

- Duke University Chapel Service, January 9th, 1977. (cool music begins) (cool music rises)

- Arise, shine for your light has come. And the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. Amen. (cool music begins) (clears throat) When we gathered together, we remember that we are God's people who have preferred our wills to God's will. Therefore let us confess our sin.

All: Lord God almighty, forgive your church. It's wealth among the poor, it's fear among the unjust, it's cowardice among the oppressed, forgive us, your children, our lack of confidence in you, our lack of hope and your rain, our lack of faith in your presence, our lack of love and your mercy. Restore us to your covenant with your people. Bring us true repentance, teach us to accept the Christ. Make us strong with the comfort of your Holy Spirit. Break us where we are strong, make us where we are weak, shame us where we trust ourselves. Name us where we have lost ourselves. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

- Hear these comfortable words from the scriptures. This is the message we have heard from Him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all. If we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His son cleanses us from all sin. Your sins are forgiven for His sake. Amen. (cool music begins) Let us pray. Almighty God, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit. That is the scriptures of read and the word proclaimed. We might hear with joy what you have to say to us today. Amen. The old Testament lesson comes from Jeremiah. "Oh Lord thou hast deceived me, and I was deceived. Thou hast stronger than I, and thou hast prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all the day. Everyone mocks me, or whenever I speak, I cry out, I shout violence and destruction. For the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and a derision all the day long. If I say, I will not mention Him, or speak any more of His name. There is in my heart as if it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot. For I hear many whispering. 'Terror on every side! Denounce him! Let's denounce him!' Say all my old familiar friends, watching for my fall. 'Perhaps he will be deceived. Then we can overcome him and take our revenge on him.' But the Lord is with me as a dread warrior. Therefore my persecutors will stumble. They will not overcome me. They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed. Their eternal dishonor will never be forgotten. Who Lord of hosts, who triest the righteous, who seest the heart and the mind. Let me see thy vengeance upon them. For to thee, have I committed my cause. Sing to the Lord. Praise the Lord, for He is delivered the life of the needy from the hand of evildoers." The Epistle Lesson from Ephesians. "Therefore remember that at one time, you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is called a circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands. Remember that at one time you were separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise. Having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus, you who are once were far off, have been brought near, in the blood of Christ. For He is our peace who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in His flesh, the law of commandments and ordinances. So that he might create in himself, one new man in place of the two, and so making peace. And might reconcile us both to God in one body, through the cross,

thereby bringing the hostility to an end. And He came and preached peace to you who were far off, and peace to those who were near. For through Him, we both have access in one spirit to the Father." At a stand for the gospel. As the people were in expectations and all men questioned in their hearts concerning John, whether perhaps he was the Christ. John answered them all. "I baptize you with water, but there is one who is mightier than I who is coming, the thong of whose sandals, I am not even worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand to clear the threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His granary, but the chaff He will burn, with unquenchable fire." Now all the people were baptized. And when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form as a dove, and a voice came from heaven, "thou art my beloved Son, with thee, I am well pleased." Amen. (cool music begins) Let us affirm what we believe.

All: We believe in God, who has created and is creating. Who has come and the truly human Jesus, to reconcile and make new who works in us and others by the spirit. We trust God, who calls us to be the church, to celebrate life and its fullness, to love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil, to proclaim Jesus crucified and risen, our judge and our hope, in life, in death, and life beyond death. God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God.

- The Lord be with you.

Congregation: And with your spirit.

- Let us pray. (clears throat) Do not turn your ear from us. Oh God. And do not put us aside. Now that in this hour, we have stopped chatting among ourselves, and are now groping for words, to pray to you. For who is to save us or heal us, or judge us, if you do not take us to heart. We're standing on thresholds this day, Lord, between what we have been and what we are becoming, between the old year and the new, between the first semester and the second, between sickness and health, between loneliness and love, between youth and adulthood, between middle aged expectations, and old age resignation, between doubt and faith. On the threshold, between this now and the not yet, the known and the unknown. We are wondering what we shall be. It is not easy to live between the times in process, still being formed, still being born, like old father Abraham. We wonder where our life journey is taking us, like Mary. We want to serve you, but we wonder what you are doing with us. Where are you leading us? Lord, what are you doing with us? We stand on thresholds this day, praying for Epiphany. We stand at the door and knock, open yourself to us, Lord, show us your glory. As we pray.

All: 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. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

- Then I ask you to invite all of you to the organ recital by John Mueller tonight here in chapel, on our new organ at seven o'clock this evening. The preacher for this morning and a worthy one, he is, is Dr. John Westerhoff.

- May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight or Lord, our judge and our Redeemer. Amen. Our text is taken from the prophet Jeremiah who in telling of his days and the public stocks, confesses his anguish. "I have been a laughing stock all the day long. Everyone makes fun of me. I am rejected and ridiculed for uttering the word of the Lord. A sad commentary perhaps, but not a unique experience. Indeed, all the great personalities of the Bible were perceived to be or described as fools." Jeremiah simply confessed his inclusion in this succession of godly fools, who had become a laughingstock for the word of God. "I have been made a laughingstock all the day long. Everyone makes fun of me. I am rejected and ridiculed." Why? "For uttering the word of the Lord." It's an appropriate text for this first Sunday after Epiphany, since to pronounce the word of the Lord appropriate for this season in the church year, is from at least one point of view, ludicrous. Christmas with this proclamation of Emmanuel God with us may be still ringing in our ears if not in our hearts. But the Feast of the Epiphany, the manifestation of Christ world transforming power and glory, is more often than not ignored or lost in the frantic return to the new year's business as usual. Epiphany just two days spent. The typically unheralded clothes of Christmastide, commemorates three somewhat strange events. The adoration of the Magi, Christ first miracle of the transformation of water into wine at the wedding feast in Canaan, and the baptism of Christ is recounted in our gospel lesson. For those bold enough to profess that Jesus is Lord. The season of Epiphany should be a dramatic revelatory converting occasion. Unfortunately, for most of us, the myths and symbols of Epiphany have become blurred, confused and distorted. They've lost most of their relevance to the worldly wise. Still these are the days when the community of faith is called to recall the beginning of Christ's power and glory. The tribute of the Magi marks the announcement of God's kingdom's coming, which shall have no end. The transformation of the water at Canaan the witness of Christ power in this world, where material and spiritual realities are one. And His baptism, the Genesis of His ministry as advocate and liberator of those denied God's will. In this sophisticated secular world of ours, these stories comprised a somewhat silly message to celebrate. And so parenthetically, we usually don't. But it's about time, isn't it that we who desire to claim the name of Christ did celebrate and affirm this somewhat laughable word of God. So it is, I invite you to join me this day and do just that. To begin our gospel lesson communicates for all time, the divine recognition, and authentication of Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah of God, the Savior of the world. Jesus of Nazareth, who went about all Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom is coming, and healing every disease and affirmative among the people. Who taught us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. Who warned us not to lay up treasures on earth, or to be anxious about our lives. Who called us to do God's will and to lose our lives in the service of God's kingdom. Who taught us to love God with all our heart and our mind and our soul and our strength, and even our neighbors as ourselves. The same Jesus, crucified and risen, Lord, and whom God has come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death, and reconciling the whole of creation, to its creator. Jesus, the Christ of God who came that the world might be saved, that God's kingdom might come, that God's will be done. That's the faith we claim when we boldly or perhaps likely, say with our fore parents, that Jesus is Lord. But don't we have to admit when we're sober, that this is surely unamusing, absurd, incongruous, eccentric word for modern humans. Have any of our eyes truly seen His salvation? His saving power, in the social political economic world in which we live? Is the world any better? Really, since His coming? Has God's community come? Is God's will done on earth is in heaven? Has peace, whole community, justice, liberation, and the wellbeing of all people arrived? Has Christ's message of healing and

wholeness and justice been realized? Have we not read the Daily Newspapers or watch the 6:30 news? What can we say to those who still daily experience, oppression, starvation, injustice, illness, and conflict? How can we with a clear conscience, deny racism and sexism, classism and nationalism, which gnaw at the sinews of our country, and places the world on the brink of daily destruction? And what can we answer to ourselves, amidst the brokenness of our own lives, and those whom we love? How can we deny our own mental and physical diseases and torments? It seems like such a foolish word. Why should anyone believe it? Or better be willing to live for it's good news. If our gospel lesson for this Sunday of Epiphany, we're not difficult enough to proclaim with a straight face. Saint Paul in his letter to the church at Ephesus makes the bold assertion, that Christ has destroyed all that keeps people apart, race, sex, class, religion, nationality, ethnic group. In Christ, God engages in a new act of creation, unifying all persons into His kingdom. Now isn't that affirmation difficult to accept, or even take seriously. But the Christian message was a bad message from the very beginning. Happy are the poor, the hungry, the sorrowful, the excluded, the peacemakers, the meek, the just. Why? Because it's they that are going to receive the blessings of God's kingdom. They who will be filled. They who will laugh. They who will be rewarded. They who will see God. Nonsense. It just didn't seem to be in the cards, not even for Jesus, the announcer. He descended from neither aristocracy of blood nor priestly nobility. His first followers were simple, poor, unsophisticated people. Fisher folk, peace workers, tenant farmers, itinerant shepherds, women and children. It was the marginal oppressed peoples of His day. All those who wanted to believe the good news of God's coming community who followed Him, and prayed with Him. "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." And then, "give us this day, our daily bread." That were their prayers answered? Worst what happened to Jesus words of woe to the rich and the powerful. Those who have made it in this world and have received in abundance this world's blessings. As a matter of fact, isn't it those who live most according to the world's values and understandings and ways, those who have already made it, who prosper most and receive the greatest rewards? While those who have denied all that God wants for His children. And those who live for God's kingdom continue to suffer, and then amidst their suffering be laughed at for their faith. The Christian face social political and economic naivete seem quite humorous. Perhaps that's why we who comprise the church of America's middle class have seen fit to either ignore, or rewrite the biblical message into a more reasonable word, a more palatable, sensible word. A word that doesn't disturb us, but rather dulls our torments, confusions, and anxieties. But perhaps that is also why, one of the earliest representations of Christ in Christian art depicts a crucified human figure with the head of an ass. The debate on what it means continues. But I'm convinced that these catacomb Christians had a deep sense, of the comic absurdity of their position. A wretched band of slaves, derelicts and square pegs. They must have sensed how ludicrous their claims appeared. Christ for them must have seemed something of a holy fool. And they knew that they were fools for Christ. But more important, they had faith and hope in the eternal foolishness of God. A faith we sometimes have lost, or worse denied. Remember how God promised Abraham and Sarah in their old age a son? And also remember how they laughed also. To be sure for one point of view, it was a foolish, humorous promise. But eventually, when there was no reason to hope any longer, they did have a son, and God told them to name their unexpected gift, Isaac, which in Hebrew means, laughter. So that we might have faith in God's laughable promises. "I have been made a laughingstock all the day long. Everyone makes fun of me. I am rejected and ridiculed, why? For uttering the word of the Lord." Let it be noted that Jeremiah was laughed at not simply for his own sake. It was not some public blunder of his own doing, nor was it some physical characteristic that caused him to appear foolish. No, it was the word of the Lord that made

him a laughing stock. Recall the circumstances. God charged Jeremiah with the responsibility of symbolically and verbally rebuking the elders of Judah for their way of life. Jeremiah's words had been strong. God will break this people in this city as one breaks a potter's vessel so that it can never be mended. And indignation at these words, the chief priest of the city ordered the seizure of Jeremiah. It was the religious leader himself who locked the prophet in the public stocks to receive the full scorn and mockery of the people. Jeremiah, for the word of the Lord, was placed in a laughingstock. I presume that most of us fear being made fools of. We suffer anxiety and the fear of being ostracized from the group, or laughed at by our peers. We can easily understand Jeremiah's lament. Most of us find it extremely difficult to speak any word, or perform any deed that might cause us to appear foolish. We fear the alienation of the laughing stock, that is perhaps why our styles of life are so monotonously similar, and why we're so reluctant to hold widely variant ideas from the majority. Here too lies the weakness of the church. We mirror the culture. We reflect the values, understandings and ways of middle-class society, and avoid too easily the hard imperatives of God's word. Surely it may be legitimate for us to fear being laughed at. But it is not morally or spiritually legitimate for us to allow that fear to swallow up our convictions. This is perhaps the most important aspect of our lesson. Jeremiah did not allow fear to overcome conviction. He cried at the mockery, which beset him. But he did not compromise his principles. As Karl Marx rightly saw, religion is not only an opiate for the masses, a defense of injustice and oppression, it is also a form of protest against it. As a protest, it offers a vision of a new age and a hope that the laughable will be realized. The season of Epiphany as a reminder of that vision and hope, it is a time for us to renew our calling to live as if the message of the gospel were true, and not to be satisfied with the real, and the possible. We are called to be a people with an imagination and vision. People with an eschatological itch people who do not fear being laughed at, for living the word of God. As Herbert Marcuse put it. "We need to break the power of facts over the world and speak a language which is not the language of those who establish and force and benefit from the facts." We are called to live for the gospel of God's kingdom coming. We are called to repent of our compromises and our re-writings of the gospel to fit our understandings in ways. We are called to recommit ourselves, to live for peace and unity, for justice and liberation and equality and community. To live for the physical and spiritual wellbeing of all people. To become fools for Christ, that we might be wise in Christ. We are called afresh to affirm our faith in the gospel of God's kingdom coming, and to live according to God's will. Surely such a faith is not belief, it's hope. And hope is the ability to stand firm and live faithfully, and be laughed at. Our Credo needs to become Spiro Orton telecom. I hope that I might know. The exodus people are forever leaving the present behind and pushing toward an unknown future. Christians are called to live as if God's community as come, as if salvation were at hand, and not worry about being laughed at and ridiculed by those who live as if the present where everything. St. Paul has reminded us that the foolishness of God is wiser than we humans. We need to live in that truth. And like Jeremiah become godly fools. The point of it all is that we must expect and not fear being made fools for Christ's sake. If we are to take our faith seriously, then it is inevitable that this faith will cause us to do things that to the world are peculiar, strange, and even laughable. The community of God has not yet arrived in its fullness. The world in which we live is still groaning for redemption. The will of God is still not done among us. Therefore, we must expect that the word of God is going to demand of us a rigor and distinctiveness of life, which at crucial occasions, will alienate us, even from our families. In order to be Christian in a serious, and self-styled way, we must be mature enough to be foolish. "I have been made a laughingstock all the day long. Everyone makes fun of me. I am rejected and ridiculed for uttering the word of the Lord." We are called to be laughingstocks for God. Are there any

takers? Are there any brave enough to live in ways the world thinks laughable? Will know of course, for more than likely, they will be those who others reject and ridicule, and laugh at. But they will also be those, who will be able to exclaim with Jeremiah, sing to the Lord, praise the Lord, for he has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of evildoers. Thanks be to God. Let us pray. Foolish God. We are reluctant to live as your clowns. It is difficult enough to believe the gospel, but to live as if it were true, to proclaim your word in our deeds is beyond our human understanding. Grant us your courage, grant us your wisdom, and lead us in Your way until at last all things are made new. In every valley lifted up, in every mountain and hill made low. The uneven level and the rough places a plane, and your glory revealed. So that all flesh shall see it together. Amen. (cool music begins) (smooth music) (bright music) (smooth upbeat music)

- Everything that we have that is good in this life. Oh, God has come as gifts from thee, we give you, but your own for your work in this world. Amen. (bright music) Grace of our Lord and savior Jesus Christ. The love of God, the fellowship of the holy spirit. Be with you all now and evermore. Amen. (bright music) (congregation applauds)