

(enchanted pipe organ music) (man mumbles) (church choir singing gospel hymn) (enchanted pipe organ music) (church choir singing gospel hymn)

- You may be seated. On this joyous occasion, it is easy to get so caught up in the world around us that we cannot hear the voice of God or feel the presence of all that is holy. Let us look closely now that we might see ourselves in the presence of God. Let us confess our sinfulness together. Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word and deed by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart, we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves, we are truly sorry and we humbly repent. For the sake of your son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways to the glory of your name, amen. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is God's steadfast love toward those who fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far does God remove our transgressions from us, amen. (enchanted pipe organ music) (church choir singing gospel hymn)

- Let us pray. Almighty God, in you are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Open our eyes that we may see the wonders of your word and give us grace that we may clearly understand and freely choose the way of your wisdom through Jesus Christ, our Lord, amen. Our Psalter is found on page 758, Psalm 27 verses one through four. Please stand and read responsively. The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear. (congregation mumbles) When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh, my adversaries and foes shall stumble and fall. (congregation mumbles) One thing I ask of the Lord that will I seek after. (congregation mumbles) (enchanted pipe organ music) (church choir singing gospel hymn)

- Please be seated. The lesson for today is from the Book of Numbers, selected verses from the 13th and 14th chapters using the new revised standard version. And the Lord said to Moses, "Send men to spy out the land of Canaan, "which I am giving to the Israelites. "From each of their ancestral tribes, "you shall send a man everyone a leader among them." Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan and said to them, "Go up there into Negev "and go unto the hill country "and see what the land is like, "and whether the people who live in it are strong or weak, "whether they are few or many, "whether the land they live in is good or bad, "and whether the towns they live in "are unwalled or fortified, "and whether the land is rich or poor, "and whether there are trees in it or not. "Be bold and bring some of the fruit of the land." Now it was the season of the first ripe grapes. So they went up and spied out the land from the wilderness of Zin to Rehob, Lebo-hamath. At the end of 40 days, they returned from spying out the land. They came to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation of the Israelites in the wilderness of Paran at Kadesh. They brought back word to them and to all the congregation and showed them the fruit of the land and they told him, "We came to the land to which you sent us. "It flows with milk and honey, "and this is its fruit. "Yet the people who live in the land are strong "and the towns are fortified and very large, "and besides we saw the descendents of Anak." But Caleb quieted the people before Moses and said, "Let us go up at once and occupy it, "for we are able to overcome it." Then the man who had gone up with him said, "We are not able to go up against the people,

"for they are stronger than we are." So they brought to the Israelites an unfavorable report of the land they had spied out saying, "The land that we have gone through as spies "is a land that devours the inhabitants "and all the people that we saw in it are of great size. "There we saw Nephilim "and to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, "and so we seemed to them." Then all the congregation raised a loud cry and the people wept that night, and all the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron, and the whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! "Or would that we had died in the wilderness! "Why is the Lord bringing us into this land "to fall by the sword? "And our wives and our little ones will become booty! "Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?" So they said to one another, "Let us choose a captain and go back to Egypt." And Joshua's son of Nun and Caleb, the son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes and said to all the congregation of the Israelites, "The land that we went through as spies "is an exceedingly good land. "If the Lord is pleased with us, "he will bring us into this land and give it to us, "a land that flows with milk and honey. "Only do not rebel against the Lord "and do not fear the people of the land, "for they are no more than bread for us. "Their protection is removed from them "and the Lord is with us, "do not fear them." This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. (enchanting pipe organ music) (church choir singing gospel hymn)

- Class of 1992, there you are and here am I, there you are preparing to cross a great threshold in your life, your graduation. And at this threshold, we gather again in the chapel. Do you remember when we first met? It was the first day of your orientation four years ago, in the afternoon we gathered here in the chapel. I prayed to God to ask God to give you what you needed in this strange new world named Duke. And then a professor, as I remember spoke to you, and I sat up here and looked at you, and that afternoon you looked so young and eager and virginal, (congregation laughs) now you look older. Are you ready to go? I ask that because there is a melody, which sometimes occurs in seniors this time of the year called, there's still one more course I want to take syndrome. Strange, people who their sophomore year could not find anything in the curriculum worth having now say that their education can be complete only by taking one more course. (students laugh) Other symptoms: strong desire to spend one more night in Krzyzewskiville. (students laugh) Particularly bizarre is the wish for another meal of the Duke food service. (congregation laughs) Can I stay another year? No, dear, we say we've already given your room to three others. You've got to go, goodbye, adios, this is it. You and I have a way I'm saying of meeting in these liminal moments, these moments, these thresholds between the old and the new, between hello and goodbye. People on the outside frequently ask me, "Well, what are today's students like?" And I know it's hard to generalize, but I say, well, the seniors are scared. And I know that characterization does not fit you all, but many of you it seems to me this year are scared. It's an unattractive characteristic in the young. I, like your parents, was a student in the 60s, and we thought there was a lot wrong with our world, but nothing was wrong that we couldn't fix once we were in charge. Now we are in charge. And our baccalaureates 60s self-confidence seems almost laughable now. 54% of you in a recent survey said that you believe your future will not be as good as your parents' present. And your pessimism may not be unjustified. Your senior year on-campus recruitment by corporations was down 50%. We had to beg IBM to come talk to you. One of your classmates met one of last year's graduates. One of the ones that heard my, You are The Hope of Tomorrow baccalaureate in 1991, here's the way she described it in The Chronicle. "The day we had dinner "he spent all afternoon playing Nintendo. "He was bored because his sisters started back to school "and didn't have anybody to bully around. "His mother had been dropping hints "more like bombs about how nice it would

be "if he would get a job. "He was scheduled to start "the next day at a temporary agency, "one of those places that we thought "a Duke education would prevent us from ever entering. "And he'd memorized the TV guide. "I hear he's managing people "who sell perfume on street corners. "I am scared." Graduation 1992, it strikes me that it's a long way from say Columbus 1492. I don't know about you, but as a child we learned that story as children in the poem of 1492. Behind him lay the gray Azores, Behind him lay the Gates of Hercules; Before him only shoreless seas. Lo! even the stars are gone. Why, Columbus, why 'Sail on! sail on! And it's a long way, a kind of great psychological gap between that 1492 and our 1992. A great gap. Not only because thanks to your Duke PC education, you know the Columbus story to be a deeply problematic, culturally falsified myth, (congregation laughs) (congregation applauds) but also because the prospect of your voyage into the new after-1992-world has got us, well, scared. Which brings me to another story of expiration of new worlds, a Bible story. In the story from Numbers 13 and 14, we are at the threshold of the promised land. The children of Israel been wandering for 40 years, and now these former slaves are about to see land. They stand on the threshold of this new land, these slaves who had nothing, and Moses has led them through the wilderness to the promised land, but there is just one small problem. The land is already occupied. The place is crawling with Canaanites. A friend of mine was teaching out in Texas, and he was lecturing on this very passage from the Book of Numbers. He was lecturing to his students about this taking of the promised land, and there was a hand, yes, what is it, Mr. Running Bear, what is it? He said, the questioner said: "who promised this land to the Hebrews?" "Well, God did." "Well, did God tell those Canaanites "that he had promised their land to somebody else?" "Could we go on with the class, Mr. Running Bear?" Moses sends some scouts to reconnoiter the land, find out what things are like over there, how big a force it will be required to take it. And after a few days they come back and there are two reports given. There is a majority report and then there is a minority report by Caleb. And in hearing these two reports we're impressed by the gap in their perception of what this new land looks like. The cities are fortified, impregnable, the land devours its inhabitants. It devours its inhabitants, what does that mean? Is there famine, is there disease, are they cannibals? The people over there looked like giants, in the Hebrew, sons of the long neck. Compared to them we are to ourselves as grasshoppers. People over there, they just looked like giants. They have a great educational system, they don't do drugs, they work hard at the factory, they eat diets low in saturated fat. (congregation laughs) Why compared to them we just looked to ourselves like grasshoppers. And the story says that the people went crazy when they heard this majority report. "What have you done?" They screamed to Moses. "Bring us all the way up here from Egyptian slavery "only to perish at the hands of these giants. "At least in Egypt we knew our place "and we had three square meals a day." "Yeah, but you were slaves," said Moses. "Well, we had it better in the safety of slavery. "We might have lived like grasshoppers, "but at least we were well-fed grasshoppers." Then comes the minority report, Caleb says, "I can't believe we saw the same place. "The land is rich, the Lord is with us, ours for the taking. "Let us go at once and take what the Lord has given us." Here in this ancient story, the threshold of the promised land, the graduation from slavery to freedom is rendered as a kind of an epistemological dilemma. Who knows what the future looks like and who shall name that future? The fearful majority or the faithful minority? We know, we know this story well. It's a story about how every journey's end as an invitation to wander into some and perhaps more perilous new path. Every victory we get in life always has a way of landing us right into the unknown. At the threshold between a land we knew and a land we do not know between the grinding the humanizing world of the slave and this risky unknown promised world of the free, a great deal depends on how we describe what awaits us. The majority saw Canaan as a land of these

impregnable fortresses, unscalable heights, these giants. But Caleb spoke of Canaan as God's land. Even the Canaanites as God's people, a land promised to do with his God pleased. Could they have been describing the same place? There's a vast epistemological, theological gap which lies between the, they're giants, we're grasshoppers and the God is with us, let us put our fears aside and go forth. Now I'll admit it even as I tell this tale that Numbers 13, 14 is a very risky story to tell among people like us. So risky that I thought for awhile about not telling it to you for the risk of the damage it might do if poorly told. Because you know that this is the Bible story that's been told for centuries by the possessors of the land to justify how they got land. And now they must retain it with murderous possessiveness. In calling what was really a very ancient world the new world, we became giants in our own eyes and treated millions of God's people like grasshoppers. There were no Canaanites' voices in the 1492 Columbus story because most of the history we know silences the cries of the people who are vanquished. This Bible story, I believe, is the one that my ancestors in South Carolina love to tell as explanation and justification for why people of our color had land and people of their color had none. It is the 1492 story retold in 1992, Belfast and Soweto and Jerusalem and Durham up this day by the possessors in an attempt to give ideological justification to our dispossession of others. But I'm telling it to you this afternoon because I hope that you can see how such a telling of this story is an ideological perversion of the story rather than the story. I think that this story from Numbers only makes sense if we remember that it was first told by landless people. The people who told this empowering tale were slaves and before that nomads. They were people who had never known what it was like to have land. This is the tale meant to be told in the ghetto, in the barrio, at the bottom. It's meant to be told in the refugee camp, a tale meant to electrify those who have nothing, but who may be imaginative enough, if they hear the story, to believe the promise that the land is not ours, it's God's, and this is God's world and God intends them to have it. The question: can this story of the landless have any meaning for us, the landed? Because you and I don't live in a ghetto or a barrio, we live at Duke. And we are here in great part because we have been the possessors of all that this society has got to offer, the best homes, the best schools, the best advantages, and we would love to get together at graduation and think that we are here just because we worked hard and have taken advantage of our advantages. God is with us, let us go forth and take it. But is there no part of us able to admit somewhere down deep that everything that we've got, which we shall celebrate this weekend came as a gift? We're gonna pray that in just a moment, confessing our indebtedness to parents and benefactors and teachers and, but do we believe it? Do we believe that everything we've got was God's before it was ours? And is there no part of us able to be 1992 surprised? Having been assured at least since 1492 that we are landed and entitled and titled and secure and gifted. That maybe all of that could kind of be a lie, a hype of a society much more internally troubled than it dares to admit to its young. Isn't it odd to find ourselves 500 years after Columbus feeling so strange, so old in this allegedly new world? Our little North American 1992 noses pressed to the shop window peering at other nation's material achievements, coming to feel like the dispossessed in the technological, industrial world that we created. And this is important, because if we can make that imaginative leap and imagine ourselves not as lords of everything that we survey, but as frail, unsteady, scared immigrants in a 1992 threshold of the future that we may not control, maybe then this old Bible story could speak to us. Can we trust the beckoning of a living God who doesn't stand in the old world, but he's always in the new on the other side in the unknown, in the threshold over in the New World? Can we trust that God? Let's admit there is part of us that would just love to go back to Egypt, to the narrow, but at least secure world that we once had. But I think the story says with Caleb, don't go back because back there is slavery, not life. Maybe you do think

that your future will be smaller than the present of your parents. I know from the poll that most of you do not expect to make as much money as your parents. And why should you? You have grown up in perhaps the most selfish generation ever to rule the United States, having taken from your children and your grandchildren to finance our false prosperity and thereby run up the largest deficit ever. No wonder you worry. It's a sign of intelligence. But I've come before you today to predict that your future may not be just simply smaller, but it may be different and maybe even better. Because from my brief expeditions spying out your generation, there's a lot that I like that I see. I just don't think it's any coincidence that it was your class that pioneered Duke's Student Volunteer program, cleaning up the mess that we and your parents made of Durham and the public schools and the healthcare system, one person at a time. And I love that your class gave a huge senior gift for the care of children. And I love that your commencement speaker is a woman that The Chronicle never heard of. (congregation laughs) (congregation applauds) I guess not. I guess not, not only is she from South Carolina, but she has spent her whole life speaking up for people that don't have a voice in this society, the children. (congregation applauds) And so what I'm saying is that in a weird way you are going to the promised land, though it looks a good deal different and maybe even better than the one that your parents thought God had promised to us. So class of 1992, lay aside your fears, get out of here, go for it, not because you're smart, talented and gifted, though many of you are. (congregation laughs) No, because of our faith that God is with us, let us go forth, God is with us.

Man: Amen. (congregation applauds) (enchanted pipe organ music) (church choir singing gospel hymn)

- Please join me in the responsive prayer. Almighty God, as you've granted us a place in this University, allow to us now this day when we dedicate ourselves to the life and work to which you have called us, that we may remember with gratitude the families and friends who have cared for us. (congregation mumbles) That in the life ahead, we may keep faith with those who loved us and trusted us and whose hopes follow us. (congregation mumbles) That we may enter with good courage and constant purpose upon the task which await us. (congregation mumbles) From all vanity and pride as if our accomplishments were of our sole creation. (congregation mumbles) From neglect of the opportunities, which are all about us, and from distrust of our ability to meet the duties of each dawning day, (congregation mumbles) that the example of wise and generous people who have gone before us in our families and here in this university may save us from folly and self-indulgence. (congregation mumbles) More especially that you would show us to us your way of love, and all that we do or say that we should come to love the Lord, our God with our soul and mind and strength and our neighbor as ourselves. (congregation mumbles) These things and whatever else you see needful and right for us, we ask in your holy name. (congregation mumbles) And now class of 1992, the Lord bless and keep you, the Lord make his face to shine upon you and give you peace. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and be with you this day and forevermore. (church choir singing gospel hymn) (enchanted pipe organ music) (church choir singing gospel hymn) (enchanted pipe organ music)