

Is 55, Phil 1

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

Kind of a boastful thing to say isn't it? I mean, of course we know God is smarter than us, does he have to rub it in like that? Do you go around and find the stink bug in your front lawn and say, “Oh stinkbug, ha! My thoughts are not your thoughts, and my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts higher than your thoughts. Now trundle along, little beetle, lest I squash you and you stink up my shoes.”

What's the deal with this guy? Is he a narcissist? We all know that isn't true. So what's he telling us this for, as if it wasn't obvious enough that the Maker of the universe may be a bit smarter than us? Well, I daresay he is telling us this for our comfort. For our good. I think this is Gospel, good news, folks.

When your computer breaks and you take it in, which would you rather hear from the tech: “Oh, man, I've never seen anything like this, I'm going to have to google this, call the manufacturer, and you may need a whole new computer” Or “Oh, I can figure this out no problem, seen it a million times, I'll have it up and running in a couple minutes”? I suppose in the first scenario we could comfort ourselves with the fact that the problem was so bad, not even a tech could fix it so, “hooray!” at

least we know he isn't smarter than us... but that doesn't fix your computer does it? In the second scenario you get your computer back.

And we look around at the world and does there seem to be some problems around? I think so. And it's the same when we look inside, isn't it? If we are honest. So we can say, "Oh if I can't figure it out, no one can." Or maybe more prevalent, "I can't ask someone for help, that would mean I am not strong enough to bootstraps my way out of this! And I couldn't bear to admit that." Which means we can keep our pride but we also keep the problems. Or we can hear this word of the Lord and say, "Well I can't fix it, thank God that He can."

And so let us rejoice that the Lord's ways are not ours. They are higher, they are better, and they work to (verse 7) abundantly pardon. That's good news.

And it is precisely why the Church throughout time has rejoiced in God's ways.

Psalm 25: Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Psalm

18:30 As for God, His way is blameless; The word of the Lord is tried; He is a

shield to all who take refuge in Him. Psalm 86:11 Teach me Your way, O Lord; I

will walk in Your truth; Unite my heart to fear Your name. And perhaps it is no

surprise then that the first Christians were referred to as those who were members of "the Way."

And when we put it like this it seems so easy, doesn't it? God's ways are amazing. They are truth, they are his good commandments, they are his saving mercy and compassion on the repentant. Rejoice, rejoice, Alleluia, Amen! And that is all true, is it not?

But is that how it seems to play out in a broken world?

We go to Paul in the letter to the Philippians. We see he is writing from prison. Which should probably give us some pause. "Uh, God? Your "way" is to have your apostle in prison? Not as a celebrity or powerful government or social influencer? That doesn't seem like a good way," we might think. Paul disagrees "What has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard..." and then he goes on to explain how it has made the whole church bolder.

You see, or maybe you don't see, and isn't that the point... we CAN'T see how an imprisoned apostle or pastor could possibly turn to the good. And we might sit here in our pews with our pastors up here preaching thinking, in our minds, "Well I could see it I suppose..." but what tune would we be singing if it was our pastors being put in there? Would we wonder what God was up to in our nation? Maybe. But we can't see that God wanted the roman soldiers to hear the gospel, so his way for that to happen: throw Paul in prison, piece of cake.

Paul continues. He continues to say that, whichever the Lord wills for him, life or death (life or death!) He says, “that way is good.” Good because if he dies, he goes to be with Jesus and his work is ended and rest begins. Good because if he lives, well he gets to tell others about Jesus some more.

And so we, who confess that God’s ways are higher, and good, and we want to walk in them... what if God says, “Ok, my way is for you to die now.” Are we rejoicing? Or are we bargaining? I think I’m bargaining. “Why me? Why now? I promise I’ll be better if you heal me!” Paul rejoices in the possibility of being called home. And the world’s ways are so opposite to that, and I think our ways are opposite to that. And I know they are. Here’s how: Remember the beginning of this sermon? “Why does God tell us His ways are higher and better? Isn’t that obvious?” Well, if it’s obvious he is smarter than us... why do we disagree with him and his ways so much? Why do we not want them? Why do we think we know more, and a better way? So maybe we do need to be reminded that God is a bit smarter than us, and can use, even death, for good. That’s what Paul seems to think.

Now please don’t mishear Paul. He is NOT saying we should drink the kool-aid and hurry this death thing along. No, it’s the Lord’s ways and it is His timing here. Secondly, he notes that if the Lord leaves you here, well, get to work, folks! Not running the rat race, but doing fruitful labor in the Kingdom. And we might think

“well that’s for Paul to do, not me.” But look at what he says in verse 30 “[you – Philippian church – are] engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.” We are in this too. So is it the child of yours, the spouse, the co-worker, friend? Where is the harvest field? If you are still breathing, let’s be about it. Is that not the Lord’s Way? Let’s be people of the Way.

And when it seems that we might stop breathing. Can we still be a people of the Way?

This text invites us to renew our perspective and therefore our courage in this broken world. It doesn’t mean we have to lie and say these things aren’t bad or scary. But it is an invitation to approach them with the hope of eternal life.

So you get in line at the grocery store and it immediately slows down, so you hop into another one only for it to slow down and the one you just left to speed up...

And the kid’s crying and your hungry and you’re going to lose it... eternal life.

Perspective. The Way. You’re still breathing.

But it’s more than the trivialities too, isn’t it? Being in prison and near death aren’t trivialities, yet here is Paul, courageous, and rejoicing. And the world when it comes to prison and death are panicking, paying off the best lawyers, trying every experimental procedure, desperate, crying out “Why me, God!? Why?!” Paul says, “For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain.” And it’s not from depression or

despair, “Oh God just end it for me, please!” No, it’s “If I live its fruitful labor, if I die, it’s Jesus. Tough call. Up to you, God.”

So how can we capture courage in these non-trivial agonies of life? Well, with Jesus, of course. And so when the surgery comes, the Way, the Church proclaims Good News of a great physician and eternal healing. When the person is on their death bed, wrestling with doubt and fear, the Church comes and proclaims Good News in history and reality of a resurrection seen and witnessed by real people! When that loved one dies the Church gathers to let that same good news of forgiveness and eternal life be a balm for their broken hearts.

We take refuge in the fact that God’s ways are not our ways. We hear that as good news that, while we cannot see any good in the relationship struggle, or the battle with cancer. When the mom can’t see any good in the exhausting day to day grind, when the Sunday school teacher can’t see if the kids are learning the stories or just goofing off. We can’t see what seeds are planted, what strength is cultivated, what persistence or resilience is earned. God can. We can’t. We can’t see how God could possibly bring good out of the miscarriage, or of the young father with three kids dying. We can’t see how that sickness might wake someone up to change their priorities and focus on God. We can’t see how that child dying might inspire someone to pursue the ministry. We just can’t see it all.

The disciples couldn't see how Jesus dying was good at all. The way of the cross, the Via Dolorosa, did not seem like it could end in any good. God could see it. And had planned it. And pulled it off. The death of Jesus for our sins, for our choosing our own way, for our doubting and pushing back against his way. The death of Jesus to make us clean, to make us his own.

The resurrection of Jesus is our confirmation that God's plan is good and effective. If he can beat death once, can he do it, as he promised for you? For the world? Can it be gain? Paul does not seem to think death is the worst thing that can happen to him, so why do we scream in panic when we see it? And that's easy for me to say here, I get it, and should it come my way and I start shaking like a leaf, well then you know what I need? I need some good news. I need some promise. I need some strong word. And is that something we, the people of the Way, have? Yes we do. And it is a privilege, and an honor to share it. And I daresay, that is what God still has us here for, no? Fruitful labor?

God is real, and he has a plan to bring his people through the brokenness of this world and to life everlasting. Let us walk in and trust in his ways, even if we can't always see around the next bend, because he has shown himself to be strong, to be merciful, and to be faithful to all his promises. In the name of Jesus Amen.