

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on January 24, 2021 (3 Epiphany, Year B)

“For the present form of this world is passing away.” The apostle Paul writes these words at the end of this very brief passage we just heard from First Corinthians. “For the present form of this world is passing away.” It sure feels as if the present form of *our* world has been “passing away” these past months. In so many aspects of our lives, the present form of this world has been passing away in ways both painful and necessary, challenging and hopeful. External traditions and assumptions have been overturned even as our internal priorities have been reset and redefined.

Presumably...hopefully...at some point this year, we’ll begin to emerge from this pandemic. It will be an opportunity to return to some things we’ve so longed for and, at the same time, open us up to a new world view. There will be both a reckoning and a recognition that some things will never be the same. Which is both exciting and a bit terrifying. Change always is. And this will impact nearly every aspect of our lives — the ways in which we work and play and worship. “For the present form of this world is passing away.”

St. Paul wasn’t speaking of a post-pandemic world, of course. He was pointing to a world that had been utterly changed and transformed by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As he writes in another passage to the church in Corinth, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”

Now, it would be easy to view this passing away that Paul speaks of as something to fear. Or mourn. Or at least to be depressed about. Paul lays it all out — he advises the married to act as if they have no spouse, mourners not to mourn, the joyful not to rejoice, purchasers as if they had no possessions. In a word, as the writer of Ecclesiastes might say, it’s all vanity. Relationships, emotions, material things, they’ll all pass away right along with the world. So what’s the point, really?

Well, it would be incredibly pull-the-covers-over-your-head depressing if that’s all there was to it. But Paul writes these words in the context of relationship with Jesus Christ. The point is really that our world — the visible world in which we live and move and have our being — is not nearly as substantial and knowable and controllable as we seek to make it. We are utterly dependent upon a world we cannot see, upon a creator so often hidden from our eyes. Without faith, life *would* all be a vain, purposeless flailing of limbs and emotions.

But it’s not. Because our hope is not grounded in what we see or do in this present time. Which doesn’t mean that our actions don’t matter or that we shouldn’t attend to our relationships or that we shouldn’t feel deeply and emotionally connected to the things around us. Everything we do matters. Our actions matter. Our values matter. Our concern for others matters. It’s just that what is to come, matters more. In the human experience, we encounter things both seen and unseen, visible and invisible. And faith is about allowing the unseen things to impact our interactions with the seen things.

This may all sound a bit ethereal and abstract, but the whole concept finds its expression in the specificity of Jesus Christ. When Jesus calls the first disciples he looks at them and says, “Follow me.” With those two little words, he’s inviting Simon Peter and Andrew to follow him in the here and now. He’s inviting them to literally drop their fishing nets and follow him as he preaches and teaches and heals; as he challenges the princes and principalities of this world; as he exposes the hypocrisy of the religious establishment; as he embodies God’s dream for a just world right here on earth. *And* he’s inviting them into a deeper life of abundance and joy and meaning that transcends all that they can see and hear and feel and touch. He’s inviting them into the very heart of God. He’s inviting them into the mystery of God’s eternal grace. He’s inviting them into a world they can know but not see. “For the present form of this world is passing away.”

And this sense of expectation, of anticipation at the unseen and untold joys that are to come, is where hope abides. For Paul, the death and resurrection of Jesus has ushered in a new era. One that has started the clock running on Christ’s eventual return. Jesus has died and has risen and will come again. And while we know neither the day nor the hour when this will take place, still it puts us on a trajectory of hope.

And I would argue that we, too, are on a trajectory of hope. Both as Christians awaiting those unseen things, and as Americans, as people of St. John’s, awaiting a post-pandemic world. We may not know precisely what it will look like, but we do know that it will be infused with God’s love.

I was thinking this week about the first time I wore a mask in public. It was early on in the pandemic, when we were all quarantined and Bryna sent me out to the Fruit Center in what felt like a full suit of body armor — mask, gloves, hat, clothes that would go straight into the laundry — to pick up groceries that would then be wiped down with antibacterial spray in the garage before being put away in the kitchen. And, if I was lucky enough to find it, at least one rare and glorious roll of toilet paper. I remember feeling quite foolish and very self-conscious as I walked up and down the aisles viewing my fellow shoppers less as other people and more as threats to my health and well-being. There was much we still didn’t know about this mysterious new virus.

What's amazing to me is how quickly we all got used to doing things in new ways. We settled into routines that would have been unimaginable less than a year ago. Our old world passed away. And although we trust that this is all temporary, we still don't know what changes to our routines and traditions will remain.

In the end, unless we recognize that everything in front of us will pass away, we can't begin to fully live. Only then can we say along with the psalmist, "For God alone my soul in silence waits, truly my hope is in him. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my stronghold, so that I shall not be shaken."

We are on a trajectory of hope, even as what we think is so important in our lives passes away. All is not vanity. Because all is grounded in our faith in Jesus Christ, the one who pierces us with his knowing eyes and says, "follow me."