

“The Way, I Am”

In the Gospel of John, there are seven distinct “I am” statements from Jesus. From our reading today, Jesus says “I am the resurrection and the light.” And in John 14, we have Jesus saying “I am the way and the truth and the life.” There are many references to Jesus as the way. In fact, the early Christians referred to themselves and their movement as followers of “the Way” before the term “Christian” became common.

If you take a road trip across America, you are bound to see a few billboards, yard signs, or bumper stickers urging you to accept Jesus as the only way to salvation. To be honest, that statement always felt a little unsettling to me. And I’m not entirely sure why.

For I find great wisdom to be found in Buddhism. Does that mean I have to throw it all out if I make the claim, “Jesus is the way”? Is it really just my way or the highway? It feels almost limiting. And Christianity should be anything but limiting.

However, I also find it a little unsettling to instead say, “Jesus is simply one way among many ways.” That feels like saying, “You have your truth, I have mine, and ultimately, there is no Way at all.” We’re just fending for ourselves.

I present these questions of mine not to cast doubt, but to attempt to reach a deeper understanding of scripture. It is important not to discourage questions. For the moment we answer a young person’s “Why?” with “Because it’s tradition,” we’ve lost. It’s a little like the parent who answers their toddler’s incessant questioning with, “because I said so!” Tradition disappears the moment it is mentioned by name. To keep old truths alive, they must be a living dynamic presence, confronting both the immediate present and the unfolding future.

Furthermore, to say Jesus is the Way, it must in some sense describe what it means to be a human being. A *created* human being. A *child* of God.

So I do believe it is possible to say, “Jesus is the way,” which does not exclude ancient wisdom found in all ages from all corners of the earth. And not just, “for the bible told me so,” but because it speaks to who we are.

This brings us to the main part of my talk. Hope. I have come to realize that Hope describes this humanity we all share. And if Jesus is considered the embodiment of hope, it might be worth looking a little closer into what hope is all about if we believe Jesus is the Way.

At face value, hope almost seems like a weakness. Immature. Contrary to the tough gritty strong man attitude embodied by cultural icons like, say, John Wayne. Where you need to buck up, pull up your boot straps, and pave your own way. Life is hard, and fight through it! Hope is just fanciful day dreaming. Polyannish, wishful thinking.

But hope is so much more. And I'd like to show that today with the help from a 20th century Christian philosopher named Josef Pieper. Pieper was an expert in classical and medieval philosophy and Christianity, particularly with the works of Plato, Aristotle, and Thomas Aquinas. Pieper was introduced to me by my philosophy professor at Augsburg College, Markus Fuhrer, who meant a great deal to me.

To start, I will attempt to paint a picture of what the hopeful state looks like for a human person. A sort of zoomed out picture of the human experience. And to help illustrate that, I will introduce a latin phrase, presented by Pieper.

(If you want your idea to be taken seriously, you gotta have a latin phrase!)

And this phrase is the "status viatoris (vee-ah-toris)." This translates to "the state of being on the way." "Viator" can also be thought of as voyage, journey, traveler, seeker, pilgrim, and so on.

So, we are on the way. On the way to what? Well, there's a latin phrase for that! It is the status comprehensoris. Which can be translated to the state of one who has comprehended. This state can also be thought of as: fulfillment, ultimate happiness, Beatific Vision, resting in God, or my favorite, the Great Banquet.

So, we have two states here. The state we find our physically embodied selves in, the status viatoris. And there's the state we find God, the status comprehensoris.

And yes, I am aware we have already entered the realm of paradox. The one has been broken into two. It appears we've put ourselves over here, and God over there. It's not within the scope of this talk to address this paradox, so you'll just have to live with it.

But that's what I like about Christianity. It embraces the paradoxes. It's like the spiritual "yes and." It says, yes Jesus was human. And yes Jesus was divine!

You may also be wondering, "isn't this all just a fancy way to say, "life's a journey" the most tired of all cliches?" Well, yeah, that is what I'm basically saying. But sometimes the oldest of truths find themselves trapped in familiar cliches, hiding behind a veil of familiarity, breeding contempt, unable to escape and enrich our lives. So, I think it is worth diving into. Because I'd hate to take for granted some of the greatest truths staring me right in the face.

So, as for the state we live in, this journey, this being "on the way" teaches us two very interesting things: First, it reveals a "not yet." We are not yet fully in the Kingdom of God, A sort of in-between state. The "not yet" implies in some sense something lacking, something not fully realized in our selves. The second interesting thing it reveals is our "orientation towards fulfillment." The fact that we were created with a deep drive to seek, thirst, and reach out into the world. This speaks to the easily forgotten fact that all beings, endowed with reason, ultimately want to be happy. We all want to be happy.

It is unfortunate that many religious speakers today often shy away from the word 'happiness', fearing it sounds too shallow or self-indulgent. Almost to such extremes that to want to be happy could be viewed as selfish!

But for the medieval mind, happiness was the very core of the Christian life. The way they saw it, happiness is the ultimate goal for human life. It is the spiritual gravity that pulls us forward. Thomas Aquinas insisted, "no one can remain in sadness." This is a thirsting, seeking, that all beings possess which continually drives them toward God. A human being desires spiritual fulfillment just as a falling stone seeks the ground, as the flower turns to the light, and the beast hunts its prey.

These two concepts within the status viatoris, the 'not yet' and 'orientation towards fulfillment' may seem unnecessarily abstract (or painfully obvious) at first, but ever since I have given more honest attention to these two basic parts of our humanity, I see traces of it everywhere. It has deepened my understanding of Christian faith. Pieper even proposes that nearly every theological statement about humanity refers to one or the other of these two concepts.

So, this is the hopeful state we live in. But we also have this unique ability to suffer and feel pain, experience bad things (and have an all around bumner of a time). All of which can provide plenty of fuel for despair, which takes us out of this hopeful state. To not be in hope. To not follow the way.

And what exactly is despair?

When confronted with suffering, hope says, "not yet" (i.e. bad things happen, but that's not the whole story). Despair is the temptation to turn the "not yet" into "not." (bad things happen, and that's all there is to it. End of story.)

A famous modern proclamation of despair would be from the philosopher Nietzsche, who is famously quoted for saying, "God is dead," not so much as a theological argument, but more as a description of where we find ourselves in the secular modern era.

Finding ourselves living in this era of despair, Nietzsche attempts to offer a solution. He calls it "heroic nihilism", which accepts that life is fundamentally meaningless yet we choose to create value, live intensely, put on a happy face, and carry on.

If you aren't familiar with the term Nihilism, it is essentially an attitude that denies our orientation toward fulfillment. Nihilism states that, "The proper movement of a being that stems from nothingness is to tend toward nothingness." I once heard in an interview on NPR musician Tom Waits cleverly put it this way, "reality is just the dead on vacation." Or to quote the Nihilists from one of my favorite films, The Big Lebowski, "we believe nothing"

(I wouldn't be fulfilling my duty of being a guy born in the 80s if I didn't quote The Big Lebowski.)

I would be lying if I said I've never felt this way. That maybe life is just a cosmic joke. Maybe life truly is absurd.' But then I must realize: if life were actually, 100% absurd, then my statement 'life is absurd' would also have to be absurd, and therefore not true. I would then have to borrow truth from a meaningful universe just to be able to complain that it is meaningless. But I digress.

So, what would be an answer to this nihilism? Thomas Aquinas had an answer. He said, "Just as they have their source in nothingness, so created beings could sink back into nothingness if that were pleasing to God" But (quoting the book of Wisdom) "God created all things that they might be"

For those of you who would prefer a less metaphysical (and weirdly unsettling) answer, and maybe something a little more tangible, I will next provide some useful tools to help us stay in hope. These are the virtues of magnanimity and humility.

Magnanimity, translated from Latin to mean "great soul," is simply the aspiration of the spirit to great things. It is the courage to believe that God created us for greatness, to believe we do have that power within ourselves. Despair is a box. It's a small, cramped room where we set limits on ourselves and believe we exist merely to survive for a short while. But Magnanimity kicks the walls down and opens us up to a greater world full of purpose. Magnanimity sets no limits to how high we can soar.

However, there is a danger involved with too much greatness, just ask Icarus. We could reach so high for fulfillment that we may think we have reached fulfillment, and that there is no further to go in this life. This is pride, the realm of charlatans and online influencers, who claim to have figured it all out and will give you their secrets for only \$9.99 a month. In pride, we forget our place in the status viatoris. The "not yet" that says we are not yet in the Kingdom of God. This is where the hopeful virtue of humility comes into play and acts as a counterbalance.

Humility prevents us from puffing up and flying too close to the sun. Humility isn't just a person to person attitude, how I rank myself among other people. It is an attitude of a person before the face of God. It is the knowledge and acceptance of an inexpressible distance between Creator and creature.

Both Magnanimity and Humility are like the protective barriers that keep us in hope, one keeps the other in check. Magnanimity without humility is pride; and humility without magnanimity is small mindedness. Put in another way, magnanimity directs hope to its true possibilities. Humility reveals the limitations of these possibilities.

The next human expression of hope that I would like to talk about is probably my favorite. It is the uniquely human ability to wonder. The German poet Goethe, in his later years concluded that, "the highest state to which humanity can aspire is wonder." And there are striking similarities between hope and wonder. In wonder it is revealed that we do not yet fully know God.

Wonder transcends. It takes us out of time. I recently heard one theologian refer to wonder as “the call of the stranger.” Basically, wonder is a response to some shock that puts us into a state of unknowing.

Most of the time, we go about our days in a state of knowing. We rely on practical knowledge to survive, secure our livelihoods, be an upstanding citizen, and be able to better help others. There is also the non-practical knowing. Knowledge about who we are and what it all means. And there is of course nothing inherently wrong with knowing in all its forms.

But we have a bad habit of building fortresses out of our knowledge. We hide behind our walls of knowing. It feels safe and secure. It protects us from the scary world of the unknown. But as we live our lives, something eventually breaks down these walls and reveals a world we do not yet know. It can be a shocking and jarring experience. And it can come about in various ways, both good and bad. From the realization of our own mortality, to love, art, or a starry night.

It is through humility that we allow ourselves to open our eyes to that experience, to truly empty our minds and allow ourselves to receive what is arising, both good and bad. To simply see what is.

To help illustrate this further, I would like to briefly mention an allegory from Plato. His famous allegory of the cave. You may have heard of it.

In this allegory, Plato says we are like prisoners trapped in a cave and shackled to the floor. Within this cave where we live, images from a fire behind us are being projected on a wall in front of us. We see those images in front of us and start to name them. And we can barely keep our eyes off of them (I can picture a modern version of this allegory involving smart phones).

Well, eventually one of the prisoner’s shackles becomes undone, but he keeps sitting there. He does not turn around until he is compelled to do so. And when he does, Plato describes a great discomfort that is involved in this, a shock if you will. The blinding light from the fire projecting the images, the pain from moving about after being shackled for so long. And after all this agony, the freed prisoner is then told that the fire is more real than the images that were projected on the wall. You can probably guess what his response would be. He’d say, you’re crazy!

But it doesn’t stop there. The freed prisoner is then dragged out of the cave and into the sunlight, an even brighter light than the fire within the cave. The man lowers his head, most uncomfortably straining his eyes, barely seeing his own feet on the ground.

He eventually settles down, his eyes adjust and he looks directly at the sun. He sees the truth of everything. The cause of everything.

The man returns to the cave and tells everyone the good news. He says, you all have been living a lie. You think you know, but you really don’t know. Nothing you see here is really true. I’ve seen the light, the truth, come with me!

What does everyone do? Well, they not only laugh at him. They think he's dangerous and they try to kill him. Plato here is alluding to Socrates's trial for practicing philosophy and ultimate execution on charges of "corrupting the youth." And of course we can see the similarity with Jesus being killed on the cross for going against the authority of Caesar.

There's much to explore with this allegory, but what I'd like to focus on here is how it illustrates not only our capacity to wonder, but also our stubborn unwillingness to allow ourselves to be humbled into wonder. When we don't allow for mystery in our lives, what emerges is a cold, rigid world dominated by hubris, prejudice, and authoritarianism. Unable to connect to the larger, diverse world around us. Making space and opening our hearts for wonder can free us from that cold world.

Pieper gives his own example of how the shock from wonder is so counter to our everyday lives of the cave.

He says, imagine among the voices that fill the workplace and markets ("buy!", "sell!", "email me this now," "I need that by monday") suddenly one voice calls out above the rest and asks one simple question: "why is there anything at all and not nothing?" "Why is there anything at all". (Heidegger called this the basic age-old question of all metaphysics). Well, you can imagine the reaction you would get. They would think you are a lunatic. What kind of nonsense question is that? Plus, it is not the time nor place for a question like that.

Pieper is showing how if we allow the world of total work to dominate every aspect of our lives, we won't have the freedom to express our humanity and experience wonder.

This explains why philosophers are often at the receiving end of jokes because wonder is ultimately useless and contrary to the busy workaday world. This has been the case from time immemorial.

Plato famously described a story of the philosopher Thales of Miletus, who, so absorbed in his stargazing, fell into a well, to be laughed at and ridiculed by a nearby servant girl.

Or a more modern joke one of my older brothers liked to tell when I told him I was interested in philosophy goes like this, "what's the difference between a philosopher and a pepperoni pizza? A pepperoni pizza feeds a family of four."

So, to summarize, we are like prisoners in a cave only looking at the shadows of things. Wonder is that shock that compels us to leave the cave. It shakes us out of our comforts and certainties to penetrate something deeper. The shock comes from genuine human activity that transcends our immediate surroundings. Be it art, love, worship, a genuine philosophical question, and even suffering. These compel us to leave the cave and approach something more real. Pieper even argues that it is precisely this shock that distinguishes true art from false art. True art brings us closer to reality, it takes us out of the cave of illusion. False art resigns itself to decorating the cave walls.

Ok, so far I have been sort of beating around the bush. I've given a birds eye view of the hopeful state. But I haven't really talked about the act of hope itself.

What does it mean when we hope, like, when I say, "I hope the Packers win the game tomorrow"?

Hope here sounds like an expectation. "I expect the Packers to win the game tomorrow" But I can expect many things. I can expect good things, but even bad things. (I could also expect the Packers to lose tomorrow because their star quarterback is injured. But I would still hope they win, because I want them to win).

So, when we speak of hope, we are only talking about the things we expect that are *good*. (good weather, good health, good company, good game). So, there is a longing and desire for something good.

But even that's not enough. Longing and desire alone do not make hope. I could desire something I know will never happen. (I could desire for the vikings to win the superbowl, but that wont happen. So, there's no sense in hoping for that.)

In hope there is a sort of confidence that what we hope for is attainable. That what we desire is possible. (It is entirely possible that the Packers could win their game, and we desire that to happen. And what joy that would bring if they won!)

This is the reason why joy belongs, if not to the essence of hope, at least as a close friend. Hope aims at the attainment of what we love. And joy is the response to the attainment of what we love.

So now, we could describe hope as "joyful expectation" but wait there's more!

We also hope for things we cannot do ourselves.

It would be nonsense for my carpenter to say, "I hope I succeed in making this table for you according to these plans," If someone said that, I would probably need to find another carpenter. But it would make sense for my carpenter to say, "I hope the wood delivery arrives on time so I can finish this table tomorrow." The carpenter, here, is relying on something outside herself to finish the table. The wood delivery. Basically, we have no power over what we hope for.

And now hope can be described as a "joyful expectation of a good that we cannot attain on our own."

But, what about the objects of our hope? The things we hope *for*? There are thousands of things that can be the objects of our hope. Good weather. Good health. A just government. The Packers winning a game.

All of which can be dashed and buried....

I hope I will have good health for as long as possible. But I know health is a fading good. My body will eventually fail me. Again, hopefully later rather than sooner, but there's no guarantee in that either. I mean, I got shingles already and I'm not even 40 yet!

So, these many hopes can get dashed. But when that happens, we don't lose hope in the absolute sense because there is one single hope, the loss of which would actually make one hopeless. This single hope can be called 'the' hope, or just Hope. 'The' hope has no tangible object to which we can easily point our finger.

This foundational hope seems to come about when the everyday hopes begin to disappear. Just as wonder breaks us from the illusion of our certainties, dashed hopes can free us from an illusion as well. The illusion that wholeness of existence implies the attainment of certain material goods, including bodily health.

The disappointment of this belief enables us to realize what we perhaps knew all along. That true wholeness consists in something else. Something outside ourselves. Something we are hoping for with a much more vital and even invincible power of our soul.

Well, what is the one true hope? Mysteriously, it is hope without an object. Not something that can be easily pinned down, bottled up, and sold. It is the unseen hope, as Paul in Romans 8 puts it.

But if we must label it, it is hope in God and all the synonyms we apply to it: Fullness of life. Coming home. The status comprehensoris. Salvation. The Stranger. Beatific Vision. The Universal Good. The Great Banquet, A New Heaven and New Earth.

I think I need to pause for a second and clarify something here.

It may be tempting to think. "Are you telling me then that it is meaningless and futile to hope for things in this world?"

We often see some religious people look callously upon our historical and political struggles with an almost smug self assuredness in the hereafter. To such an extent that they laugh at those worried about gun violence or healthcare, offering empty prayers without any intentions for action. Or even taken to such extremes that one would strap an explosive vest to themselves for a heavenly reward.

But this one hope in no way implies that the hopes we have for this world are futile, meaningless, unnecessary, or irrelevant to the Kingdom of God. And this can't be stressed enough. Yes, the one hope does look beyond this historical world, but it also affirms it and keeps it in view. And this brings me to my final point.

For any of this to work at all, there must be love.

For hope to even be possible or worthy of our time, it must be rooted in an affirmation of God and the world. It must be grounded in the fact that everything at its core, the roots of it all, in the final analysis, is sound, plumb, and in order.

It is from this radical confidence in the inherent goodness of creation that we get such bold statements from Thomas Aquinas who says, quote, "there is absolutely nothing in the world that has not been willed, affirmed, or creatively loved by the Creator; thus there is nothing that is not good, and this for no other reason than because it "is."

Or more simply put, from the ever patient Job who said, "even if He kills me. I will hope in Him."

So, what hope is ultimately saying is that, despite all the pain, the suffering, the oppression, it will all turn out. And this rests upon love, an active affirmation of God and the world. This is the crux of it all. It's Jesus' two commandments: To love god, and to love neighbor.

It is putting your hands up and acknowledging that life is pure gift. To say I am that gift, and thank you God for this gift. This makes the ordinary suddenly extraordinary. Just by the fact that it's amazing to be something rather than nothing.

This bold affirmation is easier said than done. But it must be done. To look at oneself and really ask how you feel about yourself, life, the universe, and everything.

In some ways it is kind of a silly thing to even do. We don't choose to be born, to exist. And somehow we are born and are able to have a feeling about it. But have a feeling about it we must. Love it we must. God already holds our hand, but we must hold his hand too. Do the good work in *this* world.

To center our scattered senses upon the presence of God, tune our hearts, open our eyes and ears, humble our spirit, while at the same time thirst for it all and demand nothing less. If you do that, the great mystery will open itself up to you and you will receive grace and happiness through contemplation of God and the world around you.

There's a youthfulness and happiness in hope that emanates from the participation in the life and love of God. From a rose in springtime, to the sight of a child, to old friends reuniting, feasts with family, and memories of loved ones lost.

Pieper says, "When we experience genuine happiness and hope, these exclamations of joy can scarcely be spoken without also giving tongue to an assent and affirmation which extends beyond the object praised and touches upon the origin of the universe."

All the happy moments that arise from participating in God's goodness mean at their core one and the same thing: that the world is sound, plumb, and in order. That nothing and no one is lost, that God holds in his hands the beginning, middle, and end of all that is."

So, with our feet grounded in faith, our bodies cloaked in love, we can walk the path of hope. We are pilgrims, yes, not yet home. But the one who called us to the path IS the path itself. The Way.