

# What are we here for?

11.6.05 Sermon  
S. Congregational UCC  
Centerville MA 02632

(Law) Joshua 24.1-3a,14-26 (Prophets) Amos 5.18-24 (Writings) Psalm 78 (p.63, Book of Worship) (Gospel) Mt.25.1-13

Heavenly Father, touch & penetrate & shake & awaken the inmost depths & center of our souls, that all that is within us may cry & call unto You. Shake the flinty rock of our hearts, that the water of eternal life may spring up in it. Oh, break open the gates of the great deep in our souls, that Your light may shine in upon us, that [here & now] we may enter into Your kingdom of light & love, & in your light see light." In Jesus' name, amen. (Wm.Law, almost three centuries ago; I changed to plural, & modernized the English.)

BROTHERS & SISTERS, I am full of years & of stories & am dangerous to be with because if you stay near me I may pile on you enough stories to sink you into weariness & boredom. But this morning you're safe because I can't tell many stories before we come to celebrate the Story of stories, the coming of God to be with us as one of us, eating with us, dying for us, rising from death to deliver us from fear of it, sharing with us his body, commissioning us to be his body gathered in the church to praise & rejoice in God & in one another, scattered throughout the world for the works of love, of caring, & of hope against all the temptations to yield to fear & despair & surrender hope & joy.

Now, I've already answered the question which is this sermon's title: we are here to celebrate the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, which in this church we do the first Sunday of every month. Of course this answer doesn't exhaust the question "What are we here for?" The question echoes down all the corridors of our lives & of the universe. We should ask it all our lives, in perpetual self-examination. The question can be huge, as in a child seeking life-direction. And it can be as humorous as oldsters gone downstairs & wondering why, & going back upstairs to remember why they wanted to go downstairs: upstairs is the place to do the necessary remembering.

Let's stay with upstairs/downstairs. Of course when I say that, many of us think of that 67-episode Edwardian drama of the British class-system, with upstairs the upper-class family (downstairs for the lower-class underlings): think of upstairs as the overlings, the upper story, the realm of transcendence, the library of memory, the skylight on hope. We go upstairs to study the Bible & learn the overstory under which--on the first floor--we live out the stories of our lives. Upstairs, in the Bible readings earlier in this worship, we heard the story of Abraham, who came to believe that he was here to found a family of faith, a house of hope in pilgrimage into an unknown known only to God his Guide, who led him out of Syria into Canaan, & his descendants out of famine-devastated Canaan to Egypt, then out of Egypt into wilderness wandering until Moses died & Joshua challenged the people to choose between idols & the true & living God (then out of Israel into Iraq, then out of Iraq into Judaea, then out of Judaea into Diaspora).

Now, since we live downstairs, we look at upstairs from underneath, as though we were the primary actors. Edna St.Vincent Millay's famous poem has that perspective: "The world moves on from side to side / no wider than the heart is wide. / The soul can split the sky in two and let the light of God shine through." But the truth is that our tiny souls have no sky-splitting power; if God's light shines through, it is God's doing. You know the somewhat sour saying that life is what happens to you when you had other plans? Well, grace--God's gracious gift of his illuminating presence & saving intervention--is what sometimes happens to us when we are going about our business with our defective notions of what we are here for.

But though the Bible was written downstairs by God-lovers looking up & seeing the ceiling that is heaven's floor, by God's grace they are at the same time standing on heaven's glass floor & looking down into the first floor--commenting on earth's doings in the light of heaven. While the kings are manipulating politics & the priests are managing religion, the prophets are confronting both with a critical word of the Lord to look up, turn from evil, &--as our second Bible-reading

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this morning put it--do not presume that "the Man upstairs" will be kind to you no matter how your live; rather, "let justice flow like a stream, & righteousness like a river that never goes dry." What are we here for? Say the prophets, to turn from the darkness of centering in ourselves to the light of living God's truth & courageous goodness & forgiving love. And we are here (this we heard in the Psalm we read together) to "tell to the next generation" "the hidden lessons of the past" that are all too easy to forget: "Sing them over again to me, wonderful words of life." And we are here, says the Gospel lesson we heard, to prepare ourselves for tomorrow & hereafter; 5 of the 10 girls foolishly forget to bring extra oil for their lamps, & they were excluded from the party. Instead of only frightening & boring ourselves with all the bad news in the world, we Christians should be thinking & praying & talking about what really matters, & the Bible is by far the best book to help us. Each Sunday after worship we have opportunity, after some standing conversations, to sit for a circle conversation to help one another learn to think & talk like Christians in the light of the Bible, so we can better live as Christians in a world that is no friend of our Lord Jesus Christ nor of us when we live as his friends. Everybody is invited, & you are as free to be silent as to speak. And you may be surprised, if you come, to find yourself clearer about why you are here in this upper room....

....yes, the Fellowship Hall, where we have the circle conversation each Sunday, is on the first floor. But I've been asking you to think of churches as upper floors, as the only buildings with second stories. The Twin Towers had 110 floors but no second story--& when they collapsed, they didn't even have one story, not a single floor: gravity waits & wins, we all sag down & collapse--the municipal building, the court, the schools, the stores, the houses--none of them has an upper room built only for communion with God, for what matters most & matters forever, for finding answers to questions which on the first floors we can only ask--like, Why am I (are we) here? We support the church with our presence, our skills, our money because of all the buildings in a community, only the places of worship are upper stories for our upper selves, for our souls that reach up out of time into eternity, upper stories for praise & prayer & welcoming God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, upper stories where the terrorists cannot reach us & the politicians cannot manipulate our fears & the tempter cannot seduce us away from the joy of the Lord.

In a jungle of South America, where I was on a preaching tour, Loree & I were having lunch in a parsonage, & it seemed to me as though its upper floor was missing. "Yes," said the pastor; "the termites went to the roof & ate down until the parsonage was reduced to one floor." Think about it. Imagine our town with no places of worship, all of them having disappeared in the maws of termites. That is the human condition when, as the Psalmist we heard this morning said, we forget God, come only occasionally to worship, give little or no time or money to places of worship, & live only on the first floor where the termites--having finished off the upper floor--are now feasting on us, eating away our joy, our peace, our love, our hope. Contrast such misery with these simple words on a flap of a jacket of Rick Warren's THE PURPOSE-DRIVEN LIFE, which has sold 24 million copies: "You are not an accident....God...planned you for his purposes" which "will extend far beyond the few years you will spend on earth. You were made to last forever!" But you can't begin "by looking within yourself....You must begin with God, your Creator, and his reasons for creating you. You were made BY God and FOR God, and until you understand that, life will never make sense."

A final story: Imagine what it would be like to come out into the light after being under water for half a year. It happened when Polaris I surfaced & put in at Charleston Navy Yard, where then I (as a religion consultant to the U.S.Navy) boarded it with the Navy chief of chaplains, who had me sit in the captain's seat & touch the three keyholes three officers would have to use together to fire a nuke. The Navy wanted the sub's computers programmed to provide upper-story (religion) education for underwater sailors. The chief of chaplains thought I & my five companions would do a better job of building that upper story into the computers if we touched those nuke keyholes & got more serious about danger & death & life. We are in darkness God's light in Jesus shines & we see who we are & why we're here.