

# SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

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*Fifth Avenue · New York City*

**Sunday March 17 2024**

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

**Litany and Solemn Eucharist**

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Mark Schultz, *Associate for Pastoral Care*

*on*

Jeremiah 31:31-44; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33

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## **When is Now**

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Our Gospel today presents us with a challenge that begins with asking a particular question

That I think we need to take seriously

You may have been asking it yourself when you heard the Gospel reading

And I want to ask it with you.

Jesus says:

“Now is the judgment of this world

Now shall the prince of this world be cast out.”

And I think no one, least of all Jesus, would blame us for asking:

When is Now?

When is this Now supposed to be.

Because if the world in which we live

The world post-crucifixion

Post-resurrection

If the world in which we live now

Is a world in which

People of color are seen as less than (and it is)

In which women are seen as less than (and it is)

In which folks with disabilities are seen as less than (and it is)

A world in which mass shootings are numbingly commonplace

And hundreds of violent conflicts plague countries and communities around the globe (and it is)

In which addiction ruins the lives of our loved ones (and it is)

In which refugees are routinely abused (and it is)

In which the poor are made to bear the brunt of ecological disaster

And economic uncertainty (and it is)

In which our LGBTQ friends and family

Are bullied, victimized and murdered even in their safe spaces (and it is)

In a world in which all this and more is clearly the case,

And deadly despair runs rampant:

When is this “now”

That Jesus is talking about when he says

“Now shall the prince of this world be cast out.”

Because if Jesus means Now the way we generally mean now?

He's got some explaining to do.

Our frustration here may be even more compounded by what Jesus doesn't say  
Or by what he could have said,  
What we might have liked for him to have said...but didn't.  
He didn't say to his disciples and the gathered crowds:  
"Things may be bad right now, and you might be feeling glum.  
But I'll tell you what: in the words of a song that hasn't been written yet,  
—but you're gonna love it when it is—  
"The sun'll come out tomorrow."<sup>1</sup>  
So don't worry: it's all gonna be okay."  
Somehow, if Jesus had said *that* at the close of his public ministry  
It would have been slightly more explicable:  
Not unsuspecting, necessarily, but explicable given the state of things.  
The accomplishment of Jesus' mission of redemption and healing  
Would have been secured in a future that, granted, we could never see  
—Always a day away<sup>2</sup>  
Always just somewhere over the rainbow<sup>3</sup>—  
But secure nonetheless in its endless deferral:  
We could strive for it,  
Reach for it as it continued to recede on the horizon of time,  
Vaguely imaginable  
Never attainable,  
Always conformable to whatever we needed it to be in order for things to be okay  
If not now, eventually.  
It's sadly telling that somehow the mythic doom of Tantalus,  
reaching for the ripe fruit that always exceeds his grasp  
Feels more comfortable to us  
As an image of our redemption and restoration  
Than the prospect that "Now is the judgment of this world  
Now shall the prince of this world be cast out."  
Because if the judgement were actually tomorrow,  
Not now, least of all not a Now 2000 years ago,  
The world would make a bit more sense.

But Jesus never promises okay, however much we might want it.  
Hence, if we're honest, there's an extra dimension to our challenge this morning:  
Entrenched ambivalence.  
Our challenge is that the world—  
By which our Gospeller frequently understands:  
The ordered arrangement of our human relationships, our human lives, who we are to each other,  
What more or less obtains in our day to day living and interacting...  
An ordered arrangement which, moreover, has been so wounded by sin and death  
That it has come to be ordered and arranged by, to and for death:  
Our challenge is that the world makes too much sense to us as it is—  
We are too familiar with it, too comfortable with it, too enmeshed in it  
And the 'okay' for which we might agreeably settle either tomorrow or today  
Is still so far fallen from the world as God ordered and arranged it  
By, to and for the Word, the Eternal Pattern of his Love.  
Nonetheless: imagining the judgment of the world  
Imagining an end to the world as we know it most often occurs to us as a calamitous idea  
Something, indeed, best left to a future that never comes.

Because if the world ends, we suspect: we end too.  
And we're right: the world is us. It's inescapable.  
But here's the terrible irony: it's for the sake of the world's preservation that  
When the true and original Life of the World came to us in Jesus Christ and dared to love us,  
We killed him, crucified him  
Rather than suffer the thought that the world as it is,  
The world as we re-made it in our broken fallenness, our yearned-for wounded 'okay,'  
Might be transformed or ended.  
But it is indeed in the cross, in the death of the Life of the World,  
That the world *is* ended. Has ended. The world is already over.  
Orthodox priest Alexander Schmeeman writes,  
"We can go on developing new and better material things.  
We can build a more humane society which may even keep us from annihilating each other...  
One of our goals is certainly to work for peace, justice, freedom.  
But," he continues, "while [the world] can indeed be improved,  
It can never become the place God intended it to be.  
The world condemned itself when on Calvary it condemned the One who was its true self."<sup>4</sup>  
There is no future for the world as we've known it.

Yet...yet it's Calvary that Jesus names in John as his glory. The hour of his glory.  
The means by which all people, *all people*, the whole world, will be drawn to him.  
It's for love of the world, for us, a love unmerited and unmercenary  
That he shared our humanity, received our death, and lives to share his endless life with us.  
So, returning to Jesus' words that "Now is the judgment of this world  
Now shall the prince of this world be cast out."  
We may begin to understand  
That Now is not a when, but a what.  
That Now is a presencing of the already-accomplished purposes of Eternity unfolding in time  
Fully available, fully present Now  
The transfiguring grace of God is not waiting for you to try to take it  
Only to coyly recede into tomorrow  
It's yearning, Now, for you to receive it as gift.  
There may be no future for the world as we have known it  
But the Life of the World that emptied himself for love on the cross,  
That suffered our violence, that bore the brokenness of our world, of you and me and all of us  
And died on Calvary to draw all people to himself:  
That Life rose again.  
In the Cross  
Our desperate times meet God's gracious Now  
Our sin-sick world meets God's Eternal self-giving redeeming love  
And a dead world is recreated by love, in love, for love  
A lost humanity is recovered by love, in love, for love  
And life and joy become finally truly possible as the okay for which we once would settle  
The terrible darkling shadow of bliss for which we once would settle, fades away  
As a new day dawns in a new world for us and in us now.  
The bruised and broken body of Jesus Christ on the cross  
Both reveals and begins to transfigure our bruised and broken humanity  
For if we die with him, and dying he destroys our death  
We rise with him, as rising he restores our life<sup>5</sup>  
Now.  
Now is the judgement of this world

Now shall the prince of this world be cast out.  
Now is the Glory in the world without end.  
Because God loves you, loves all of us  
And has always loved us from the very heart of the fullness of Eternity.  
And that is the very substance of the Now of which Jesus speaks  
Not a point in time, past, present or future  
But the glorious reality of love present to all time, available to all time, that fulfills all time.

In a few moments  
When we celebrate the Eucharist  
As the host is lifted above the altar, as the very Sacramental Body of Jesus Christ is lifted up  
To draw all people to himself  
All the Infinite Uncreated Light of Heaven contained in,  
Blazing out from what looks to be a little piece of bread  
We witness the rising, the aurora dawnlight glory of the Sun of Righteousness  
Heralding the New Day the New World the New Covenant once more  
Not in a tomorrow that never comes  
But Now.  
The Redemption of the world, your redemption  
Is at hand, has always been at hand.  
Behold he comes to meet you  
Humble and lowly;<sup>6</sup>  
Here, at the foot of the cross  
Behold: broken for you, he gives himself to you  
Now  
Where the judgement of this world is already accomplished  
And the prince of this world is already cast out  
Where that dawnlight splendor can break even from the horizon of your own heart  
And shine in you and from you in the midst of this present darkness.<sup>7</sup>  
The Glory of God can be yours, can be you, by grace if you'll receive it, if you'll live it  
Your life can bear the fruit of the unfolding Now of God's graceful and loving purposes  
Not because everything will be okay at some point.  
But because the Hour has indeed come.  
And it is Now.  
And now.  
And you.  
And Jesus Christ.  
And now.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Charnin, Martin, from the song "Tomorrow" from the musical *Annie*, 1977.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Harburg, E.Y., from the song "Over the Rainbow" from the film *The Wizard of Oz*, 1939.

<sup>4</sup> Schmemmann, Alexander, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), 23.

<sup>5</sup> Reference is made here to the Preface of Easter, BCP 379.

<sup>6</sup> Zech. ix.9

<sup>7</sup> Eph. vi.12