

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

November 17, 2024

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## *In nomine lesu*

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A number of years ago, in an issue of *The New Yorker*, Kathryn Schulz, who resides in New York and spends the summers in Oregon, wrote an article called “The Really Big One”<sup>1</sup> which earned her the National Magazine Award. It was about the little known but very dangerous Cascadia fault line that may devastate the American Northwest someday.

Most people are far more familiar with the famed San Andreas Fault that threatens California, but the Cascadia subduction zone, as it is more properly titled, is a 700-mile-long natural disaster waiting to happen. The last time it slipped was on January 26, 1700, long before Americans of European descent moved into the area.

When the earthquake hits, it is estimated that over a million buildings from Vancouver, British Columbia, down through Washington and Oregon may collapse, including 3,000 schools. But that’s not the worst of it.

No matter what time of the day or night this earthquake occurs, people will have 15 minutes to find higher ground before a 700-mile-long wall of water five stories high sweeps everyone away.

Children, the disabled and senior citizens will be especially vulnerable. It is believed that at least 13,000 people will die in the disaster. And with roads, bridges and hospitals destroyed, it may be weeks or even months before some people receive help.

Schulz, a book critic for *The New Yorker*, wasn’t prepared for the fear her article inspired throughout the Northwest, so a week and a half later she wrote another article for the magazine’s website titled “How to Stay Safe When the Big One Comes.”<sup>2</sup> She pointed out two equal mistakes — panic, which can cause one to do the wrong things, and fatalism, which could lead to folks doing nothing at all.

In her article, she encouraged residents to bolt their houses to their foundations, strap down water heaters and remember that big, heavy objects on high shelves would fall down.

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<sup>1</sup> Kathryn Schulz, “The Really Big One,” [The New Yorker Magazine](#), July 20, 2015.

<sup>1</sup> [How to Stay Safe When the Big One Comes | The New Yorker](#)

Those living on higher ground should make sure they have several weeks' worth of supplies like water, food and batteries. Those in coastal areas should know exactly where to run (since roads would likely be destroyed) to get to higher ground.

Just as important, families needed to have a plan for the disaster, and on top of that, it wouldn't hurt to get to know your neighbors better.

Schulz added that the Big One might be overdue, but even so, whether it happened tomorrow or hundreds of years from now, it was important to always be ready

### **The Day of the Lord**

In today's scripture passage, Jesus is teaching in the temple and tells the people to get ready and stay ready.

While people marveled at the temple's grand scale, its construction, its massive columns and its decorations — truly one of the wonders of the ancient world — Jesus said, "... the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

People want to know more, and in response, Jesus describes the terrible end that the great temple of Jerusalem will come to. But even as he begins to describe the end of all things — the terrible Day of the Lord — he makes it clear that we cannot use earth-shaking events as a reliable guide that the end is finally at hand.

Solomon's temple, the first temple, had been destroyed by the Babylonians, after which the Judean leadership had been led into exile. After Babylon's fall and upon the return of the exiles, the people envisioned rebuilding their lost temple.

The effort languished, however, because of political opposition, exhaustion and the problems of day-to-day living. Prophets like Haggai and Zechariah called the people back to the great task, but even so, it took decades for the temple to be built to the point where it could be used, and centuries until, under the leadership of the flawed and much hated Herod the Great, it was brought to a state of grandeur.

Surely, God's people must have felt that everything else could be destroyed when the great Day of the Lord came, but God's temple would surely be left standing. So many would have viewed Jesus' prediction about the temple's destruction as scandalous — perhaps even treasonous. What were you feeling and thinking when you watched what transpired at our nation's Capital Building in Washington, D.C. on Epiphany Day, 6 January 2021?

The words of Jesus were no less startling, precisely because he was talking about the Day of the Lord.

The idea of the Day of the Lord, when God would intervene in history and set things to right, is a staple of the prophets in the Hebrew scriptures. And although some of the judgments of these prophets were directed at foreign powers and superpowers, when the prophets spoke of the Day of the Lord, they were just as likely to be reminding God's people that if they did not set their own houses in order, they, and not their enemies, would be the target of God's wrath.

Amos, for instance, made it clear that the Day of the Lord would be no refuge for God's people. "Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light."<sup>3</sup>

So in this gospel passage, Jesus points to signs and wonders, natural disasters, wars and civil unrest, as normal events in the course of things. These were not to be interpreted as signs that the end was at hand.

Not even the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, a political event that was still a few decades in the future when Jesus spoke these words, meant that the world would end. All of these events would, however, give believers a chance to testify about Jesus, despite persecution and betrayal. And the words of Jesus would provide the testimony we as believers are meant to give in difficult times.

## **Be prepared**

What this passage tells us, I believe, is that just as folks in the Northwest should take seriously the prediction of a major earthquake and be prepared, so too should we take seriously the words of Jesus not only about the end, but about the dangers of the world before the end.

And rather than believe that we have an inside track when all this occurs, we should recognize that governments and nations may fall, the earth may shake and tsunamis may lay waste to coastlines. What we need to be about is honoring Jesus by imitating him in service to the poor, the neglected and the oppressed. Thus we will demonstrate that Jesus reigns in our lives and in this present moment by our actions.

Jesus warned us that some of our persecution may come from those we love and trust, and by "family," Jesus may have meant not only relatives, but fellow citizens and even fellow believers. This too should tell us we are on the right track.

Of course, it's not enough to **get** ready. You have to **stay** ready. At the start of this millennium there was a great deal of fear-mongering about Y2K, a computer glitch that was supposedly going to lead to the total breakdown of society

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<sup>3</sup> Amos 5:18.

and mass chaos. Many people purchased generators and stored supplies extra food and water, to prepare to survive the event.

January 1, 2000, came and went, and according to one account, many people in Elkhart County, Indiana sold their generators and used up their supplies. Thirteen months later, a massive ice storm hit that led to loss of power in some places for many days or even weeks, and during the coldest part of winter. Some individuals who had prepared for an apocalyptic Y2K meltdown were totally unprepared for an ordinary natural disaster.

In his essay “The World’s Last Night,” C.S. Lewis writes, “The doctrine of the Second Coming teaches us that we do not and cannot know when the world drama will end. The curtain may be rung down at any moment. . . .”<sup>4</sup> He continues, “That is will come when it ought, we may be sure; but we waste our time in guessing when that will be. That it has a meaning we may be sure, but we cannot see it. When it is over, we may be told. We are led to expect the Author will have something to say to each of us on the part that each of us has played. The playing it well is what matters infinitely.”<sup>5</sup>

We play our part by relying on the Holy Spirit to fulfill our roles and disciples of Jesus. Jesus’ Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul, in his letter to Romans puts it this way: “So here’s what I want you to do, God is helping you. Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going to work, and walking around life – and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. . . . Love from the center of who you are, don’t fake it. Run for dear life from evil, hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply, practice playing the second fiddle. Don’t burn out, keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. . . . Get along with each other, don’t be a suck-up. Make friends with nobodies, don’t be the great somebody. Don’t hit back, discover the beauty in everyone. Don’t insist on getting even, that’s not for you to do. ‘I’ll do the judging,’ says God. I’ll take care of it.”<sup>6</sup>

After all, whether or not we are alive on the great day of his return, we all have our own Day of the Lord — our own judgment — to prepare for. Let us not panic. Nor let us fatalistically do nothing. We have been given our survival supplies: God’s Word, God’s presence among us when we gather in Jesus’ name, God’s

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<sup>4</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The World’s Last Night and Other Essays*, San Francisco: HarperOne, 2017, p. 113.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 113-114.

<sup>6</sup> Romans 12:1-2, 9-13, 17-19, Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message//Remix: The Bible in Contemporary Language*, 2003.

sustenance in Bread and Wine – Christ’s Body and Blood, and in the power of the Holy Spirit to do God’s will in our world.

## **Soli Deo Gloria**

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