

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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Fiery Ordeal

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Beloved siblings in Christ, grace to you and peace from the One in whom we live, and move, and have our being. Amen.

Have you ever heard a real lion roar? Not on a screen, but in person? A zoologist will tell you that a lion's roar isn't just a sound, it's a physical event. The frequency is so low and so loud that it rattles your ribcage. It is designed to paralyze prey before the predator even takes a step. The weapon isn't just the teeth; it's the intimidation. That is exactly how systemic fear works. And it is exactly what we are dealing with today.

Beloved, Peter warns us: "Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion." Not a cartoon lion. Not a spooky metaphor meant to entertain children. A roaring lion is what you hear when fear is doing its work. Anxiety. Intimidation. The threat that if you step out of line, you will be made an example of.

That roar is familiar in our public life right now. We hear it when compassion is criminalized. When feeding people is treated like a nuisance. When the unhoused are spoken of as a problem to be removed rather than neighbors to be sheltered. We see its jaws when immigration systems turn human beings into numbers and disappear them into detention, deportation, and prisons.

So let's name the question we carry into worship today: What does faith look like when the lion is loud? Peter calls the moment we are living in a 'fiery ordeal.' Let me be clear right now about what we are going to do with that phrase. We will unmask the toxic theology that says God wants you to suffer, that pain is God's favorite lesson plan, that abuse is holy if you endure it quietly.

And we will hear the gospel truth: suffering is often the pushback of the world when people walk the Way of Christ. Not a punishment from God. Not a badge we chase. But a predictable backlash when love refuses to stay private.

Peter says, “Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you.” That line has been used in the church to sanctify far too much harm. People have been told, “God is testing you.” “This is your cross to bear.” “If you just endure, God will be pleased.” “If you leave, you’re being unfaithful.” And that is simply **not** the gospel.

We have to learn to read scripture with care. There is a difference between descriptive language and prescriptive language. Peter is not commanding suffering as if it were a spiritual exercise program. Peter is describing reality as it often is when you follow Jesus, the powers will resist you.

Here is the crux of the matter: Christ alone redeems. Your pain does not redeem you. Your bruises do not save you. Your endurance does not make evil good. Luther once said the theology of glory calls evil good and good evil, and tries to polish suffering until it shines like a gift. But a theology of the cross calls a thing what it actually is.

So let’s say it plainly in church, with no hedging: State-sanctioned harm is evil. Racism is evil. Dehumanization is evil. Violence against bodies and families is evil. Abuse is evil. God does not need evil in order to be God. God does not require someone’s suffering in order to love them.

If suffering is not God’s desire, then why does Peter speak this way? Why does Jesus pray the way he does in John 17, as if he knows the road ahead is costly? Because the “fiery ordeal” is often what happens when God’s people stop cooperating with a violent status quo.

Empires, in every generation, have a common strategy. They thrive on: Control, Exclusion, Scarcity, and Fear. The empire needs neighbors to believe that there is not enough. Not enough safety. Not enough belonging. Not enough dignity. Not enough room at the table.

But Psalm 68 sings of a very different God. This God is not impressed by palaces and borders. This God is described as “Father of orphans,” “Protector of widows,” and the One who “gives the desolate a home to live in.” When the church acts like it follows *that* God, the empire panics.

When people share what they have, when they organize for shelter, when they show up for those targeted by law and policy, when they tell the truth about systems that devour the vulnerable, the lion roars. This is not because God is punishing the church, but because the church has become dangerous to the machinery of dehumanization.

Now here is where Acts 1 helps us. The disciples ask Jesus, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” They want an answer. They want a schedule. They want a plan that will eliminate the uncertainty.

But Jesus does not give them a timeline. Jesus gives them a promise, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses.” Then notice what comes next. They return to Jerusalem, and they devote themselves to prayer, together.

This is not a resignation. This is not hiding. This is a community preparing for courage. Because faithful resistance is not fueled by adrenaline alone. It is sustained by prayer, by friendship, by meals, by songs, by shared courage, by people who refuse to let one another face the lion alone.

Peter says, “Humble yourselves... Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.” That is not a command to pretend anxiety is not real. It is a call to stop letting anxiety isolate you. In this community, you do not have to carry your burdens alone. If you are struggling, know that there are prayer partners, support groups, and pastoral care available. Your church family is here to listen, to pray, and to walk with you.

The empire wants everyone alone. If each person believes it is only “me and my private survival,” then the lion has already won, and with merely a roar! Anxiety becomes the leash. Individualism becomes the cage.

But Jesus, in John 17, prays for something deeper than individual bravery. Jesus prays for communion. He tells us that eternal life is simply this, to know God. Not to pass a test about God, but to know God.

To know God in the biblical sense is to be drawn into relationship. To be bound together. To be held. And Jesus prays, “Holy Father, protect them.” Not “make them tough.” Not “make them invulnerable.” Protect them.

God's protection often looks like people who refuse to abandon one another. So humility, in Peter's letter, is not self-hatred. Humility is choosing to live these truths: I cannot save myself. I do not have to. I belong to God. And I belong to God's people. And from that belonging, we can resist the fear.

Peter says, "Resist him, steadfast in your faith." Standing firm is not passive submission. It is active resistance. It is the hard work of mutual survival. It is showing up again. It is telling the truth again. It is protecting the vulnerable again. It is praying together again.

It is organizing, giving, advocating, feeding, visiting, accompanying, interrupting harm, and making room at the table until the table looks like God's kin-dom. And yes, sometimes that faithfulness will come with heat.

But hear the promise Peter gives, "After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace... will restore, support, strengthen, and establish you." Not because suffering is good. But because God is faithful.

So remember your baptism. In baptism, God marked you with a love stronger than empire. In baptism, you were commissioned to say a brave and definitive **No** to state-sanctioned harm, and an equally definitive **Yes** to the dignity of every neighbor.

And as you go, know this, you do not face the roaring lion alone. The God of Psalm 68 goes before you, fierce in mercy, mothering in protection, relentless in love. The power of empire is an illusion. And you can rest, even as you resist, in the victory of Christ's unconditional love. Amen.