

(energetic organ music) ♪ Once in royal Davids city ♪ ♪ stood a lowly cattle shed ♪ ♪ Where a mother laid her baby, ♪ ♪ In a manger for his bed. ♪ ♪ Mary was that mother mild ♪ ♪ Jesus Christ her little child ♪ ♪ And through all ♪ ♪ His wondrous childhood ♪ ♪ He would honor and obey ♪ ♪ Love and watch the lowly mother ♪ ♪ In whose gentle arms he lay ♪ ♪ Christian children always be ♪ ♪ Mild, obedient, good as he ♪ ♪ And our eyes at last shall see him ♪ ♪ Through his own redeeming love ♪ ♪ For that child so dear and gentle ♪ ♪ Is our Lord in heaven above ♪ ♪ And he leads his children on ♪ ♪ To the place where he is gone ♪ (organ music) (choir sings angelically) (organ music) (choir sings energetically) (calm organ music) (choir sings sweetly) (gentle organ music)

- Welcome to the chapel, it's always a very special Sunday when we are the host of the Raleigh Boy Choir, and we welcome them again to the chapel under the direction of Thomas Sibley, and the accompaniment of Terry Pope, and we're happy to have them with us. If you're a new student at Duke this semester, we invite you to be our guest at a brunch downstairs in the chapel basement, immediately after service today. Let us continue our worship on this Sunday before Epiphany. (organ music) (congregation sings)

- Oh Eternal God, who by the leading of a star didst manifest thine only begotten son, to the peoples of the earth, as with joy the wise men hailed it's light, so may we be led by faith to thy presence. Where we may behold thy glory face to face, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen. Let us pray.

All: Open our hearts and minds, Oh God, by the power of your Holy Spirit so that this word is read and proclaimed, we might hear with joy what you say to us this day, Amen.

- The first lesson is taken from the book of Isaiah. "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples. But the Lord shall rise upon you and His glory will be seen upon you. And the nations shall come to your light, and the kings to the brightness of your rising. Lift up your eyes round about and see, they all gather together. They come to you, your sons shall come from far, and your daughters shall be carried in the arms. Then you shall see, and be radiant. Your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you. The young camels of Midian and Ephah, all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord." This ends the reading of the first lesson. Oh sing to the Lord a new song, (congregation responds) Sing to the Lord, bless His name. (congregation responds) Declare His glory among the nations. (congregation responds) For great is the Lord and greatly to be praised. (congregation responds) For all the gods of the peoples are idols. (congregation responds) Honor and majesty are before Him. (congregation responds) Ascribe to the Lord, oh families of the peoples. (congregation responds) Ascribe to the Lord the glory due His name. (congregation responds) Worship the Lord in holy array. (congregation responds) Say among the nations, "the Lord reigns." (congregation responds) He will judge the peoples with equity. (congregation responds) Let the sea roar and all that fills it. (congregation

responds) Then shall all the trees of the woods sing for joy before the Lord. (congregation responds) He will judge the world with righteousness. (congregation responds) (organ music) (congregation sings) The second lesson is taken from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. "For this reason, I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles, assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace, that was given to me for you. How the mystery was made known to you by revelation. As I have written briefly, when you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations, as it is now been revealed to his holy Apostles and prophets by the Spirit, that is, how the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel. Of this Gospel, I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace which was given to me by the working of His power. To me, though I am the very least of all the Saints, this grace was given to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, that through the Church, the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose which He has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness, and confidence of access through our faith in Him. Here ends the reading of the second lesson. (organ plays) (choir sings) ♪ Here lies the sweet child ♪ ♪ In a cradle of straw ♪ ♪ With Mary and Joseph now gazing in awe ♪ ♪ The worshiping shepherds ♪ ♪ they gather around ♪ ♪ They sing with the angels ♪ ♪ A heavenly sound ♪

- The Gospel for this Sunday before Epiphany. "Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem saying, where is he who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east and have come to worship him. When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired to them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, in Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet, and you, oh Bethlehem in the land of Judah are by no means least of the rulers of Judah. For from you shall come a ruler who shall govern my people Israel. then Herod summoned the wise men secretly, and ascertained from them what time the star appeared, and he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, go, and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring him word that I too may come and worship him. When they had heard the king, they went their way and lo, the star which they had seen in the east, went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly, with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary, his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. And opening their treasures they offered him gifts, gold, frankincense, myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country another way. The word of the Lord. Ours is an age of vast unbelief. Of doubt, and cynicism, and yet, at the same time, it's an age almost pathetically willing to believe in anything, if given half a chance to believe in something. I know when I got out of seminary, they convinced me that we were entering a religionless era. I was prepared to go out into something called the secular city, where humanity, come of age, would have no longer need of former consolations like God and religion and the Church. We were told that as people became more modern, they would get more secular, less religious. Well, like much of what I learned in seminary, this became dated six months into my first parish. For there I was set upon by Jesus freaks, faith healers, charismatics, the twice born, and I was forced to reassess this alleged rise of secularity. Indeed, I came to the conclusion that perhaps the modern problem was not too little religion, but too much religion of every shape, form, and fashion. From the sublime to the ridiculous. As we moved to the

latter half of the '80s this religiosity continues unabated. In Evelyn Wall's novel *Brideshead Revisited*, a novel which talks about the dilemma of the modern non-believer and the modern believer, Charles, the sophisticated modern agnostic, and Sebastian the romantic believing Catholic, discuss religion. Charles, "I suppose they try to make you believe an awful lot of nonsense, don't they?" Sebastian, "is it nonsense? I wish it were, sometimes it sounds terribly sensible to me." "My dear Sebastian, you can't seriously believe it all." "Can't I?" "Well, I mean about Christmas and the star, and the three kings and the ox and the ass." "Oh yes, I believe that, it's just a lovely idea." "But you can't believe things simply because they're lovely ideas." "Oh, but I do, that's the way I believe." You look around bulletin boards at our university, and you will find many Eastern gurus still roving about, and there're lots of pop therapies that offer to rearrange your life for \$50 a weekend. And for a pair of rubber soled shoes and a t-shirt, you can jog your way into immortality, provided you eat wheat germ and yogurt. Astrologers, health food faddists, meditators, nude bathers, primal screamers, well, they don't call it religion, but if you get trapped by one of them in a coffee hour conversation, it sure feels you're being evangelized for some kind of religion. It wasn't long ago, I stood with a communicant, of one of the stuffiest of stuffy Presbyterian churches, and she talked to me, while peering out from under a gold cardboard pyramid. "What is that you have on your head?" I ask. She said, "It's a pyramid." "I know very well it's a pyramid, but why are you wearing it on top of your head?" "Well, because I'm a bit depressed today, it lifts me up." "What if you're not depressed?" I asked, she said, "Then I wear a silver one." A small pyramid, when placed over a bowl of fruit, I was told, keeps her bananas from rotting. (congregation chuckles) This woman is a Presbyterian for heaven's sake! (congregation laughs) Now, I'll tell you, for someone like me, for someone like you, sophisticated, educated, mainline, middle of the road denomination, it's amusing, even shocking. Well of course this is nothing new. These hyper-religious have been bedeviling the most sophisticated of us for at least since the first century. They show up in the very first act of the story of Jesus. When Jesus was born, Matthew says, strange visitors from the east show up. Now, many of our English versions call these visitors wise men, which, I hate to tell you was a bit too charitable a designation, if not downright misleading. They are called, in the original Greek, magi, we get our word magic from the root magi, and a little note at the bottom of my RSV Bible, says that the magi were a learned class in ancient Persia. But that doesn't tell the whole story about the magi. Magi covered a conglomeration of astrologers and fortune tellers, augurs, magicians of varying degrees of plausibility, and quackery. Matthew is probably thinking of astrologers, star gazers, which is a ridiculous, specifically condemned pastime among the Hebrews. In other world these magi, that show up at the manger, would represent to the early Jewish reader, schooled in scripture, the epitome of gentile idolatry and religious quackery. Dabblers in stars, or chicken gizzards, forever trotting off here or there in search of some mysterious key to the future they thought they had seen in the constellations. You may remember that Paul has some choice words for one such magi, in Acts 13, calling him a son of the devil. Gold, frankincense and myrrh that we read about in the story, were more than likely the tricks of their trade, elements used in their alchemy, and various experiments. In other words, these magi may not be so much wise men, or "We three Kings of Orient are", as we sing, but your average, credulous, naive, Gentile horoscope devotee, sincere perhaps, learned it, earnest, but utterly ignorant about religious matters. So with a new star out, and first-century religious infatuations being what they were, it isn't surprising to find these star gazers out on a wild goose chase in Judea. They come to Herod, Herod gets his scholars, and resident theologians together, to check things out. And they inform him that the scriptures say, that Messiah will be born in Bethlehem. And then Herod, knowing a group of suckers when he sees them, tells the magi, "Go find the child" and so