Female Speaker: Discussion, we never mention our relation to God. You see we are very much like the citizens of Jerusalem in Zephiniah's time because we have invented for ourself a secular world, a world from which God is almost totally absent. And so we think we are the masters of our own destiny, left to muddle through as best we can, or we join the climb to get to the top of the ladder of prosperity by stepping on someone else's fingers. We are like the man I knew in a church in Pennsylvania who said one time in a discussion group, sure I believe in God, but I don't think he does anything. And so we have constructed a society that believes that God is absent from the world. But as Dostoevsky wrote, if there is no God, everything is permissible. There is no one to see what we do, we imagine, and there are no consequences to be paid. And so we have become the ultimate idolaters who have usurped the place of our creator. It was because the people of God in Zephiniah's time held very much the same views that God said through his prophet that he would judge them and destroy them and all like them from the face of the Earth, and that is very much the judgment of God that we too deserve in this advent season. The general confession still holds, dear friends, there is no health in us. And advent comes to us first of all as the season when we need repentance. And yet, the promise is still there. God will keep his word through his prophet. He will take away his judgments against us, but only if we celebrate this Christmas for still a third reason given us by our prophet, because we are jubilant over the fact that God has come into our midst as our king. Rejoice and exalt with all your heart proclaims our prophet to us, the King of Israel the Lord is in your midst, you shall not fear evil again. And is that not finally the reason why any people or any one of us has true cause for jubilation? Because the Lord, this mighty one to save now rules in our midst as sovereign? We are not abandoned in the world to the follies of fortune and the whims of government bureaucracies. We are not left to our own flawed and selfish devices. We do not have to rely on our own cleverness, our own wisdom, our own strength to live whole and good and righteous lives in the world. No, God offers to forgive us, to take away his judgments against us and to come to us to order and to sanctify and to daily guide our lives. But it is only the people who accept that you see who are celebrating in Zephiniah's picture. The others have fallen victim to their own evil and to God's very real judgments upon it. Just as any one of us will fall equal victim if we try to usurp God's throne. He is king over our lives, the lord of the universe, and until we accept his rule in our midst we can never have his abundant life. He alone has the power to triumph over sin and death, he alone is mighty enough to give us life in its fullness, and because he loves us so much he will settle for nothing less than that. He will settle for nothing less for us than a merry merry Christmas party. Well we can participate in that party, if in faith we will welcome the one born at Bethlehem as our lord and king. For you see Jesus Christ is the incarnation of that mighty warrior to save that Zephiniah talks about. He is the one who brings forth every generation, who created you for his purpose, who rules every empire and who commands the stars. And if we will accept him for who he is, and give up our petty claims to his throne, if we will trust his guidance through his word and obey his will given us in the scriptures, if we will seek his purpose for our living by daily prayer and Christian discipline, then we can indeed have a joyful Christmas party. And we can in truth rejoice and rejoice again, because our lord is at hand in this advent season, and has promised us that he will never leave us, even to the end of the age. But there is one more thing in
Zepheniah's picture of that exuberant party of the saved, it is not only the faithful who rejoice. For the prophet says that God himself is in the midst of that laughing and dancing throng, celebrating with them. He literally shouts over his repentant and forgiven people in joy and in exultation. The father, holding a homecoming party for the son who was lost and is found, the shepherd exuberantly calling out to friends and neighbors that the sheep lost from the flock has been recovered, it's God the father, you see, rejoicing, because we have all come home for Christmas. And wouldn't that be a Christmas party to top all Christmas parties? Joy in heaven, over all of us repentant sinners, the morning stars singing together again at God's redeemed creation, the saints of all the years joining in the Hallelujah chorus, the laughter and good fellowship at the father's table, and joy friends, joy in our hearts, because we have been forgiven and welcomed home and given the imperishable gift of God's good abundant life. Yes that would be quite a festival, for God our mighty one to save, really knows how to celebrate Christmas. And so what shall we say then, to his invitation? Shall we join the party? Amen. (church organ) (congregation singing over organ) (congregation singing over organ) (congregation singing over organ)

Male Speaker: The lord be with you.

Congregation: And also with you.

Male Speaker: Let us pray. Oh God who didst prepare of old the minds and hearts of men and women for the coming of thy son, and whose spirit ever worketh to illumen our darkened lives with the light of the gospel, prepare now our minds and hearts, we beseech thee, that Christ may dwell in us, and ever reign in all our thoughts and affections as the king of love, and the very prince of peace. It is in his name that we pray. For the members of Christ's church throughout the world. For all ministers of the gospel, for all teachers and leaders of thy church, that they may be good stewards of thy manifold grace we pray. For Christian missions everywhere, especially in lands where governments or cultures are hostile to thy gospel, for those who have never heard its word of truth there, and for those who are too jaded and self consumed to see its truth here, we pray. For all families who have no home, remembering the plight of our lord's family, homeless in Bethlehem, and refugees in Egypt, we pray for all those who by poverty and oppression have no home to call their own. For all who worship in the services of this chapel, those who have come here this morning with heavy burden or doubting heart, those who join us on the radio, or In their rooms at the Duke hospitals, may they find here the help they need for this, and every other time of trial, we pray. Remember oh God, the peoples of the world, divided into many nations and tongues. Deliver us from every evil which obstructs thy saving purpose, and fulfill thy promises of old to establish thy kingdom of peace in the name of Jesus the Christ. Oh God, who has set before us the great hope that thy kingdom shall come on Earth, and has taught us to pray for its coming, make us this advent ever ready to thank thee for signs of its dawning, and to pray and work for that day, when thy will shall be done on Earth as it is in heaven, through Jesus Christ our lord, Amen. The lord reigns, let the Earth be glad, and let us show forth our gladness and our gifts and offerings which we now give to God. (soft melody) (soft slow melody) (church organ) (congregation singing over organ)

Male Speaker: Oh kind and gracious God, who did not deem it an unworthy thing to come among us to be born as we are and to live this life with us, who did not reject us even in our sin, we offer you these gifts as
sign of our thanksgiving for your beneficent love showered upon us in Jesus the Christ, praying as we have been taught.

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, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever, Amen. (church organ) (congregation singing over organ) (congregation singing over organ)

Male Speaker: I remind you that the Lord's supper shall be celebrated immediately after the service in memorial chapel. And now by the grace of our lord and savior, Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the holy spirit be with you now and always, Amen. (church organ) (church organ) (church organ) (church organ)