

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
November 29, 2020
Sermon by Pastor Bart Brauer
Be busy watching

—Mark 13:32-37

Wouldn't you agree that one of the hardest things to do is fight sleep? When your eyes want to close, your will may want them to stay open, but your eyes want to close. So you tell yourself, "I just need to stay awake for ten more minutes; I can do ten minutes." Maybe you can. But what if you don't know how long you have to stay awake? You're waiting for something, and you don't know when it's going to happen. It could be ten minutes, it could be half an hour, it could be half a day, and you cannot afford to miss it. You just don't know when. If it's hard to fight sleep, wouldn't you agree it's even harder to fight sleep for an indefinite amount of time?

Think of how hard it was for the disciples Peter, James, and John to fight sleep in the Garden of Gethsemane. Even though their Lord Jesus, visibly shaken and overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death, had pleaded with them at the outset to stay and keep watch with him. Even though Jesus had told them the first time he found them sleeping to watch and pray so they would not fall into temptation. Their eyes were heavy, and they lost the fight against sleep three times in a row. Letting their Lord down. Putting their own souls into deadly peril as the forces of darkness, including a betrayer from their midst, were about to invade the garden to destroy their Lord and, if possible, them too.

Jesus tells us all to stay awake. That is his first message to us in a brand new church year. Two days before Jesus stepped into that garden, he spoke a message for all his disciples until the end of time. *Be on guard! Be alert! Do not be found sleeping! Keep watch!* These urgent calls to us from Jesus are at the end of a whole chapter where Jesus has us looking at the events that led up to his coming again at the end of the world.

Let's look through that chapter, Mark chapter 13. Jesus began by talking about the beginning of pains. Not the end of the world yet, but the signs that lead up to the end. Many deceivers come supposedly in Jesus' name and deceive many people away from the true Christian faith. There are wars. Nation is pitted against nation and kingdom against kingdom, causing both civil unrest and international clashes. There are earthquakes in various places, not to mention other natural disasters. There are famines. Aren't all these things happening in our generation, as these have been happening more or less in the generations before us? These are the beginning of pains that tell you the end is on the way.

Things get difficult for Christians. They get arrested and put on trial. They get punished. They get persecuted. But the Lord sees these difficulties as opportunities for Christians to witness to the world before the end comes. Jesus assures Christians the Holy Spirit will give them the words to say at the critical times. Because, as Jesus says, the gospel must first be preached to all nations. Let no Christians underestimate the pressure that will be brought to bear on them. Jesus talks of betrayals and rebellions within families, even killings. Jesus talks of the collective hatred of all people being directed at Christians, so it will be necessary to stand firm to the end to be saved.

Jesus speaks of distress and tribulation so severe that nothing will have compared to it before and nothing will compare to it again. Christians are not spared from that distress and tribulation. They are right in the middle of it. In fact, the distress and tribulation are aimed at them, as false Christs and false prophets bring out every trick they have to try to deceive the elect and get them damned, if that were possible. It is so bad that the Lord cuts short the days, brings a rapid end, to spare the elect and save them. How bad does it have to be for the Lord to take such drastic action on behalf of his people?

Then the end comes, with the breakdown of all God's creation, including the extinguishing of all created light, the sun, the moon, the stars, to be replaced with the great power and glory of the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, who suddenly appears and comes in the clouds. He sends out his angels, and they gather his elect from every point on the compass and bring them to the Lord who graciously chose them to be his own. So the Lord and his elect and his angels will be together forever.

This is what's happening. This is what will happen. Jesus has laid it out for us in Mark chapter 13. He closes the chapter by saying, *"No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come...I say to everyone: 'Watch!'"*

Surely we all want to stay awake and not fall asleep on the Lord. We want to stay alert, stand firm, and be saved. So how do we do what he is telling us to do? We could summarize it under the theme: Be busy watching. Be busy, watching. It's both.

Not just be busy. We've been busy before. It used to be one of the favorites expressions out of our mouth, sometimes even spoken with pride. "I'm so busy." But I can say that in the last eight months, I've heard that coming out of people's mouths less. "Hey, can I give you a call?" "Oh sure, I'll be available." "Hey, can you make a virtual

meeting this week?” “Oh sure, just let me know, I’ll be able to make it.” Not that there’s nothing to do, but maybe a number of the things we used to jam our days with and race around after just aren’t as available to us right now. As the COVID situation hopefully improves and we return to some normalcy, should our goal be to return to all the same things that were keeping us busy before? Is that the normalcy Jesus wants for us? He warns against that earlier in the gospel of Mark: “Others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.” We are fully capable of busying ourselves to death. Perhaps part of the purpose behind COVID has been to give us a kind of reset, a look at reestablishing priorities in life and being busy in the right way.

Don’t just be watching either. The Lord does not tell us about the things leading up to the end and about the end itself so we can buy a ticket, sit back, and watch the show. That’s what the prophet Jonah tried to do. Jonah was not on board with the Lord’s gospel mission to save the great city of Nineveh. Jonah didn’t want the Lord bringing those wretched Assyrians to repentance and faith in the Savior. Jonah bought his ticket, sat on a hill outside the city, and waited for the Lord to swoosh down destruction on Nineveh. And Jonah got an earful from the Lord. In contrast to Jonah’s petulance and pride, the Lord emphasized his own compassion, ending the conversation with a question: “Should I not be concerned about that great city?” The Lord is busy. His people need to be busy too.

Don’t just be busy. Don’t just be watching. Be busy watching. To emphasize for us what that means, Jesus gives a brief parable, a comparison. *“It’s like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each one with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch. Therefore keep watch, because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping.”*

Yes, being busy watching certainly includes prayer. Praying for yourself, that you do not fall into temptation. Praying for God’s forgiveness, and thanking him that he does forgive you, just like he forgives me, because Christ died for our sins and was raised again. Praying for all the saints, that they remain firm in God’s love and forgiveness, too. Praying that God opens doors for the gospel message so it’s proclaimed clearly and many more people are brought to repentance and Christian faith.

Yes, being busy watching certainly includes watching the way you live. Staying sober. Being self-controlled. Purposely not being spiritually drowsy like the rest. It’s a good test every time we engage in an activity: Is this something I would like the Lord to find me doing if he suddenly comes back in the next hour?

On top of prayer and self-controlled living, there’s something more. And this is what Jesus really wants to emphasize for us today. Listen closely to his words: *“It’s like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each one with his assigned task.”* If your assigned task in the house is washing the dishes, you wash the dishes. If your assigned task is wiping down the tables and chairs, you wipe down the tables and chairs. If your assigned task is folding the laundry or taking out the garbage, you fold the laundry or take out the garbage. If your assigned task is being a parent, you be a parent. If your assigned task is being a son or a daughter or a brother or a sister or a faithful friend or all those things, you be all those things. If your assigned task is studying or interning or working, do your duty. It’s your place to be a witness to people whom you have a unique opportunity to witness to, be the witness God has made you to be. If your assigned task is giving your offerings or giving your time or giving your voice or giving your energy to the work of getting the gospel preached to all nations, give generously of yourself, just like the Son of Man did not come the first time to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

In today’s first lesson, Noah serves as a great example of this. The Lord knew that he had set a time limit of 120 years for the earth, but as far as we know, he never communicated that exact timeframe to Noah. God simply told Noah that a flood was coming to destroy all life from the earth, and he should build a big boat to rescue his family and a pair of all living creatures. So Noah built a big boat. He did everything that God commanded him, just as he had been told. He got busy, watching.

The Lord puts you in charge of specific things. He assigns specific tasks to you. And he wants you to do those things for him until he comes back. He wants you to be busy watching. Aware of what you need to be doing in life. Aware of the fact that he is coming back at any time. We don’t know when that is going to be, and he doesn’t want us to know. I guess we’ll have to stay awake. We’ll have to be busy for the Lord. We’ll have to keep watching for the Savior. Amen.