

(soft organ music) (organ music ends) (up-tempo organ music) (energetic choral singing) (melancholic choral singing) (dramatic choral singing) (organ music ends)

- Grace to you and peace from God our father and the lord Jesus Christ. We welcome you to this service of worship in Duke Chapel on the 22nd Sunday after Pentecost. Let me call your attention to the numerous announcements contained in today's bulletin. Please make a special note of the lecture by Dr. Martin Marty on American Religious Life Friday evening at seven o'clock p.m. in your chapel of the Divinity School. Dr. Marty is internationally known for his perceptive analysis of contemporary American religious life and is always a fascinating speaker. We are grateful to have as our special guest this morning the Alamance Chorale and the Chorale's director, Dr. Steven Tin Ike. And we thank them for their moving musical leadership of our worship. The Duke Chapel Choir is singing this morning at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. Our preacher of the morning is the Reverend Maurice Richy, Associate Dean for Student Life and Field Education in the Divinity School. Maurice is presently serving as a member of the Board of Ordained Ministry of the Western North Carolina Conference, and for the past 13 years, has been greatly influential in the ministerial formation of hundreds of divinity students here at Duke. We look forward with anticipation to the message he brings to us today. Let us now prepare our hearts and minds for the worship of almighty God. (joyful organ music) (choir singing) ♪ Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty ♪ (choir singing) ♪ Holy, holy, holy, ♪ ♪ merciful and mighty ♪ (choir singing) ♪ Blessed trinity ♪ (choir singing) (choir singing) ♪ Merciful and mighty ♪ (choir singing) ♪ Blessed trinity ♪

- Let us pray together the collect of the day. Almighty and everlasting God, in Christ you have revealed your glory among the nations. Preserve the works of your mercy, that your church throughout the world may persevere with steadfast faith in the confession of your name through Jesus Christ our lord who lives and reigns with you and the holy spirit one God forever and ever, Amen.

- Let us pray.

- Open our hearts and minds, oh God, by the power of your holy spirit so that is the word is read and proclaimed, we might hear with joy what you say to us this day, Amen. First lesson is taken from the prophet, Habakkuk. The oracle of God which Habakkuk the prophet saw. Oh lord, how long shall I cry for help and thou wilt not hear? Or cry to thee, violence, and thou wilt not save? Why does thou make me see wrongs and look upon troubles? Destruction and violence are before me, strife and contention arise. I will take my stand to watch and station myself on the tower and look forth to see what God will say to me and what I will answer concerning my complaint. And the lord answered me, write the vision. Make it plain upon tablets. The one who reads it may run. For still the vision awaits its time. It hastens to the end, it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it, it will surely come. It will not delay. Behold, the one whose soul is not upright shall fail, but the righteous shall live by their faith. This ends the reading of the first lesson. Blessed are those whose way is blameless.

- (murmurs).

- Blessed are those who keep his testimonies.

- (murmurs).

- Who also do no wrong.

- (murmurs).

- Thou has commanded thy precepts to be kept diligently.

- (murmurs).

- Then I shall not be put to shame.

- (murmurs).

- I will praise thee with an upright heart.

- (murmurs).

- I will observe thy statutes.

- (murmurs).

- How can a young man keep his way pure?

- (murmurs).

- With my whole heart, I will seek thee.

- (murmurs).

- I have laid up the word in my heart.

- (murmurs).

- Blessed be thou, oh Lord.

- (murmurs).

- With my lips I declare all the ordinances of thy mouth.

- (murmurs).

- I will meditate on thy precepts.

- (murmurs).

- I will delight in thy statutes.

- (murmurs). (dramatic organ music) (choir and congregation singing)

- The second lesson is taken from Paul's second letter to Timothy. But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching for reproof, for correction, and for training in the righteousness, that the person who is of God may be complete, thus equipped for every good work. I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead and by his appearing and his kingdom, preach the word. Be urgent in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, and exhort. Be unfailing in patience and in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths. As for you, always be steady. Endure suffering. Do the work of an evangelist and fulfill your ministry. This ends the reading of the second lesson. (choir singing acapella) (choir singing acapella)

- The gospel lesson for the morning comes from St. Luke's gospel, the 18th chapter. Jesus spoke to them in a parable to show that they should keep on praying, and never lose heart. There was once a judge who cared nothing for god or man, and in the same town there was a widow who constantly came before him, demanding justice against her opponent. For a long time, he refused, but in the end he said to himself, true I care nothing for God or man, but this widow is so great a nuisance that I will see her righted before she wears me out with her persistence. The lord said, you hear what the unjust judge says and will not God vindicate his chosen who cry out to him day and night, while he listens patiently to them? I tell you he will vindicate them soon enough, but when the son of man comes, will he find faith on earth? He spoke to them in a parable to show that they should keep on praying and never lose heart. It was not smart of St. Luke to tip his hand. No, to hand us the key to this parable of the widow and judge before we have a chance to hear it for ourselves and wrestle with what it means. For right out front he says, now what our lord is talking about here is continuous prayer. He is talking about keeping on keeping on. You know the kind of pep talk a coach will give a team that has won three for the season and eight points down in the last minute of the game. That's what Luke is doing here in verse one. And it is frankly tempting to take Luke's introduction and to run with it. It's been done before. There's not a verse in scripture that could stimulate a good pietist like this one. Keep on praying. That's what our world needs, more prayer. After all, isn't that what the gospel is

all about? More prayer? Why if we had enough people in enough places lifting enough prayer, why who knows what we might accomplish? It staggers the imagination. We could storm the kingdom with our prayers, and perhaps force God's hand, like this poor widow with the judge. Now if that pietist were a good Methodist, that would be something else. The classical 20th century Methodist never grows weary in well-doing. Lose heart, never heard of it. Wouldn't think of it. You take a good organization, undergird it with a lot of prayers, and then throw some money at it, stand back, move over, here come the Methodists. We would be building kingdoms yet unknown. But if our pietist were a Methodist who had discovered liberation theology, or perhaps feminism, then get ready to be organized to hold prayer vigils for oppressed women and meet your legislator to lobby her for rewriting the laws on inheritance and estate taxes. In the history of biblical exposition, one might find variations on all of these approaches to Luke's words. And there may be, indeed, I dare say there is a kernel of truth in all of these understandings of this text. But none of them is entirely faithful to the major thrust of this parable or to Luke's interpretive comments which precede it. If that be the case then, what might we make of these eight brief tightly written verses? First, Luke is writing in response to some very specific questions circulating among his congregations. When will the kingdom of God come? How will we be able to tell when it is coming? How will we know the true prophets of the kingdom from the false ones who think they know when it is coming? Will we have time to prepare for the coming once it's on the way? It is in response to these sorts of questions, says Luke, that Jesus tells the parable of the widow and the judge. A widow has been wronged. How? By whom? We do not know. She has sought justice from her local judge but to no avail. She persists in her quest. She would not fold until she had had her day in court. The judge has lost no love on this woman or her cause. He has neither ethical nor compassionate to say nothing of competent. If you've read your newspaper over the past six months, you should have no difficulty recognizing the type. This judge is focused on his own comfort, convenience, and advantage. Yet because of his own perversion and the persistence of this lowly widow, all widows were lowly under Hebrew law, justice was done. The woman had her day in court. Her opponent was put in his place. She had satisfaction before the bar of justice. Says Jesus, hear what the unjust judge says. This widow is so great a nuisance that I will see her righted before she wears me out. Will not God vindicate his chosen who cry out to him day and night while he listens patiently to them? I tell you God will vindicate them. Unlike most of Luke's parables, this one does not invite us to identify God with a main character but to contrast the two. If a corrupt judge is capable of executing justice for a deprived woman, even with a nice assortment of rather sorted motives, will God not do at least as well toward the elect? The implication of the text is that God will do infinitely more for the elect, and that right soon. So according to Luke, God is not an impassionate deity positioned in space remote from the sufferings of the covenant people, or indifferent toward them. No, God knows the plight of the people and is responsive to them. God may not respond when we will or as we will, but respond, God will. Suffering for God's sake will neither go unnoticed nor unvindicated. God is a patient listener. God keeps covenant with the faithful and will not abandon them when they are wounded in kingdom battles. God will come for them. He spoke to them in a parable to show that they should keep on praying. Luke was writing to a congregation in latter stages of battle fatigue. Some seemed ready to surrender. Why continue? The promised kingdom already tasted in the experience with Christ refuses to come in its fullness. Keep on keeping on. Never lose heart. To suggest that we need only lay on more prayers and in this way storm the kingdom, to think that if we're still sick even after exhaustive prayers, we must be weak of faith. To think that that offer from grad school has not come through because we did not expect a miracle in the beginning. To understand prayer in these ways is to trivialize it. The

prayer which Luke has in mind sounds more like Thy kingdom come, thy will be done. Profound agony of soul led a young Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theological student in New York, to return to Nazi Germany with virtual certainty it would mean intense suffering if not death. If I am not with my people during the war, he said, I shall have nothing to say to them after the war. Bonhoeffer did return. He did participate in a plot on Hitler's life, because he was convinced Hitler was the devil incarnate. He was arrested. In prison he continued his prayers. Daily he recited the psalms, the great prayer book of the Bible, as he paced his prison cell. With his feet as well as his lips, he prayed for the coming of God's kingdom. He was hanged just weeks before the collapse of Berlin. Was Bonhoeffer vindicated? After all he was killed. Where is God's justice in a death like this? Only an unbelieving heart that takes death more seriously than God would believe Bonhoeffer was not vindicated because he did not survive the war. Though Bonhoeffer struggled mightily with God and his own temptations during his imprisonment, he was indeed by his own testimony sustained by God until his death. Martin Niemöller was another young German pastor who first welcomed national socialism, or Nazism. But soon he saw its pagan tendencies and organized a counter church in the Nazi-dominated state church of Germany. In 1937, Niemöller was arrested for his resistance to the Nazis. Many of the years between his arrest in 1937 and war's end in 1945, Niemöller spent in solitary confinement. Repeatedly, the Nazis offered him release in return for confessions toward the government. Repeatedly, Niemöller refused. After the war, Niemöller confessed it was his meditation on the scriptures which enabled him to survive the long stretches of solitary confinement used by the Nazis to force compromise. Did God vindicate Niemöller? It is clear that God sustained him through horrible suffering. That in itself speaks to us a word of hope and confidence and strong testimony of the faithfulness of God towards God's faithful servant, Martin Niemöller. I was privileged as a young theological student to meet in Leipzig in East Germany with a group of Christians gathered in a parish church there in the early 60s. They were facing hard choices. Confessing faith then meant you did not attend a university. It meant you did not get a crack at the choice jobs. It meant you never got on the list for a new apartment or better working conditions. These Christians asked repeatedly how do we sing the Lord's song in a land once our home but not increasingly strange and foreign? And how do we resist growing bitter toward those in authority, or thinking life in the West is superior simply because it is freer and more opulent? These people subsisted on prayer, and God's promise of faithfulness toward his chosen. How long, oh lord, how long, before our suffering is vindicated? If you have wept over Ethiopian famine, over South African repression and violence, over endless bloodshed wherever in the world, then you are a kindred spirit with those to whom Luke was writing. The issue for the widow was justice against her opponent. For you and me, it is justice against the enemies of the kingdom of God. How long must we endure arms control negotiations before there is just a beam of hope for a nuclear-free world? How long do we have to watch women and children abused before we learn to relate together in human family? How many marriages must fail? How many families be destroyed before we acknowledge that lust and adultery are not a private affair but a community issue? How many generations of children will have to grow up alone before we have the faith to place the love of children above compulsion for a higher standard of living or personal fulfillment or professional advance? The prayer Luke invites us to make is the prayer of the heart, not in lieu of our private time with God, but in, under, and with all that we do. We are invited to pray with our lives and not only with our lips. To be focused upon God in our midst, and God coming to bring justice and recompense and judgment. To cease our praying with our lives is to capitulate to evil and to succumb to cynicism. When we cease our prayers, we have enthroned the idols of America. We have given over our confidence in God to the world and admitted that life is hopeless and that there is no

God. Christ has given us his promise through Luke's account. The sacrifices we make and the suffering we endure to keep the faith in our relationships, in our families, in our vocations, in our church, our community, these sacrifices will not go unheeded. That is the promise of God. How long, oh lord? Not so long that God will forget or abandon us. God will not forsake the faithful who suffer for the kingdom. God will vindicate them with a refiner's fire. Luke assures us that in contrast to the unjust judge, God is very just. God will come to vindicate those faithful to the kingdom. And Luke finally in the very last verse taunts us with our lord's last question. Yes, the kingdom will come. Yes, the faithful will be vindicated. But when the kingdom comes, will we be numbered among the faithful? Let us pray. Yours is indeed, oh God, the majesty and the power and the glory. Lead us not into temptation. Deliver us from evil. And bring us thy kingdom. In Christ our lord, Amen. (soft organ music) (choir and congregation singing) (choir and congregation singing)

- The lord be with you.

- And also with you.

- Let us pray. Gracious God, you do not create us to live alone, and you have not made us all alike. We thank you for the varied societies into which we come, by which we are brought up, and through which we discover your purpose for our lives. In gratitude, we pray for our brothers and sisters here and everywhere. Your son, Jesus the Christ commanded us, love one another as I have loved you. Therefore we pray for our families, with whom we live day by day. May this most searching test of our character not find us broken and empty. By all that we do and say, help us to build up the faith and confidence of those we love. And when we quarrel, help us to forgive quickly. We pray for the places where we work. That there we may be workers who have no need to be ashamed. We ask to be reliable rather than successful. Worthy of trust, rather than popular. Whether those we work with be many or few, may we help to give them the sense that they are personally wanted and cared for. Loving God, we pray for the varied communities to which we belong, that we may be good citizens. Make us willing to accept responsibility when we are called to it. Make us willing also to give place to others, that they too may have their opportunity. And grant that our influence may be good and not evil. We pray for the generation to which we belong, those with whom we share a common storehouse of memory, common standards of behavior, and a common attitude toward the world. Grant that the presence of Christ may be so real to us, that we may be able to help our generation to see Christ also as our contemporary. Lord of all life, and to whose world we come and from whose world finally we must go, we thank you for all those people, great and humble, who have maintained the fabric of the world's life in the past, and left us a great inheritance. May we take up and encourage what is good and hand it on to those who come after, believing that our work in your name will not be wasted or in vein. We ask these things in the name of the Christ who commands us to love one another even as he loves us. Amen. In a spirit of gratefulness, let us now offer our gifts and our lives to God. (soft organ music)