

Why Are We Here? Why Are We Alive?

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

There was an old Swedish farmer in Northern Minnesota who worked hard all his life and was delighted when at last he and his wife late in life, had a little baby boy. All through the years this farmer who didn't have much of an education was preoccupied with one question. It was a 'why' question and he just looked forward to the time when his boy would be able to go to school and get the education that he had not been able to get and especially that sometime or other, he would at last get to the great University of Minnesota. The time came when the boy came to that age and the father took him down to one of the dormitories at the University of Minnesota.

The boy went through his first quarter and then went home at Christmas time. The father was looking forward to seeing him because he felt, "My boy will now be able to answer the question that has hypnotized me and mesmerized me and made me desperate all through the years of my life." And so he asked the son, "Well, what did you do this quarter?"

The boy said, "Calculus, analytical geometry and we did some physics." He started to outline all the subjects and the father was interested and listened enthusiastically. But then he said, "Now, did you find out?" The boy said, "Did I find out what?" The father said, "Why are we here? Why are we here?" The boy said, "What do you mean why are we here?" The father said, "Why are we alive? Why are we here?" The boy said, "No dad, they didn't talk about that." Throughout the years of the boy's life, the four years that he passed at the university, the dad would keep on asking him.

After the boy had outlined each quarter's studies, the father would say, "And, why are we alive?" The boy would say, "No, I don't know." The day came for the graduation and it was the father's first time to come onto the campus and he walked down the mall and he looked up above the Northrop Auditorium and read, 'The search for truth'. "This is what this university was established for. This is what I was looking forward to you being able to tell me. Do you know now why we're here?"

The boy just looked down and said, "No, no". That's a hideous situation isn't it? I had the same situation. I went to Queen's University in Belfast and so I am not knocking you, but it is ridiculous, isn't it? It is irrational that all of us here are studying all kinds of different subjects. We know the answers to all kinds of questions but we don't know the one question that is at the basis of all other questions and that a normal, ordinary, uneducated man fastens onto as the most important question to be answered in this life.

Really, loved ones, it is irrational that we do not deal with it. It is like that situation that I once described before. A Greyhound bus draws up just outside there on University Avenue. We all get into it and it goes down University Avenue onto Interstate 35 and out onto the freeway.

After we all get to know each other for 15 or 20 minutes, somebody says, "Now, where are we going?" And somebody else says, "Bring out the food, there's food back here. I'm hungry. Let's have lunch." And so we all get into lunch and have some food and then somebody says, "But what are we all doing in the bus here?" And somebody else says, "Look, let's have some songs and play some games." And so we all start singing and playing some games.

Then after three hours, a kind of neurosis sets in because we all begin to realize that nobody is

answering the question. Everybody is pretending that we're having such a great time that it doesn't matter where we're going as long as we just keep doing it. Then imagine that situation three weeks later. Imagine the kind of uncertainty and insecurity that begins to spread among us all. Now, take it on 20 years. Some of us are not so happy as we once were, because some of us are getting sick. Some of us have died and been thrown off the bus and we don't know what happened to us. Others are having children and the children are beginning to ask the question, "But daddy why? Where are we going? Why are we here?" And everybody keeps saying, "Don't bother about that. Just keep singing. Keep laughing. Keep cleaning the windows of the bus."

Well, after a while, you'll do anything to get off that bus. You'll do anything to get out of such a meaningless situation. Some are crowding into one corner in order to protect themselves from another group in another corner. Some have too much food and some haven't enough food. Eventually one guy starts writing the only book that we're all interested in then, it's the only way to get off the bus, "How to Commit Suicide".

Do you know such a book has already been written? Really you can't blame a person doing it. Because we're on a space ship that is going far faster than any Greyhound bus would be able to go on an American freeway and we are spinning very fast through space. Loved ones, there has to be some reason why we're here. There has to be. It has to be a basic concern of education to find out why -- otherwise everything is meaningless. Who cares what the windows are made of or what the cushions on the seats are made of or how to live happily with each other? Who cares about that if nobody actually knows why we're here or where we're going or what we're going to end up as.

Of course, the problem in it we all know. The problem is we're all in the bus. Nobody's coming from outside to tell us why we're all here. The only people we know are the people on the bus. That's why that London musical was written, 'Stop the world, I want to get off'. We have a feeling if we could get off it or if we could get somebody onto it who wasn't on it at the beginning, he might be able to tell us what it's all about. He might be able to tell us why we're alive.

It's interesting. One guy comes along called Mohammad and he says, "I can tell you", but he's on the bus. What does he know? He never was off the bus. He came onto it like the rest of us. He was born on it. Another fellow called Buddha comes along and he says, "I'll tell you why we're here", but he was born on the bus. He doesn't know either and another fellow called Zoroaster comes along and he says, "I'll tell you why." The difficulty with them all is, they're all limited by the fact that they were born on the bus. They were never off it.

There's only one man that came onto the bus from beyond. There's only one man that has ever left the bus and come back to show us that he was able to come back and to leave it when he wanted. That was the man Jesus of Nazareth whose historicity we studied last Sunday. If you ask Him, "Why are we alive?" he'll begin like this. He'll say, "Well, first of all whatever is of flesh, whatever is born of flesh is flesh. You are born of flesh. You're born of the same kind of substance as your mother and father. I want to tell you this, you're not going to last any longer than they are. It doesn't matter what you do. The physical life that you have and the mental life and the emotional life that you have, it's only going to last about 70 or 80 years. It's not going to last any longer. It doesn't matter what you do to make that life better. That life is not going to go on more than 70 or 80 years."

In fact He would say to us this morning, "You're actually more dead than you were when you were 17 because the old cells are dying." You say, "Yes, but some are being renewed." Yes, but less are

being renewed after 17 than are dying. You're actually starting to deteriorate from about 16 or 17 years. The marks of that deterioration become obvious in the color of our hair later on and then the wrinkles. But from a surprisingly early age, we're already condemned to death. Jesus would say that to us this morning, "Get this clear. The way you're moving at the moment is towards extinction. It's a temporal life that you have. That flesh life that you have is not going to last more than 70 or 80 years."

The strange thing that you and I face is we feel that's wrong. We feel it's not true. There's something in us that says, "No, I wasn't made to go out like a light after 70 years. I wasn't. There's something in me that I feel goes on. I feel it goes on." This book says God has put eternity into man's mind. There's something inside us, isn't there, that makes us rebel against the idea that we won't last more than 70 or 80 years.

Actually, we go to a funeral and it's a deceptive thing. We're absolutely convinced that that will never happen to us however close we get to it. There's something in us that makes us feel, "Yes, but the person is still alive." We're not made to just die and be nothing. We feel all that frustration and try to overcome it. The gold watch at the end of the 30 or 40 years seems to signify the end, but we feel it can't be the end. There must be something more.

You know what you and I do and this is what Jesus would explain. We actually try to take this temporary life and make it into the life that will last forever. We try to make it into the life of eternity. We say, "Okay, it is pretty wild here. You can't go on a cruise now without some hijackers probably killing you. You can't be sure of what will happen when the thing really blows up in the Middle East. We can't really be sure how often we get onto a plane and know that we'll land at our destination. The whole thing is getting pretty rocky."

When Wall Street shakes, we all shake. It is an uncertain, unstable world. Yet I feel I was made for stability. You know what we do. We try to parley all the attributes and qualities that we have into some kind of stability. That's why we go to school. We like to think we go to school to search for truth. We like to think we go to the school to benefit society. But many of us go to school so that we'll get a decent education, and get a good job. Maybe through the money we earn, we can establish some kind of stability and security in our life. This is because we feel we were made for the stability and security of going on forever.

We try to do that and you know how we do it. We try to trade up our cars and trade up our houses to get a little above the crowd. If we can just get our head above this economy, maybe we'll have the kind of stability that we believe we were made for. So that's what we do. We try to build up our stocks and shares. We try to build up our investments. We try to get the best medical package, and the best insurance package. We try somehow to satisfy this feeling inside us that we deserve and are made for the security and stability of eternity. Yet we are haunted all the time, aren't we?

We're haunted by one terrible figure. We're haunted by the figure of that haggard old face with the bedraggled beard that was carried out of a luxury apartment at the top of a motel here in the States. He had Kleenex still sticking to his fingers and died on the way to hospital of malnutrition. Why we're haunted by him is, he was the richest man in the world. Howard Hughes was the richest man in the world. He did more than any of us will ever be able to do to try to make himself secure and give himself the safety of eternity in this present world. The guy died a neurotic, of malnutrition. And we have a horrible feeling that as we try to build up investments and as we try to build up our security and our jobs, we might never actually make it.

Every time we lose a job and every time the economy blows up in our face, we sense again, "Yes, I feel I'm made for eternity but I am not doing too well at getting it." Jesus would say, "It's because whatever is born of the flesh is flesh". What you've got here is just temporary life. Yet we feel we're something more than that. I would be surprised if you didn't feel what I've felt. At least the men here -- we men are so miserably ambitious. But don't you think most of us have felt like John Milton.

John Milton was a great poet in 17th century England and from when he was very-very young, he felt, "I am born for some great thing. I am born to achieve something worthwhile." I think all of us feel that. We feel, "Well, we're worth something. We are something valuable. We are born to do something great." We try to do something great, and achieve something great. We try to be important and to get other people to treat us as important. But the more we try, the more hopeless it becomes.

We really do feel that there's nobody quite like us. We feel that our life is unique and individual and different from everybody else's but the rest of the four billion don't seem to notice it. They don't treat us that way. We try to get them to give us attention. We try to get them to give us recognition and a sense of self-worth but somehow we can't get it. It doesn't matter how much we try, we're still haunted by certain figures.

John Wayne was pretty popular and yet not too many people talk about him now. Bing Crosby was pretty popular and yet not many people talk about him now. You're haunted by that terrible feeling that you'll go out like a light and nobody will even know that you've gone no matter what you do.

It's the same with happiness. We all feel we're made for the happiness of eternity. That happiness for us happy human beings is a subtle thing. We believe we were made for the peace of Walden Pond combined with the outrageous excitement of the Arabian nights. If we just had the peace of Walden Pond we'd get bored to tears. If we just had the excitement we'd be worn out. So we spend a lot of our lives trying to get that combination. We use relationships and experiences and circumstances to try to get as much excitement as we want and then to keep as much peace and stability as we can. Somehow you can't measure the two. You either end up bored or you end up over-excited. But it's hard to get the combination. We work all kinds of relationships and all kinds of experiences with people, with drugs and with alcohol. We try to get that tremendous exhilaration that we feel we're made for. But somehow it's hard to hit it.

In other words, we feel we're made for eternity but somehow we can't reproduce what we think eternity is. Jesus says, "Look, it's because you're working with temporary flesh life. You're working with the life that you were born with and that life will never give you the sense of eternity." He says to us this morning, "You are unique. You are unique. There is nobody like you in the whole world. And there has never been anybody like you in the whole world." Here is the amazing thing, and it really should humble us loved ones. There'll never be anyone like you in the whole world. There'll never be anybody like you in the whole world. There won't.

You actually know that in your heart, don't you? Even if you are an identical twin, you know you're not an identical twin. You know there's a difference in your personalities between you and your brother or you and your sister. There's nobody like you in the whole world. There has never been anybody like you in the whole world and there will never be anybody like you in the whole world.

You are unique and actually you know that in your heart of hearts. You know the business of

fingerprints and how important that is. There are no two fingerprints alike. But beyond that, there are all kinds of differences that make you absolutely unique. Jesus is saying to us, "You're unique and you have been put here by My Father, who is the Creator of the world, to do something and be something that nobody else can ever be or will ever be. My Father has made you so that you can show some of His nature that nobody else can show." That's the first reason you're here.

You are unique. There's nobody like you in the whole universe. Do you realize there is nothing you do, there is nothing you think, there is nothing you say that God does not see, every second of your life? He knows what you do and say and think, every second of your life. He is watching you like a dear gentle father every moment of your existence. And He is working constantly to bring you into His own character and nature and to bring you close to Himself because He wants to explain to you what He put you here to do and to be. That's it.

You're not just a number. You're not just somebody who has mechanical ability. You're not just somebody who has artistic ability. Your Creator has put you here to do and be something that nobody else can do or be. And the only way you'll ever find that out, Jesus says, is to get to know His Father. In fact, He said that's eternal life. Eternal life is not trying to produce the attributes or qualities that you think eternity has. Eternal life is actually knowing the person who made you. It's getting to know Him personally and getting from Him an explanation of why He put you here, what He wants to do with your life and most of all, what He wants you to be.

Some of us say, "Well, I see that. At times I've glimpsed it or thought I have. But I've been dissatisfied with the things I've been trying to do to make eternity real to myself. I've seen what an egotistical monster I've become as I've tried to draw people's attention to me so I could get a sense of self-worth. I've seen how I've used other people to try to get all the money that I need or all the clothing that I need. I've seen that and have tried to change but I find that there's something in me that keeps on doing that. I keep on being covetous and I keep on being greedy. I see what you're saying that I've to get to know the Creator and he will explain to me why I am here, but I find that even when I've glimpsed that, I can't be what I believe He wants me to be."

And that's where Jesus would say, "Well, you see it is because whatever is born of the flesh is flesh. The personality and the self that you have here is not right. It's born of the flesh. It's got used to depending on the world. It's got used to depending on things, on people and on circumstances to try to manufacture eternity in you. That's what you're like. That's why I died. I didn't die to bribe My Father to forgive your sins. He's willing to forgive your sins. That's not difficult. I died so that you could be changed. What My Father did was He foresaw the kind of person and the kind of monster you would develop into. He put you into me even before eternity. He destroyed you in me. That's what my death is about. In 29 A.D., I died to show you what I had done for you in eternity. My father put you into me and He changed you completely. What you have to do is have that made real in you now. Then you'll be able to do what God, My Father reveals to you that you should do."

In other words, you've really got to start all over again. You've got to be born again. You've got to have all the old attitudes that you've had for years and all the old desires that drive you -- you've got to have them destroyed in My Son. You've got to start all over again and be born again. That alone, will begin to give you a sense of closeness to the Creator who made you. Loved ones, that's why we're alive.

We're alive to get to know our dear God that put us here. You have to get to know Him personally.

You have to be changed by Him otherwise you won't be able to be what He wants you to be. That you can do. "How?" Well you start off by believing these things that I've shared with you. They're not things that I made up. They're the things that Jesus told us in this book. He's the only one that has ever been off the bus and he explained this to us. You have to start by believing it. You start by believing on the basis of the historical evidence and by believing on the basis of the words that He speaks here. This is no ordinary man. This is the Son of the Maker of the world and what He's telling us about life is true. You've got to believe that.

Secondly, you've got to turn away from your own attempts to reproduce eternity. That's what repentance is. You've got to turn away from all the attempts you make to reproduce the stability of eternity. Does that mean no possessions, no jobs, and no bank account? No, that's foolishness. It doesn't mean that. But it does mean that you stop looking to those things for your security. It means you stop looking to the money that you've built up for security. The money is going to go with the rest. It's going to burn up with everything else.

You turn away from trying to establish the security and stability of eternity from this temporal life. Instead you look to God, your Father and you start talking to Him and asking Him, "Lord God, why did you put me here? What do you want me to do? What do you want me to be? What of yourself do you want to show to this world through me?" You start saying that.

First you believe that these things are true. Then you repent by stopping doing that. If you say to me, "Does it mean everything?" Yes, it does. It means those moments when you throw in a little boast to get respect from your peers -- that has to stop. You have to stop being envious of the other person because they've got all the attention this past week. You just stop doing it. You stop looking to the praise of men to try to get a sense of self-worth. You start looking to your Creator, your God and you start asking Him to give you a sense of His love and a sense of His appreciation and His knowledge of you. As soon as you do that, your Creator will start coming through to you, that's it.

First you believe, and then you start actually living like that. That's why it says, 'you believe and repent', and that's what enables you to be born again or to start all over again. If you are in the situation where this has come home to you for the first time today, then I would encourage you to act on it. I wouldn't bother about anything else. I would act on it. If you don't act on it and make a commitment today, the week will drag on through and you'll find yourself back in your own old kind of frustrating life. You do need to make a definite break.

That's why Jesus said, "He who does not believe is condemned already." He knows it so well, as now so then. If you don't make a move today, you won't make a move tomorrow. You don't make a move the next week and it gets more ground into you as the days pass. So I would encourage you if this has come home to you as real, I would encourage you to make a commitment today.

You can either make it where you stand during the last hymn, or during the last hymn you can just come up here. I'll go down and kneel if it makes it easier for you to have somebody else at the altar. You can go up to the altar and ask God, "Lord, I have hardly known you have existed until this day but I ask you to rescue me from the futility of this meaningless existence that I've been involved in. I ask you to start getting through to me somehow. I don't know how you're going to do it, but start getting through to me why you put me here or what you want me to do and be." Then the next step is to commit to turning from all the manipulations and methods you've used to try to reproduce eternity. God's Spirit will bring those things to you. You just have to repent of them and

stop them. And you have to ask God to give you the Spirit, the life of His own Son.

If you do that in honesty, God will come through. That's His whole purpose in putting us here. The whole thing is meaningless if He doesn't come through. He will come through to you and He will give you strength to begin to live a life with Him during this coming week and during the rest of the weeks in your life.

Then you'll be able to give those dear dads and moms of yours some answer if they ever ask that question. Why are we here? Why are we alive?