

Higher Thoughts and Ways

In the name of him who does all things wisely and well, dear friends in Christ: That's true, you know: that the Lord God *does* all things wisely and well. But it seems that we often doubt or forget that. When faced with a minor inconvenience, who knows, maybe the car won't start, an appliance breaks down, the drain gets plugged at an inopportune time (is there ever an opportune time for such things?) we're likely to throw up our hands in frustration and exclaim, "Why? Why did this have to happen now?" Presumably the question is addressed to the Lord – and sometimes it is overtly. Then it comes out: "Why, God, are you letting this happen to me?" And this is for relatively minor things. It gets worse when the stakes are higher and you're facing bigger issues; maybe an injury or serious medical diagnosis for you or someone close, or a financial crisis of some kind, loss of income or investments, unexpected taxes or bills, overwhelming debt; or a genuine disaster, home damaged or destroyed by fire, flood, or windstorm. At such times we all begin to wonder aloud if "the Man upstairs" really has our best interests at heart.

All of this is just on the personal level. We could broaden our focus and consider even bigger issues than cause us to worry and doubt: political gridlock in Washington in which it seems that our elected officials fiddle while the country burns, the loss of American power and prestige in the world, the ailing economy and near stagnant "recovery", our porous southern border being overrun by illegal immigrants, the steady decline of society's morality, the undermining of traditional marriage and the subsequent collapse of the family, terrorism here and overseas, the rise of militant Islam and the persecution and murder of our fellow Christians, the Ebola outbreak in Africa which threatens to become a global pandemic ... I could go on and so could you piling on more things that are causing to rise within us a deepening sense of anxiety. Meanwhile in the media outspoken critics of our faith sneer at us a line that's often echoed by our non-Christian friends and neighbors: "So, your God is running the world, is he? Well, it seems to me that he's not doing a very good job of it." And we're left sputtering at this indictment, trying to come up with a response, and failing because we don't know what to say.

As it turns out, we don't have to. The Lord himself answers the accusation in today's text from Isaiah, "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

And to fully appreciate what the Lord is saying here, it will help us to review the main overarching theme of his message to his people through the prophet Isaiah. It's this: the Lord says, "I made you a people of my own. I turned you into a great nation. I ransomed you from slavery in Egypt and settled you the Promised Land. I gave you victory over your enemies. I blessed you with wise and powerful kings like David and Solomon who were feared by your enemies and admired by your friends. I gave you earthly glory and wealth. Above all, I set my Temple in your midst – the place where I said I would dwell with you on earth, where I would teach you my Word and forgive all your sins. I did all this for you and for no other nation on earth. And at every opportunity, you rejected me. You corrupted your ways, despised my Words, and squandered your worship and praise on false, idol gods. When I sent prophets too numerous to name to call you to repent and return to me, you persecuted them. Even now, you refuse to listen. So here's what I'm going to do: you're a divided kingdom now. First I'm going to destroy the northern kingdom which consists of ten of the twelve tribes of Israel. I'm going to bring in a foreign army that will wreak havoc and scatter the few survivors over the face of the

earth. I'm doing this as a warning to you who live in the southern kingdom of Judah. I want you to know that I mean business and that you are to repent or the same thing will happen to you. But I also know that you're not going to listen. So the time is soon coming when I will have to destroy your kingdom as well. Your nation will cease to exist. The devastation will be horrific. Jerusalem will be leveled and my Temple destroyed. It will seem to you and to all the world that I am powerless God, unable to protect my people and keep my promises.

"But it is precisely in this way that I am going to keep my promises and protect those who truly are my people, because I'm going to spare a remnant of you. I'm going to have you taken captive and carried off into exile. There in a foreign land I am going to preserve you. And after 70 years have passed, I'm going to bring you back. I'm going to resettle you in the Land I promised to your forefathers and reestablish your kingdom. When it happens, you'll be thrilled and overflowing with joy. You will know that I always keep my Word. And through you I will fulfill all the promises I made to the Patriarchs – including the promise to bring the Savior into the world through whom all things will be restored.

"And I'm telling you this in advance so that you too can be among those who are saved. When the world as you know it is falling apart, when the enemy is at the gates, when my holy city is destroyed, know that these are the drastic measures I needed to take – that you by your faithlessness forced me to take – and trust me. Repent of your sins. Turn back to me. And know that I will take care of you who through faith are truly mine."

Again, that's the brief version of Isaiah. The point is that no one living through these dreadful events would have imagined that the Lord was using them to preserve his people, keep them in a state of repentance and faith, and fulfill his promises to them. All the evidence would have said otherwise. And human wisdom evaluating the evidence would conclude that the God of Israel, if he exists at all, is a weak and pathetic deity not worthy of recognition.

To which Lord replies, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways. Mine are infinitely higher than yours. You think you're so smart. You think you can see what I'm doing through the events that take place on earth. And then when something you don't like happens, you think you have the right to sit in judgment of me and declare me to be weak and incompetent for allowing it to take place. Well, you're wrong. You're the ones whose tiny minds are limited and full of sinful corruption. You're the ones who are blind to the truth and cannot see what's really going on. And it's arrogant beyond measure for you to pretend that you can understand and then dare to sit in judgment of me."

Today's text from Isaiah speaks to our view of tragic events that happen on a national scale. In last week's Old Testament lesson, we saw it on more of a personal level. There we had the end of the Joseph narrative from Genesis. And if there was anyone who ever had reason to doubt the Lord's wise and good will toward him, Joseph was the guy. Think about it: he was almost murdered by his brothers who despised him only because he had the misfortune to be their father's favorite. But then he was spared, not by his brother's mercy, but by their greed. Instead of killing him they sold him into slavery to traders heading for Egypt – which in those days was just as good as murdering him. The life of an Egyptian slave was typically miserable and short. In Egypt he's purchased by an important government official. Through several years of hard work and faithful service he rises to be the head of the household staff. Sure, being a slave stinks; but if you have to be a slave, it's better to be a high ranking slave. But just when things are looking up, he's falsely accused by the boss's wife of attempted rape. And for seven long years he rots in an Egyptian dungeon.

Well, you know the story: how at length he interprets the dream that the Lord gave to the Pharaoh as a warning, and how Joseph is then placed in charge of all Egypt to save it from the coming famine. It all works out well in the end; but again, in his darkest moments, when he was sold by his brothers and purchased as a slave, or all that time in prison, all the evidence would have suggested that the Lord was doing a lousy job of taking care of poor Joseph. But what did he tell his brothers? “What you did to me, you meant for evil; but God meant it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”

Joseph understood that the Lord’s thoughts and ways are infinitely higher than ours, and that the Lord uses tragic events and, strangely, even the sins others commit against us to fulfill his wise and loving plan for our lives. His ways are not ours. They’re immensely better. His thoughts are not our thoughts. They are far beyond our understanding. For that we can give thanks. And so it is that in the face of adversity, be it on a personal level or on a much larger scale – it really doesn’t matter – and we’re tempted to think the Lord has dropped the ball, or he’s making a mistake, or he’s doing it all wrong, or he’s let me down, we need to recognize that for what it is: the sin of thinking that I am wiser and more competent than the Lord himself. It’s the claim that I would be a better God than he is.

It was that very thought, you may recall, that got Satan into so much trouble.

And seeing that sort of thinking in ourselves, we need also to see our need to repent of the satanic, arrogant self-delusion that it is. It’s nothing less than playing the game of armchair quarterback with the Almighty. Never a good idea. We are in no place to second guess or sit in judgment of him. To do so is the very height of prideful presumption. He does not owe us an explanation. Thus repenting of this wretched sort of thinking, we then turn our weak hearts and feeble minds to the highest of all God’s thoughts and ways: how in love he sent his Son to be our Savior; how he, like Joseph who foreshadowed him, was betrayed by his own, was sold into servitude, and was falsely accused. How he, though perfectly righteous, nevertheless endured the agonies of the cross as he suffered for our sins. Human wisdom could never have conceived such a plan of salvation: God saving a world full of rebels who despised and rejected him by the tortured death of his only-begotten and dearly loved Son. These are higher thoughts and ways indeed; which is why we know they can be trusted not just for our forgiveness and eternal salvation, but also for the present. In times of sorrow, in times of loss, in times of looming disaster and impending doom we can commit our cares and our lives to him whose thoughts and ways are so much higher than our own and who does all things well for us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!