

## “Jesus is Coming—Look Busy!”

Sermon: Year C, Pentecost 23, Proper 28, Lectionary 33

Texts: 2 Thessalonians 3:6–13, Luke 21:5–19, Isaiah 65:17–25

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May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. AMEN

Remember when we were kids in school, and the teacher would leave the room, and everybody except the most serious and studious kids in the class would begin slacking off as soon as she walked out the door? There were a few of us who would keep working—and yes, I was usually one of *those* kids—either because we loved school so much that we didn’t want to stop, or because we feared the teacher so much we were afraid we would get in trouble! And one kid would get posted at the door to warn us when the teacher was coming back—“Hey, she’s coming! Get busy!”—and we’d all suddenly be back in our chairs, toiling away at whatever it was we had been assigned to do while she was out of the room.

There’s an Internet meme that picks up on that same idea, but aimed at Christians. It says, “Jesus is coming soon—look busy!” Today’s reading from Second Thessalonians fits right in with this. It’s easy to hear “Anyone unwilling to work should not eat” and hear it as some kind of call to the Protestant work ethic, or as a condemnation of socialism, or to misuse it to criticize and condemn those who are without work or who aren’t able to work for some reason. But that’s not what it’s about at all.

You see, in the church in Thessalonica, a “teacher out of the room” situation had sprung up. As soon as the Apostle Paul had left after helping get the church established, people had started slacking off and behaving badly. Apparently this congregation, as other congregations in the early days of the Church, looked after the wellbeing of all of its members, making sure that all were fed, all were clothed, all were nursed when sick, all were sheltered. They watched out for one another in tough times. Those who were poor contributed what they could, and those who were wealthy contributed from their abundance. (Interestingly enough, did you know that Immanuel once had its own health insurance fund? I found a book from the early days, long before the Social Security safety net was dreamed of, where people would make monthly contributions so health care could be provided for members in times of need. That was only a little over 100 years ago.)

The Thessalonian Christians had a deep belief that Christ was going to return almost immediately. There was a great sense of urgency about this Kingdom of God that was breaking into this world, a sense of urgency about preparing for the new way things were going to be, and so the way they cared for one another and for their neighbors was for them a foretaste of what the Kingdom of God was going to look like, that time described in the passage from Isaiah that we heard a few moments ago.

That inbreaking Kingdom was what drove them to work so hard for one another’s good. But it became part of the problem, as well. Some of the believers in that congregation were so convinced that Jesus was coming back within weeks or months that they quit their jobs so they could sit and wait. Those folks were like the old saying I’ve cited before: “They were so heavenly minded they were no earthly good.” Instead of contributing to the welfare of the faith community and to the good works that they were doing for one another and for those in need in the wider community, they began living off the labor of the others in the congregation. It became all about them and Jesus, and they thought they didn’t have to do anything productive anymore. They had become weary in doing what was right. And in their idleness, they started to become busybodies... they started meddling in other members’ lives, they started criticizing the work that the others were continuing to do, they became gossips, stirring up trouble in the assembly, provoking resentment from those who were still working, and criticism from those outside the church who found this scandalous. So Paul had to write them to urge them to get back to doing what they had been called to do, both for their own good as a community and so they would set a good example for the world of their love and care for one another and for their neighbors.

Some 1900 years later, we have lost much of that sense of urgency that drove the early Church. We tend not to focus as much on Christ’s imminent return—though that sense of kingdom urgency is something I believe we need to recover. Even so, we’re maybe not so very different from the Thessalonians. Maybe our problem is at the opposite extreme. Where the Thessalonians were quitting their day jobs and sitting idle, waiting for Jesus, we instead throw ourselves, body and soul, *into* our day jobs and all of our other “busy-ness”: our clubs, our workout routines, all of those things we think are so vital. We use up all our energy elsewhere.

So, when we come to church, we want to *stop* working—and that’s where we end up like the Thessalonians. It’s easy for us to put our priority on all those other things we’re doing, that we’ve somehow convinced ourselves are the most important things in our lives, the central things, and when we get to church, we want to just sit and have it be “Jesus and me.” Church becomes the place where we get to be idle for awhile, where we can just sit and enjoy God’s presence, and then we leave, thinking that loving God is all that is required.

But remember that Jesus said there were two great commandments: The first is to love God with all your heart and soul and mind, and the second is like unto it: Love your neighbor as yourself. When we gather to worship, when we pray, we are tending to that first commandment, and that’s great. That is vital, and life-giving. But it can’t stop there. It can’t all be about “Jesus and me,” that vertical relationship between God and myself. It must also be about that second commandment, that horizontal relationship, that love for those alongside me and those out in the wider world. And there can be nothing passive about that relationship. Jesus makes it very clear: We are called to be servants to one another and to our neighbors, and we’re called to be stewards of what God has gifted us with. Christianity is not a spectator sport. It is a path of service and commitment and yes, work. It is a path of stewardship of all that God has given to us: our financial resources as well as our time and talents and labor. Our love for God, and God’s love for us, fuels our love for our neighbor, and that love is demonstrated in giving and service. And that love is what will build the world that God envisions for us. But Jesus warns that it will not be easy. That kingdom will not arrive without conflict and hardship. But it will arrive. And so we work for it not out of fear of Christ’s return and the kingdom’s arrival, but out of sheer joy in what will be.

There is much work to be done—and not just busy work. Yet the work of the Kingdom and the work of the assembly ends up all too often being done by the same handful of people, with resources that are stretched to the max. I know how much many of us are giving already, and how hard so many of you are working. But some folks could easily reach the burnout stage. They need more help—they need help from all of us. How much more could we be doing to transform and energize this community and to change our world if we each seriously and faithfully committed to pray for this assembly and its work and mission for even five or ten minutes a day? How much more could we do if every one of us sought out even one task, one ministry that needs to be done, and supported it with our money, time and talents? There is work for all ages, for all abilities.

I’d like to see us get better at matching people up with the needs, and to get better at encouraging and inviting one another into ministry. Some of you may not be as active simply because no one has ever invited you to get involved. We need to deepen our relationships with one another, to learn more about the gifts God has given each of us, to share our stories with one another. Do you know about websites, or could you be trained to keep one updated? Can you serve at Café Immanuel, or help set up or take down the rooms for Farmers’ Market? Can you greet people warmly at Farmer’s Market, or converse with them at the advocacy table? Can you repair things or build things? Can you paint walls? Can you design posters for events or to call people’s attention to needs? Can you teach children new skills or knowledge? Can you teach people about health or nutrition or first aid? Do you have skills for organizing information? Can you make phone calls to invite people to events? Can you cook? Do you have gifts for hospitality and welcome? Can you write cards for those who need encouragement? The list goes on and on, and there’s something there each of us can do, no matter what our limitations may be. God is calling each of us to worship, work, and witness. How is God calling you to work to participate in the inbreaking kingdom of God that will someday be realized in its fulness?

Now, I want you to hear me very carefully. My purpose is not to browbeat you, or to shame you. My role is more like the kid who is posted as a sentry at the door to remind you all that the teacher is coming back, to encourage you to be busy and focused. I am urging you lovingly, with a concern for your growth and your own spiritual wellbeing, and a concern for the spiritual wellbeing and growth of this community of faith. This isn’t about doing good works in order to win God’s favor. This is about responding to the love that God has already shown us, and extending that love to others, so we can be used by God to help bring about that incredibly beautiful vision that Isaiah describes, of a community where people are not in distress, where infants don’t die because of lack of health care, where no one’s labor is in vain, where there is no violence or destruction, where there is such peace that the wolf and the lamb can eat together. That is the urgent and compelling vision to which we are called to bring all that we are, all that we have: money, talents, and time. So, sisters and brothers: Hey! The Kingdom is coming...let’s get busy! AMEN