

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

November 16, 2025

Between the Burning and the Rising

[Readings](#)

[Bulletin](#)

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

Some of Jesus' disciples were admiring the Temple: its massive stones, its gleaming facade, its impressive architecture. It was the center of religious and political life, a symbol of stability and divine presence. Then Jesus responded with something that must have shocked them: "The days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." (Lk. 21:6, NRSVUE)

The beautiful, impressive Temple, our most trusted institutions, systems, and structures, will be destroyed. Jesus goes on to paint a picture of wars, insurrections, earthquakes, famines, and plagues. Nation rising against nation. Kingdom against kingdom. False messiahs crying, "I am he!" and "The time is near!" (Lk. 21:8)

This feels like our world today, doesn't it? We live in a time of perpetual apocalypse, where social crises, environmental destruction, and inequality rage daily. The old systems are failing before our eyes. The institutions we once trusted can no longer bear the weight of our hope. They're coming down, stone by stone and brick by brick.

But there is another world. The prophet Malachi offers a contrasting vision: "The day is coming, **burning** like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble." (Lk. 21:8) Yes, destruction is coming—but for the faithful, for those who revere God's name, "the sun of righteousness shall **rise**, with healing in its wings." (Malachi 4:1)

Here is our tension: We live between the world that is **burning** and the world that is **rising**. Between Luke's apocalypse and Malachi's promise. Between systems collapsing and righteousness dawning. And here is our calling: Our faith is not an escape from the burning, but the work of enduring and building the rising world.

Let's be honest about what Malachi is saying. "The arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up." (*Ibid.*) This is not arbitrary divine anger. This is the assurance that injustice is temporary.

God guarantees that the destructive systems that oppress people will not stand forever. The day is coming when those who exploit the poor, who destroy the earth, and who wield their power as weapons, will be reduced to stubble. And this judgment? This is good news. It ensures the end of cruelty. It promises that evil does not have the last word.

Jesus echoes this realism in Luke. He warns us: "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and 'The time is near!' Do not go after them." (Lk.21:8) Don't fall for false hope. Don't be deceived by those who promise easy solutions or quick salvation.

Instead, Jesus tells the truth: "They will arrest you and persecute you... You will be betrayed even by parents and siblings, by relatives and friends." (Lk. 21:12, 16) Following the path of justice will cost you something. It always does.

We must have a justice-oriented faith that acknowledges that our present systems cause real pain. We cannot salvage the dystopia we're already living in. We cannot baptize systems of exploitation and call them holy. We must see clearly in order to oppose effectively.

Now we come to one of the most difficult—and most misused—texts in Scripture. In 2 Thessalonians 3:10, we read: "Anyone unwilling to work should not eat." This verse has been weaponized. It has been co-opted by capitalism to shame the poor, people with disabilities, those who are unemployed, and those who struggle with all sorts of various disadvantages. It has been used to defend the cruel myth that people must "earn" their right to survive, their right to live.

But listen: Paul (or his disciple writing in his style) is not talking about wage labor. He's not defending capitalism—capitalism didn't even exist yet! Paul is addressing a specific situation in Thessalonica. Some community members, perhaps believing that Jesus was returning imminently, had stopped contributing to the community's shared life. They were willing to eat from the common table but unwilling to help set it.

The key word is unwilling. Paul is not condemning those who cannot work. He's addressing those who refuse to share in the collective responsibility of communal life. As Devon Price writes in *Laziness Does Not Exist*, "If a person can't get out of bed, something is making them exhausted. If a student isn't writing papers, there's some aspect of the assignment they can't do without help."¹ The concept of laziness has been projected onto marginalized communities to protect the systems and profits of those in power.

We must reclaim this text from its misuse. The proper perspective here is not about wage labor, but about contributing to collective flourishing. The goal is to build communities where food is distributed according to need, not according to productivity. Paul and his companions "worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you." (2 Thess. 3:8) They provided a model of communal effort. And then comes the real heart of the passage: "Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right." (2 Thess. 3:13)

This is the call, not to endless wage labor, but to diligence in justice. The hard, often unpaid labor of community building. Caregiving. Organizing. Protesting. Showing up. Mutual aid. Building and supporting alternative markets and agriculture. Sharing tools and knowledge, skills and resources. This is the work that builds the rising world.

Jesus says in Luke 21:19, "By your endurance you will gain your lives." Endurance. Not passive waiting. Not resignation. Active persistence. Endurance is resistance against fatigue, despair, and what Devon Price calls the "Laziness Lie": the lie that tells us our small efforts don't matter, that we're not doing enough, that we should give up.²

Endurance is the daily commitment to living out our ethics just because it is the right thing to do, regardless of the timeline of global victory. As Roxanne Gay writes, "Just because I don't feel a lot of hope doesn't mean I'm not going to do anything. We can slow down the damage if enough people care. The trick is to

¹ Price, Devon. *Laziness Does Not Exist*. S.L., Atria Books, 2022CE.

² *Ibid.*

make sure that we don't let that hopelessness keep you from doing the work that needs to be done."³

And here's the beautiful thing: This endurance is not grim. It's not joyless. Psalm 98 gives us the emotional key: "O sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things... Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it. Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy." This joy is possible because the present crisis does not define us. We are defined by the guaranteed victory of God's justice. Joy becomes a form of resistance, a refusal to let the chaos extinguish hope.

So here is our calling as people of faith: We are called to see the truth of the world's pain. To name the systems that are **burning**. To refuse false promises and easy solutions. To acknowledge that the old structures are crumbling, and that this is both terrifying and necessary.

We are called to sing the song of God's coming justice. To live with the joyful anticipation of the sun of righteousness **rising** with healing in its wings. To practice resurrection even before the resurrection is complete.

We are called to never tire of doing what is right. To share the burden. To reject the shame of the "Laziness Lie." To value contribution over profit, need over productivity, care over exploitation. To build networks of mutual aid where everyone eats, not because they've "earned" it, but because they belong.

We are called to live now as if the future world of healing and righteousness has already begun. Because in the community of Christ, it has. This means actively practicing justice, equity, and collective contribution in our communities today. It means rejecting shame and embracing the work of mutual aid. It means sharing the labor so that no one grows weary alone.

Friends, I end with a benediction from the enfleshed liturgy as it says all this perfectly: "Thrones of power will never be the seat of our salvation. Only love, practiced and cultivated in community, can grow the hope we need. Only love,

³ Wikler, Maia. "Roxane Gay and Mary Robinson Explain Why Feminism Is Key to Achieving Climate Justice." *Teen Vogue*, 31 Oct. 2019, www.teenvogue.com/story/roxane-gay-feminism-climate-change. Accessed 12 Nov. 2025.

shared and multiplied through struggle and solidarity, can sustain and assure us. Only love, enfleshed in everyday lives near and far, takes the shape of God."

In this active faith, we are not just waiting for the future. We are co-creating a new world today. Go forth and build. Amen.