

(organ music)

- Good morning and welcome to this opening Sunday service here in the chapel. We're delighted to have the students back with us from summer vacations, and are glad to have all with us, in particularly our visitors. You will note the wide array of activities available here at the chapel, the tear out sheet. Please fill that out with your areas of interest and service. Remind you that there is still time to audition for the Duke Chapel choir. This week begins our evening, or late afternoon, prayer services. This year, we're going to have a service at 5:15 on Tuesdays here in the chapel. The Taize prayer service, and then we will also continue our Thursday evening choral Vespers. I'd like to ask our musicians to come forward. One of the very special things about life here at the chapel is this glorious music. And we have a wonderful team of talented people who help us to produce this music. You've heard Sam Hammond this morning, our university carillonneur, as he played as we were arriving at the chapel. Sam is often an invisible musician, because he's perched up in the tower at the carrillon, but he's deeply appreciated. Norman Ryan is our curator of chapel organs. He works full-time around the chapel to keep our great organs tuned. He's currently conducting a massive renovation of our large front organ. Back at the back of the Aeolian is Robert Parkins, the university organ, excuse me, back at the Flentrop. He plays the Flentrop for our Sunday services. David Arcus is the Duke Chapel organist. He accompanies the choir, and is normally up here at the front organ. Donna Sparks is our assisting conductor at Duke Chapel, the Duke Chapel Choir. She always also leads the Thursday afternoon choral Vespers, and this is all under the leadership of Dr. Rodney Wynkoop, our director of the chapel music and director of university choral activities. Dr. Wynkoop spent his summer in Brazil working with community choirs in Brazil at a wonderful summer there, and we welcome all of these musicians back. We thank them for what they give us every Sunday. And now let us stand as we continue to worship God. Let me mention one more announcement. The chapel is collecting food and clothing and financial donations for the victims of the chicken plant fire in Hamlet, North Carolina. We have boxes downstairs that during the week you can bring canned goods and food. We welcome financial contributions. Please designate your contribution for the victims of the terrible fire, and all of this will be taken to Hamlet on this Friday. I wanted to call that to your attention. The grace of the Lord, Jesus Christ, be with you.

Congregation: And also with you.

- The risen Christ is with us.

Congregation: Thanks be to God. (instrumental music) (Choir and Congregation singing) (organ music)  
(brass and percussion music) (Choir and Congregation singing)

- Let us pray. Open our hearts and minds, O God, by the power of your Holy Spirit, so that as word is read and proclaimed, we might hear with joy what you say to us this day. Amen. The first reading is taken from the book of Genesis. Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed

there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place-and I did not know it!" And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! "There is none other than the house of God, "and this is the gate of heaven." This is the Word of the Lord.

- [Janet And Congregation] Thanks be to God.

- Today's Psalm is found on page 843. Let us stand and read responsively. Sing responsively. (organ playing)

- ♪ Your testimonies are wonderful, ♪ ♪ therefore my soul keeps them. ♪ (Congregation singing response) ♪ -  
With open mouth I pant ♪ ♪ because I long for your commandments. ♪ (Congregation singing response)

- ♪ Keep steady my steps according to your promise, ♪ ♪ And let no iniquity get dominion over me. ♪  
(Congregation singing response)

- ♪ Make your face shine upon your servant ♪ ♪ and teach me your statutes. ♪ (Congregation singing response)  
(organ music) (Choir and Congregation singing)

- The Epistle lesson is taken from the book of James. Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures. But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves, For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act-they will be blessed in their doing. If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. This is the Word of the Lord.

Congregation: Thanks be to God.

- This reading is taken from the Gospel according to Saint Mark. Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went by way Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech, and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside

in private, away from the crowds, and put His fingers into his ears, and He spat and touched his tongue. Then, looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one. But the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well. "He even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak." This is the Word of the Lord.

Congregation: Thanks be to God. (organ music) (Choir singing in Latin)

- Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran, and then he came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he laid it under his head, and he laid down in that place. And, and he dreamed. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven. And the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him and said, "I am the Lord. "The God of Abraham, your father, and the God of Isaac. "The land on which you lie, "I will give to you and to your offspring. "And your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, "and spread abroad to the west and to the east, "and to the north and to the south, "and all the families of the earth "shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, "and will bring you back to this land. "For I will not leave you "until I have done what I have promised you." And then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it." He was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place? "This is none other than the house of God, "and this is the gate of heaven." Thanks be to God.

- We were having this Bible study on the book of Acts, chapter eight, where Phillip is accosted by an angel that's got a message from God. And she spoke up and said, "Angels, these angels, I've never seen an angel. "And I don't know anybody else that's ever seen an angel. "What are we modern people to do with these Bible angels?" And in response I told her about how I had spent my day just the day before. Early in the morning, this woman had come to see me. She was a Duke student, and she told me how, after many months of consideration, she was quite surprised to find that she was considering going into seminary to become a pastor. "Now why would God want me to do this?" She asked. I said, "Well, you work well with people, "you're warm, open, caring." She said, "Yes, but I'm a biology major." I said, "I don't know. "I don't know what God's up to here." That afternoon I got a call from another Duke student, said he had to see me that very afternoon. I said, "Come over." We met about 5:00 and he told me this long story about all the long circuitous twists and turns in his life up to that point, and how that he had at last, after much struggle and sleepless nights, he had come to the conclusion that God was speaking to him. That God was telling him to forsake the career path that he had planned, and to go out and to work with the poor. I got away from that conversation in time to go this fancy restaurant to meet with this search committee I was on. We were having a candidate come in from somewhere in the Midwest. We got seated at the table. The waiter came to the table, taking people's orders. He got to me and he said, "Hey. "I bet you, you're a preacher, aren't you?" Well there was giggling around the table. There were inappropriate remarks. This was a medical center group. And I said, "Maybe you've seen the Duke Chapel program "in the afternoon on Sundays?" He said, "No, no, you just look like one." And I get this waiter away, and get the... We went on with the meal, about 10:00 we were leaving the restaurant, as we were going out someone says, "Wait, wait!" And it was this

waiter running after me. I said, "Look, these medical center people "were supposed to get the bill, I--"  
(congregation laughs)

- He said, "No! "I just wanted to ask you. "I think God is calling me into divinity school. "I wonder if you could suggest a good divinity school. "Somebody Baptist, maybe?" Well can you see why on the next day when I was asked about angels I said, "Look. "They're busy just now. "If you'll take a number, sit down over there, "they'll get to you when they can. "They're busy calling biology majors into the ministry. "They're tormenting Duke sophomores. "They're calling waiters. "They've been real busy just now." Of course you and I live in a place where we don't expect much divine communication. In the universe in which we move, there appears to be a scarcity of divine messages. I don't spend every day talking to people who received some message from God. I mean, this is a university, after all. In fact, one wonders, what would we do if God ever had a message for one of us? "Reverend Willimon this is Public Safety. "We're over here in the dormitory, "we've got this guy, says his name is Gabriel. "Got this, he's dressed, "he's got this white robe on, his wings, "and we caught him trying to break in to Alspaugh 102. "You want us to bust him?" Well last week, we were introduced to the Biblical story of Jacob. Little brother, Jacob. You remember? His name means, "heel" or "grabber," referring to the circumstances of his birth. And as the story goes on about Jacob, we find that he is not called grabber for nothing, since he duped his poor old brother Esau out of his birthright. Jacob has been very busy with his schemes and his plans, and his deceit. Now, with his poor father Isaac blind and on his death bed, Jacob dresses up in sheep's clothing, so that when the old man stretches out to bless, he will bless smooth-skinned little brother Jacob, thinking that he is really giving his blessing to hairy Esau. And so Jacob gets every cent of the inheritance that should have gone to his brother. And that's sort of the way Jacob has made it in the world up to this point, by hook and by crook. Liking nothing better than to put one over on poor dumb Esau. "Here, Esau. "Take a card, any card." So Esau, Esau says, "After Dad's funeral, "I am going to murder that little shyster." And can we blame him? Well, Jacob, sort of person who always lands on both feet, gets word of Esau's plans, and he slips out of the back door of the funeral home as the service is ending. And he is now a fugitive, an exile, he's on the lamb, and it's ironic. Jacob, who had wanted, wanted more than anything, to have it all, who had dreamed of having the whole inheritance for himself, to be number one in the world, and have Esau spend the rest of his life waxing his Porsche, here is Jacob now, out, way out, this is where our scripture today takes place. He is out nowhere, between Haran and Beer-sheba. Alone, vulnerable, without protection from family. Banished. In Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, he tells us what this banishment means. "Banishment, oh be merciful. "Say death. "For exile hath more terrors in his look than death. "Do not say banished. "Banished is death misturned." It's just like he's died. He's out there in the midst of the wilderness, alone. Out in the dark, wild beasts roam, and Jacob prepares for sleep with nothing but a stone for his pillow. The sleep of the exiled, we would expect to be a restless sleep. Alone, vulnerable, out nowhere, noplac. Have any of you ever slept like Jacob? The restless sleep of the exile? With nothing but a stone for your pillow? Nowhere, somewhere between Aycock and Jarvis, alone. It's a story about that. And now with his defenses down, with all of his tricks having been played, this striver, this grabber, Jacob sleeps. He sleeps like a baby and has a dream. We've sung about it when we were kids at summer camp. We are climbing Jacob's ladder. We are climbing Jacob's ladder. Every round goes higher, higher. We are climbing Jacob's ladder. Freud noted that one of the functions of dreams appears to be a sort of dredging up from our unconscious of painful, difficult memories in our past. That when we close our eyes, they bubble up out of our unconscious. Well if Freud was right, then there must,

there should have been enough raunchy memories, enough pain and regret, for Jacob to have dreamed a three-movie flight that night. But recall, this is Jacob. Regret over the past, for how he's duped his father and bamboozled his brother, forget it. This is Jacob. He sleeps like a baby, and then he has these technicolor dreams. A great ladder, really in the Hebrew, a staircase, a ramp, is let down from heaven right to the place where Jacob sleeps. And angels of God are ascending and descending on that great ladder. Angels, these winged creatures, they have wings so they can take messages back and forth from Earth to Heaven, from Heaven to Earth. They are ascending and descending, would you note in the story, this is a two-way staircase. These messengers are not only carrying messages from Earth up to Heaven, but they are carrying messages from Heaven down to Earth. And here, I think we note, that most of our dreaming is a mostly one-way street. We, spending our lives trying to get an angel to carry our message up to God, listen to us pray, "Oh God, get me, give me, make me." The conventional high school commencement address often speaks of dreams. High school graduates will be told, "Get a dream and stick beside it." Robert Kennedy will be quoted: "Some look at the world and ask why? "I dream of a world that is not yet and ask, why not?" And yet, by your sophomore year of college, when you ponder the meaning of these high school speeches, you're bewildered to find that even the very grandest of our dreams are still our dreams. They are nothing much more than the grandest of human wishes writ large. Walt Disney's Cinderella says, a dream is what your heart wishes when you're fast asleep. Our best dreams are just these projections of ourselves. Ourselves wanting to be more, for sure, but still ourselves just as we are. We can only hope to achieve such dreams, not to be transformed by them. Our dreams, be they the dreams here at Duke, or any other dream that we have, tend to be ladders. Ladders by which we pull ourselves up by ourselves, higher, higher, high school, college, graduate school, higher, one step at a time, up, up, we go, by ourselves. So that's why I want you to note that in this dream in the story, this ladder, stretched from Heaven to Earth. That there are angels descending the ladder. See, Jacob already had a dream. We've been hearing about that dream ever since Jacob was conceived. The dream that he would be number one, and older brother would be nothing. The dream that he would be set up, he would have all the family inheritance, and he would be set up, and poor, dumb, Esau would be serving him. It is a dream not unknown to those of us who get, and climb, and achieve. We know that dream. But if you'll note in the story that there were angels descending that ladder as well. So that in the words of Tom Long, that night Jacob has a dream that God, in his dream, has him. And God tells Jacob that night, "I am not gonna let you go until I am finished with you." Jacob is a dreamer. But surprise, so is God. Now it takes a while for God's dream to take effect in Jacob's life, 'cause he awakes, and after being promised in this glorious dream of God's steadfast commitment to him, Jacob awakes and says to God, "Okay, God. "If you will keep me, if you will protect me, "if you will keep me and clothe me, "if you will give me land, then I'll let you be my God. "Take a card, God. "Any card." Is there no limits to this guy's graspingness? Well, we shall see, because it's going to be another night beside a dark river, when Jacob shall be encountered not by dreams of angels, but by the hammer hold grip of a God determined not to let Jacob go until he has had his way with him. But that's another story for another Sunday. Today, today let us simply note that there is a bold claim being made in the story of Jacob and his ladder. There is a bold life-changing cosmic claim being made here. A claim that intrudes itself into our flattened world, this supremely self-confident, secular place of mostly one-way communication. That claim? There is business between Heaven and Earth. We're not abandoned. Even the worst of us, even the most morally questioned of us, this is a story about Jacob, after all. And even the most deserted, confused, alone places in our lives, we are not abandoned. There is business to be worked out between God and us. You see, the old song that we learned

in children doesn't tell it all, does it? We are climbing Jacob's ladder. We are climbing, we. No. This is a two-way thoroughfare that night. Our dreams, even the very best of our dreams that cause us to work and study and achieve at Duke, these dreams are subject to divine intrusion and subversion. So that at times our lives may be disrupted and reoriented to God's dreams. We're sending our messages to God. Well, surprise, God is also sending messages to us. So that it just may be, I warned you here, that you're out some night in some dingy dorm room, it's dark, it's late, you're alone, with nothing but a stone for a pillow. And we, who are so accustomed to doing all the talking, we get a message. A message from God. I am with you. I will keep you. I've got plans for you. I will bring you home. And we awake. Well it's still Gilbert Adams. It's Monday, but now we're different. We've been surprised that even unto us the word has become flesh and dwelt among us. Or, as Jacob said, "Huh. "The Lord was in this place, and I didn't even know it!" (organ music) (Choir and Congregation singing)

- You may be seated. Let us pray now together the litany for this year in the university. God of Abraham and Isaac, of apostles and prophets, in every age, you call people to work for you, showing justice, doing mercy, giving purpose to an aimless humanity. By your truth, darkness is dispelled, and all people set free to mature in wisdom. In pursuit of that truth, we now take our place at Duke University. Receive us into yourself, oh God, use us to accomplish your sacred intention. (Congregation responds) That in this place, we will remember those parents, teachers, and friends who love us, and whose hopes follow us here. (Congregation responds) That we may accept the responsibility of our freedom and the burden of our privilege. (Congregation responds) That with courage, we may doubt, but that we will also place our doubts in the larger faith of Jesus Christ. (Congregation responds) From insulating ourselves with books and words. (Congregation responds) From ignorance that heeds injustice, from indifference that yields to cruelty, and from blind loyalty to false values. (Congregation responds) From hopelessness that cripples us, a self-consciousness that paralyzes us, and from temptations that destroy us. (Congregation responds) Gracious God, in a world where justice does not yet roll down as waters, nor righteousness as a mighty stream, where there is much knowledge but little wisdom, we pray for this school, its students and faculty, staff, and administrators, and for the task in which we now unite. Turn our efforts to good, that as our understanding increases, our responsibility will deepen. For the sake of the future that you give us to create, hear us, oh God. Amen. Now our offerings honor God, who has entrusted the Earth's resources to our care and keeping. Through the act of giving, our personal priorities and congregational commitments are held up to the mirror of eternal values. Let us give as we have been blessed, and spend our resources that lives may be healed in Christ's name. (organ music) (brass and percussion music) (Choir singing) (Choir and Congregation singing)

- Let us pray. God of all majesty and glory, receive our outpouring of love, in these gifts and in our renewed commitment to your purposes. For all the beauty in nature and people that you have provided, give thanks. May riches of understanding abound the more we give. And treasures of wisdom flow through us, this university, and your church, to enlighten a troubled and needy world. In Jesus' name, we pray together,

Congregation: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

- And now, may the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Choir: ♪ Amen, amen, amen, amen.♪ (brass instruments playing) (organ playing) (Congregation and Choir singing)