragged filling my time with Christmas busy-ness. The world excels at burdening us with unreachable expectations, and sometimes the church does the same. But while the work Jesus calls us to may be a challenge, and while it certainly requires more from us than we have to give, it does not require more than God will supply. He might indeed call you to give everything you have, but He will give you far more than you have lost. Being overwhelmed and exhausted and confused is hardly rare among God's people. I don't know anyone who has endless energy, neverending enthusiasm, and all the answers. But maybe what we need instead is to simplify our expectations and our schedules.

Maybe we need to cut out some of the ambitions we have and replace them with Jesus' way. Maybe we need to force ourselves to truly rest and listen to what God is actually saying to us. Maybe God will indeed call us to some faraway land to save millions of lives, but maybe more likely He will first call us to show a little more love to the people right in front of us.

The reality is that we live most of our lives in this Advent-like state, waiting for our faith to become sight, and so we might as well practice waiting well. Be busy about God's work. Be busy walking the path of Jesus. He doesn't call any of us to save the world, or even to save one life. That's His job. He calls us instead to practice love to our neighbors and to give of ourselves to be witnesses to God's goodness in our lives. He calls each of us to point others to Him through our own lives so that He can transform them. Jesus is coming soon: be busy.



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