

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

*St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA*

*June 29, 2025*

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## Still Waiting

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The feast of the apostles Peter and Paul! What a day! We are remembering today two of the most influential people on the church's formation. Much of what they taught and did while alive still affects the church today...for both good and ill. If we wanted to keep the celebratory tone and nature of the day we could focus on the positive ways they have influenced the church: they were both powerful preachers, they were both willing to leave their comfort zones to share the Gospel good news with the world, they were both deeply devout and faithful followers of Jesus, they were instrumental in expanding the church to the gentiles, they both helped lay much of the foundation upon which the church rests.

But by now you know me well enough to know that I can't just leave things at the shallow, surface level...no, we must go deeper into these interesting, faithful, broken, and complicated church fathers. One of the more interesting ways we can go deeper with these two is by comparing them; they are **very** different after all! We've got a fisherman and a pharisee. A country bumpkin from the backwater region of Galilee and an urbane Jerusalemite who was born in the bustling trade city of Tarsus. Straight talking Peter who spoke plainly and used many of the same agrarian images that Jesus used; and the well-educated Paul, who sprinkled Greek philosophy throughout his sermons.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> c.f. Romans 7:15 which paraphrases Epictetus

These two men did so much for the church. And it cannot be understated that their expanding of the church to the Gentiles is a large part of why we are gathered here this morning roughly 2000 years later. But these two men, and some of their ideas, have also hindered the church. And there are those today who would be a part of our Gospel-sharing endeavor, were it not for some of the interpretations stemming from Peter and (mostly) Paul.

It seems almost as though God knows that we limited human beings are never going to get God, we're never going to understand God; at best we're groping around the edges. And if that's the case, we need to hear different perspectives on God. We need to hear how a provincial fisherman experienced Jesus Christ. We need to learn how a zealous persecutor of the church came to be one of its greatest missionaries. But we do so knowing that even Peter and Paul's understanding of the divine was far from perfect.

Like us today, both Peter and Paul were limited in their understanding of God by their context within time and place, as well as their own differing lived experiences. Every time Peter travelled away from home he was taking his life into his hands. Since he was a nobody from nowhere, he could be press-ganged into serving Roman soldiers, he could be arrested for preaching and teaching, and he was still expected to pay his Roman and Temple taxes year after year. Not so with Paul, who had his Roman citizenship to shield him from corrupt soldiers and judges;<sup>2</sup> not to mention that as a citizen of Tarsus he did not pay the Roman tax. Imagine how these two vastly different experiences of the Roman Empire may have affected their faith and ministries!

When we consider Peter and Paul as whole people and explore their identities (as much as we can), we can gain insight into why, say, Paul is willing to write something like: "Let every person be subject to the governing

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<sup>2</sup> He even invokes this protection twice: Acts 16:37-38, Acts 22:25-28

authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.”<sup>3</sup> Such a statement makes perfect sense coming from someone who has seen some benefit from his Roman citizenship. We don’t hear much directly from Peter on Rome, but I suspect he would have a *slightly* different take on the Roman government than Paul does!

We need to humanize these titans of the early church. We must acknowledge that while they were right about much, they were still broken humans, just as prone to error as the rest of us. When we do that, we take their perspectives seriously. When we consider context we discover a fuller and more complete picture of these faithful forebearers.

There is, perhaps, nothing more important to understand about these two, and their faith, than this: they were both fully convinced that Jesus would return in their lifetimes. This one belief drastically affected how they interpreted the teachings of Jesus, it affected their sense of urgency for spreading the Gospel, and it certainly affected their attitudes towards the world around them.

It's been a while since I've encountered a believer in the apocalypse; but you likely remember how many of them there were back in 2000CE (and again in 2012CE for some reason, the Mayan calendar or something?). People with those beliefs act different, don't they? Sure, we can chortle at the person who sold everything and spent all their money in preparation for the Rapture; but while we laugh we must also acknowledge that their perspective on the world and the divine is driving their actions in discernible ways.

We can see a similar sort of end-times driving action in Peter and Paul too. Their conviction that Christ would soon return leads Paul in particular to an almost heartless attitude towards the suffering and poor.<sup>4</sup> If Jesus is coming

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<sup>3</sup> Romans 13:1 (NRSVUE)

<sup>4</sup> c.f. 1 Corinthians 7:21 (NRSVUE) or 1 Thessalonians 5:2 (NRSVUE)

back soon, Paul's thinking goes, then everyone's suffering will soon be over...so just endure!

The problem is...we're still waiting, aren't we? Roughly 2000 years later... we simply cannot take that same view that Peter and Paul had. And we must be mindful of how this particular belief drove their actions and interpretations. Why? Because we're still waiting for Christ to return!

But here's the thing. Christ **has** returned. Just not fully. God's Kingdom is here **already**. But not yet. How does Christ encounter us? In the least and lowly, just as he told us in Matthew 25. Jesus constantly redirects us to loving service and action on behalf of our neighbors. He tells Peter, not once but three times, feed my sheep.

We await the return of Christ. That future time when the world will be as God intended it to be: peaceful, just, loving, gracious, whole. But we do not wait idly. We do not ignore the pain of the world around us, thinking that it will end soon. For we know that while we're still waiting, Christ is constantly returning to us, in the neighbors we are privileged to serve and in the people we get to love. Amen.