

“My Ways Are Higher”

A Sermon by the Rt. Rev. Peter Buss, Jr.
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“As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:9)

Aha moments. Most of us have had our share of “aha moments”—times when something clicks, and we come to a new realization. It could be something physical, like someone discovering that they are allergic to wheat, and a new world of eating and health opens up for them. Or it could be something related to a relationship, like learning of a traumatic experience that a friend has endured in her childhood which explains some of her triggers in the present. Many of us, through our general learning, have become aware of game-changing ideas, like when it became known that the earth is a sphere rather than flat; or that people could improve their failing eyesight by placing shaped glass in front of their eyes. To use a philosophic concept from the life of Emanuel Swedenborg, he spent much of his early career in search of the soul within the body. But through his theological and revelatory exposure, he came to the realization that the soul exists on a different plane entirely, a discrete degree above the natural (*Invitation to the New Church* 14). It changed his whole way of thinking about the human beings we are.

So it can be when it comes to our spiritual lives. We can come to many profound realizations if we are paying attention. We are created to become angels. Marriage can last to eternity. Material riches do not bring happiness.

In fact, that is one of the functions of the Word itself—to open our eyes to new ways of thinking about life—spiritual ways that give us aha moment after aha moment about the Lord’s will for us, and how things really work. A phrase from Scripture captures this theme perfectly and stands as a refrain for our spiritual contemplations today. The Lord says, “My ways [are] higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:9).

My ways are higher. Let’s pause to consider those words for a moment. When we think about it, there is no question that they are true. The Lord’s perspective, and providential care, and wisdom are many discrete levels above our own. He is omniscient, and we are down here muddling through as best as we can. But the intent is not to make us feel inept or clueless. Rather the consistent call is to raise our minds above the day-to-day, to consider the Lord’s ways as revealed in His Word. “‘Come now, and let us reason together,’ says the Lord” (Isaiah 1:18). “Lift up your eyes all around and see” (Isaiah 60:1.4). “You have heard that it was said to those of old... But I say to you...” (Matthew 5).

Symbolically also there is this constant call to commune with the Lord on a higher level: note the small upper room built for Elisha (2 Kings 4:10), or the upper room in which the Lord ate His last supper with His disciples (Mark 14:15), or the fact that Moses went up Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments (Exodus 19). Then there is that passage we heard earlier about

the ability we all have to look upward toward God, or downward to the world. When we choose to look upward, it says that we receive influx and enlightenment (*Arcana Caelestia* 10,330).

“My ways are higher.” There are indeed vital spiritual realities that the Lord wants us to understand. There’s a better way of thinking about things. If we live according to His spiritual principles, life works out so much better for us. If we trust in Him, even when the future looks uncertain, His message is that things will work out in the end.

The Disciples and Easter. I’d like to draw your attention to two Biblical manifestations of this reality, where the truth of the Lord’s words come to light in powerful ways. The first is the Easter story itself, which many of us have so recently been focused on. In that incredible narrative, there is the very human reality that even the disciples, those closest to the Lord, didn’t know certain key things that would happen.

For example, as recorded in the Gospel of John, right after the Lord went into the temple and cast out the moneychangers, the Pharisees engaged Him in a debate about His authority. With the disciples listening Jesus, said a strange thing: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The Pharisees thought He was crazy and retorted, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you will raise it up in three days?” In that very section, the account jumps us forward in time three days after the Lord was crucified: “Therefore, when He had risen from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said this to them; and they believed...” (John 2:18-22).

A similar thing occurred around the Palm Sunday story. Jesus’ disciples witnessed Him riding into Jerusalem on a donkey’s colt, and the people meeting Him with palm branches and Hosannas. Then it says, “His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered...” (John 12:16). Can you see the aha moments in the minds of these disciples? While they were going through life in real-time with Jesus, many things He did and said didn’t make sense to them. But when it all came to its climax, and He appeared to them after the crucifixion, so many things slotted into place for them and they understood things in a new way.

Isn’t that the case for us as well? So many parts of our lives don’t make sense to us in real-time, but in the end, we come to understand: Why am I experiencing the money issues I am? Oh, maybe my priorities weren’t straight. How come it’s so hard to get along with this person? Oh, we’ve got some patterns that are dysfunctional, and I actually have to change. “Lord, what am I supposed to be learning from this one? Because I don’t see it.”

There’s a passage in the Heavenly Doctrines that says of our spiritual growth or regeneration, “The order by which a person is brought on his or her way while being regenerated no mortal being knows, not even the angels except in vaguest outline; only the Lord knows it” (*Arcana Caelestia* 1154). So also, we read in Genesis the words of Joseph to his brothers, “As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive” (Genesis 50:20). Isn’t it true that most of the

hardships that we endure, when we look back on them, have brought us in the Lord's providence to a more trusting, wise, and humble place in life? And the words that are our focus hit home in a new way: "My ways are higher than your ways."

"Arise." The other Scripture isn't Easter-related per se, although it is about death and resurrection. It's a poignant healing miracle shared with us in the Gospel of Luke, where Jesus brings back to life the daughter of a man name Jairus. The circumstances are indeed tragic, and the human states involved are among the most tender. For those who have faced the loss of a loved one, may you continue to feel the support of family, friends, and your church community.

The reason for focusing on it today, however, relates to some powerful details in that story that hold symbolic meaning for all of us, whether or not we've faced the loss of a loved one. At the point of healing itself, it says, "[Jesus] took her by the hand and called, saying, 'Little girl, arise'" (Luke 8:54). Arise. This is the lifting up of our spirits to experience life a little more from the Lord's perspective, or with a bit more of the realization of His ability to help. The little girl, aside from a precious loved one to her parents, represents "affection within which is innocence" (*Arcana Caelestia* 3067). Implied is the symbolic "little girl" within each of our spirits: a part of us open and accepting of the Lord's teachings and willing to place our faith in Him. The affection here is a love for the truth. Innocence is that trusting willingness to be led. Both together have the power to lift us up, or allow us to be lifted up as to our spirits by the Lord.

In this context I'd like to introduce another powerful phrase that comes to us in the Heavenly Doctrines that stands as goal for us. It is "to live morally from a spiritual origin" (*Apocalypse Explained* 195:2). What does that mean? To live morally is generally to do the right thing. It's the honorable way of conducting ourselves. It's owning up to our responsibilities. It's sacrificing what may be our first choice for ourselves for the sake of something more important. It's respecting other people's boundaries and ensuring that we are safe to be around. It's acting with integrity.

But there's more to it. There's the "from a spiritual origin" part. That's this well-meaning or moral part of ourselves fed by Divine wisdom from the Word. The little girl in this case is the part of us that's willing to be so fed. We discover, or rediscover, or are finally at a place to absorb the reality of one of the Lord's teachings. "I will forgive, even though a part of me doesn't want to." "I will do my best to cleanse the inside of the cup and dish or work with the Lord to purify what is going on inside." "I will carve out more time for prayer and spiritual contemplation." "I will forego this pleasure because the Lord commands it." Each of these commitments helps us to "live morally from a spiritual origin." As the passage continues, it leads us to "possess faith, the fear of God and conscience." It leads us to see in the Word Divine laws according to which we must live (*Apocalypse Explained* 195:2).

Implications. A few days ago I was describing to someone what I'd be preaching on today, and the person asked the simple question, "What's the take-away?" It's a great question, which focuses on the *implications* for this phrase of Scripture that we have been working with,

that the Lord's ways are higher than ours. I am a firm believer that the specific applications are unique to every person, so let me share with you some areas of application with hopes that they inspire your "My ways are higher" realizations.

The first area has to do with some of the things the Lord teaches in His Word. Sometimes those don't make sense to us, and we struggle with how to absorb them. How many of us have seen things in the Word that challenge our cultural sensitivities? Differences between the sexes, implications for women's and men's roles, marriage between one man and one woman, even the ideals of marriage which seem like they don't fit the experience of many people today. How many of us have questioned the Lord's rules around divorce and remarriage, or why intimacy between men and women is supposed to be experienced within the context of marriage?

As we struggle with these things, is there a way in which the words given to us in Isaiah can help: "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts"? Like the little girl to whom the Lord said, "Arise," there is a calling to discover why He has organized things the way He did. There are powerful reasons, and we are wise to reach up for them. We are wise to strive for a moral life fed from a spiritual origin.

The second area calls to mind once again those disciples who were confused by some of the events in Jesus' life that they witnessed, and only later had those events fall into place for them. Each of us, in the course of living, will come to those moments, where we don't know exactly how to proceed, or feel burdened by what has to be endured. It could be the loss of a loved one, or the gradual decline in our own health. It could be a major financial set-back, or a short-sighted decision that a loved-one has made which has created a mess. It could be a period of life where we feel unfulfilled—like we're going through the motions but don't seem to be getting anywhere.

We read again from the Heavenly Doctrines: "The order by which a person is brought on his way while being regenerated no mortal being knows, not even the angels except in vaguest outline; only the Lord knows it" (*Arcana Caelestia* 1154). How could it help to consciously raise our thoughts to the Lord in these contexts? Certainly, prayers to Him can bring feelings of comfort and inner peace. Would concepts of the eternal walk of life help too?

The goal appears to be to keep this refrain from Isaiah in mind, and to consciously place our faith in the Lord, saying in effect, "Lord, Your ways are higher than my ways, and Your thoughts than my thoughts. Help me to trust that You are leading me and my loved ones, and that all of us will be okay in the end." **Amen.**

Readings from the Lord's Word: Isaiah 55:9; John 12:12-16; *Arcana Caelestia* 10330, *Apocalypse Explained* 195:2.

Isaiah 55:6-9

⁸“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” says the LORD. ⁹“For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.”

John 12:12-16

¹²The next day a great multitude that had come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, ¹³took branches of palm trees and went out to meet Him, and cried out: “Hosanna! ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!’ The King of Israel!” ¹⁴Then Jesus, when He had found a young donkey, sat on it; as it is written: ¹⁵“Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your King is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt.” ¹⁶His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things were written about Him and that they had done these things to Him.

***Arcana Caelestia* 10,330**

The nature of human beings is such that they are able to use their inner powers of thought and will to look downwards or to look upwards. Looking downwards consists in looking away to the world and to self; and looking upwards consists in looking towards heaven and towards God. ...People looking in an inward direction are not self-directed but are directed by the Lord; this is called looking upwards because as to their inner powers of will and understanding they are then raised by the Lord towards heaven, and so towards the Lord.... As a result, they receive influx and enlightenment.

***Apocalypse Explained* 195:2**

To live morally from a spiritual origin is to act from religion, and within the church from the Word. For those who thus live from religion and from the Word are raised up above their natural self, and thus above their proprium, and are led by the Lord by means of heaven. This is why they possess faith, the fear of God and conscience, and also the spiritual affection of truth, which is an affection for the knowledges of truth and good derived from the Word; for to them these are Divine laws, according to which they live.