

♪ O holy night ♪ ♪ The stars are brightly shining ♪ ♪ It is the night of our dear Savior's birth ♪ ♪ Long lay the world in sin and error pining ♪ ♪ Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth ♪ ♪ A thrill of hope the weary soul rejoices ♪ ♪ For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn ♪ ♪ Fall on your knees ♪ ♪ O hear the angel voices ♪ ♪ O night divine ♪ ♪ O night when Christ was born ♪ ♪ O night divine ♪ ♪ O night O night divine ♪ ♪ Truly he taught us to love one another ♪ ♪ His law is love and his gospel is peace ♪ ♪ Chains shall he break for the slave is our brother ♪ ♪ And in his name all oppression shall cease ♪ ♪ Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we ♪ ♪ Let all within us praise his holy name ♪ ♪ Christ is the Lord ♪ ♪ Then ever ever praise we ♪ ♪ His power and glory evermore proclaim ♪ ♪ His power and glory evermore proclaim ♪ ♪ Christ is the Lord ♪ ♪ Then ever ever praise we ♪ ♪ His power and glory evermore proclaim ♪ ♪ His power and glory evermore proclaim ♪ ♪ Have you heard the sounds of the angel voices ♪ ♪ Ringing out so sweetly ringing out so clear ♪ ♪ Have you seen the star shining out so brightly ♪ ♪ As a sign from God that Christ the Lord is here ♪ ♪ Have you heard the news that they bring from Heaven ♪ ♪ To the humble shepherds who have waited long ♪ ♪ Gloria in excelsis Deo ♪ ♪ Gloria in excelsis Deo ♪ ♪ Hear the angels sing their joyful song ♪ ♪ He is come in peace in the winter's stillness ♪ ♪ Like a gentle snowfall in the gentle night ♪ ♪ He is come in joy like the sun at morning ♪ ♪ Filling all the world with radiance and with light ♪ ♪ He is come in love as the child of Mary ♪ ♪ In a simple stable we have seen His birth ♪ ♪ Gloria in excelsis Deo ♪ ♪ Gloria in excelsis Deo ♪ ♪ Hear the angels singing peace on earth ♪ ♪ He will bring new light to a world in darkness ♪ ♪ Like a bright star shining in the skies above ♪ ♪ He will bring new hope ♪ ♪ He will bring new hope to the waiting nations ♪ ♪ When he comes to reign in purity and love ♪ ♪ Let the earth rejoice ♪ ♪ Let the earth rejoice at the Savior's coming ♪ ♪ Let the heavens answer with the joyful morn ♪ ♪ Gloria in excelsis Deo ♪ ♪ Gloria in excelsis Deo ♪ ♪ Hear the angels singing Christ is born ♪ ♪ Hear the angels singing Christ is born ♪ ♪ Silent night ♪ ♪ Holy night ♪ ♪ Holy night ♪ ♪ Holy night ♪ ♪ Christ our Savior is born ♪ ♪ Jesus our savior is born ♪ ♪ Hallelujah hallelujah hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah hallelujah hallelujah hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah hallelujah hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah hallelujah hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah hallelujah ♪

- We welcome you to Duke Chapel on this fourth Sunday in the season of Advent. It's always a special Sunday when we are led in worship by the North Carolina Boy Choir under the direction of Mr. Bill Graham. They are regulars here in the chapel, and we thank them for their musical leadership today. They have their annual Christmas concert here in the chapel and they bless us with their presence. Call your attention to the various Christmas Eve services here in Duke Chapel which are open to all. And now let us continue our worship. Would you stand for the greeting? Show us Your mercy, O Lord.

Congregation: And grant us Your salvation.

- Truth shall spring up from the Earth.

Congregation: And righteousness shall look down from Heaven. ("The Virgin's Slumber Song") (choir singing in foreign language)

- Let us pray. Lord we have come here from so many different Advents, from so many different lives, and worlds. Collect us together into church. Gather this far flong flock together into one body of adoring, praising, confessing, signing, believing, praying people. Gather us here, where we will learn to wait for you, and know when you do come in the name of the Blessed Trinity. Amen. Please be seated.

- Let us pray. Open our hearts and minds, O God. By the power of your holy spirit, so that as the word is read and proclaimed we might be prepared for your Advent among us. Amen. The first reading is taken from Paul's letter to the Romans. Now to God who is able to strengthen you, according to my gospel, and the proclamation of Jesus Christ. According to the Revelation of the mystery that has kept secret for a long years, but is now disclosed. And through the prophetic writings is made known to all the gentiles. According to the command of the eternal God. To bring about the obedience of faith. To the only wise God through Jesus Christ. To whom be the glory for ever. Amen. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. (choir singing)

- This reading is from the gospel according to Saint Luke. In those days, a decree went out from emperor Augustus. That all the world should be registered. This was the first registration, and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descendant from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary. To whom he was engaged, and who was expecting a child. While they were there the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her first born son. And wrapped him in bands of cloth. And laid him in a manger. Because there was no place for them in the inn. Now in that region, there were shepherds living in the fields. Keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them. And the glory of the Lord shown all around them. And they were terrified, but the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news "of great joy for all the people, "to you is born this day, in the city of David, "a savior who is the messiah, the Lord." This will be a sign for you. You will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth, and laying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, "and on Earth, peace among those whom He favors." This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

- The Seekers Sunday school class was discussing what to do about Christmas and Gladys suggested that the class restore the time-honored practice of adopting a needy family, buying them clothes and food, taking it by them on Christmas Eve. Good idea, Gladys, said members of the class, and during morning, Harold has a list. Not so fast, Gladys, said Martha, Christmas food baskets for the poor went out with the hula hoop. Food basket charity is degrading and it's ineffective. The good old Seekers class, asuaging its guilt with a once-a-year trip across the tracks to do something for one poor family. Well, what do you suggest that we do for the poor? Snapped Gladys. And Martha responded, we need to work on the larger causes of poverty and work for systemic change. We need to try to help the whole society rather than a food basket for one poor family, that's why this society ignores the church. The church is always reaching out to

one neighbor, but not doing anything about the whole neighborhood. Well, how do you think the Seekers Sunday school class should spread Christmas spirit? I dare say that most of us enlightenment types agree with Martha. Because in the last couple of decades, charity has become a dirty word. Rather than these one to one, face to face, food baskets for the poor, most of us now agree that we ought to spread out our concern to work for the larger issues, the great system problems that cause poverty. Above all we believe that we ought to have a right attitude towards the poor, by right voting rather than food basket right giving. This past fall, one of our students told me that she approached her professor about working for a Saturday at Duke's Habitat for Humanity house and she got this response. "I don't support Habitat for Humanity "because I don't think it helps America's housing problem "to build one house at a time." if you really want to do something about the housing problem, you ought to get us a different senator in Washington. You see? With Martha, we have been taught to look beyond the sad plight of the Joneses. To look at the larger, social greater issues for the less fortunate. Greatest good for the greatest number. Large, big. Universal. And yet, the Christmas story is anything but big, large, universal. The story of the Nativity which Caroline has just read us from the gospel of Luke, is decidedly small and specific and particular. It's not a story about the whole human race, it's about people, real people with real names like Mary and Joseph and Quirinius. And it doesn't begin with once upon a time in a land far, far away, there was a king who... That's the way fairytales begin, but not Bible stories. Bible stories begin with, in those days there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus and this was the first enrollment when Quirinius was governor of Syria and all the world were to be enrolled. Joseph went up from Galilee, from Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem. You see, it's very specific, it's very particular. It's not once upon a time, timeless eternal. You can date this story. Quirinius was governor of Syria. You can get out a roadmap and you can trace the journey of Mary and Joseph from Galilee to Nazareth to Bethlehem. A fairytale can happen to anybody, anywhere, any time, but not Bible stories. And it is this particularity, this smallness, that is not just a characteristic of Bible stories like the Nativity, I tell you, it is a characteristic of the Christian faith itself. I got this friend, he's a professor, he's been, he's reactivated in a church after a long absence and I ask him how his newfound commitment to the church was going. And he said, fine, I agree with the general principles of the church, I find myself in basic support of the overall goals of the church, I just don't like these stories. Stories? I ask. Yeah, those Bible stories, they just make it all sound so limited and concrete. And I bet if we were as honest as my friend, we would also have to say that's one thing that bothers us about the Christian faith, it's these stories, like the one about Mary and Joseph. On their way to Bethlehem to pay taxes during the Quirinius administration. And what we'd prefer is the Christmas story told the way John's gospel does it. High sounding rhetoric about the incarnation, the word became flesh and dwelled among us. Full of grace and truths, we have beheld His Glory. You see, John's got none of those messy details about Quirinius administration. There's no Mary, there's no Joseph. There's no detours through conflict ridden little backwater Bethlehem on our way up to those rarefied reaches of yuletide settlement. And that's the way we like religion. We love the drink in religion in the form of clear liquor from which these gross particularities of history and geography have been distilled. We thrill to the enunciation of universal timeless truth, relevant to humanity of every age, and yet here we are standing on nearly the Eve of Christmas, ready to receive homiletic urging towards some great, grand universal human love, and what we get is a hasty trip from nowhere Nazareth to backwater Bethlehem made by a Jewish couple, Mary and Joseph during the reign of Augustus. Oh, like my friend, we affirm the great general principles of the faith, we're in broad agreement generally speaking with the church's goals. Our problem is with these stories, they're just so particular and

specific and concrete. Like Martha, we are concerned about the plight of the poor, but in the broadest, most general sort of way. We're concerned when we're standing inside a voting booth rather than standing on a back door step with a basket of canned goods and a turkey for Christmas. And yet if we are to love as God loves, judging from Luke's story of the Nativity, then I think we got to learn to love with a particularity and a specificity that just makes us squirm. If you will note, it is rare that the Bible makes a statement like God is love, some abstract affirmation floating above human time and place. But rather the way the Bible says it, it's God loves Israel, God chooses Mary, God spoke to Joseph, God loves Jesus. God called the Church. This is scandalously particular. Rarely does the Bible speak in timeless generality, more typically, the Bible speaks just the way of today's text. God goes to specific people in specific times and particular places. And here I believe is the implication: Particular times and specific people living in particular places like Bethlehem matter a great deal to God. As my friend Stan Hauerwas says, there is an unrelenting, passionate particularity about the way the God of the Bible loves us. The way this God intrudes into human history at specific times and places. Abstract, general, even if high-sounding ideas, rarely have the power to grasp and invigorate us. It is only in the specific and particular that lives are engaged, here. I am sending flowers to a person who, for me, is a representative of the highest and best aspirations of the human race. No. No, that's not the way it is when you're in love with somebody. When you're in love with somebody, one of the reasons that love so transforms us and engages us and changes every waking moment is that we love this person, we love the way she walks, we want to know what she's eating for breakfast, the sound of her name, Jane, Jane. And she doesn't have to stop being Jane and blend into the great, gray lump of the human race for us to love her. In fact, if she did, she would be much less lovable. And God's love invades our time and place with similar particularity. It wasn't just that the word became flesh, once upon a time somewhere to somebody. It was that Jewish Mary, from Nazareth, Galilee had a baby named Jesus in Bethlehem, here. And to witness such passionate, divine intensity about the specific and particular is to realize the possibility that this just may be the way that God loves us and it may be the way God intends for us to love other people. Because God didn't disdain to be born in a place like Bethlehem to real people like Mary and Joseph. There's a better than even chance that God might condescend and get mixed up among people like you and me. In a place like Durham, here. And I tell you that's what makes being loved by this God so uncomfortable, it's particularity. John's "the word became flesh" is more comfortable than Luke's Bethlehem, Nazareth, Mary, Joseph, Quirinius. Luke's story is so discomfiting because it challenges our assumption that our daily lives really don't matter to this great big God. And we resist loving as God loves us. Because there is something mildly reassuring that our little lives really don't matter so much to God. Certainly not enough to disrupt us during tax season by an unexpected pregnancy or a voice from heaven while we're doing our bit with the sheep on the night shift, here. And we just love to come to church and be served up a soufflé of universal principles and abstract sentiments. Puff pastry of ideas. But Luke says that's just not the way this God loves us. Instead of lofty, fluffy platitudes about the human race, we are confronted face to face with a poor Jewish carpenter and his pregnant, young, out of wedlock wife looking for a place to spend the night in Bethlehem. Rather than sociological abstractions about the systemic causes of injustice, we're made to look at the Joneses, the way that they turn their eyes away from us when we hand over the food basket. The food basket filled with canned goods we didn't need. And we note that their gratitude is ever so slightly exceeded by their resentment. Because it's one thing to love humanity, it's another thing to love the Joneses and have our hypocritical platitudes deflated by their justified resentment, here. And from what I've noted, hate, hate appears to be similarly disrupted by the specific and the particular. For instance, what do you think about

when you hear the word Iraq? Lawless aggressors? Terrorists led by a maniac no better than Hitler? But just take a moment and picture in your mind an 18 year old from Baghdad shivering in the desert in green fatigues, a picture of his girlfriend in one pocket, a picture of his mother in the other. And he's staring across desert waste at another 18-year-old from Birmingham with a picture of his girlfriend in one pocket and his mother in another. When facing the universal, it's a little easier to pull the trigger. And maybe that's why most of our leaders always speak in terms of generalities. They talk about the violation of international law or the New World Order. They don't talk in specifics and particulars, about 18-year-olds. I remember years ago president Johnson damaged public support for another war when in a moment of great, honest candor he said, look, war, anyway you call it, is sending one mother's son to kill another mother's son. Now of course if that mother's son is from Baghdad and if he's a Muslim, he doesn't know Luke 2, and he doesn't know the story of Christmas. But we know that story and we know that that story implies that God loves him as much as God loves us with scandalous particularity, face to face, one at a time, by name, here. It is only as we learn to love others in the same manner that God has loved us, face to face, one at a time, with risky specificity and particularity, that God's love has a chance in an often violent, nameless, faceless world. A world made all the more violent because of its namelessness and facelessness and placelessness. When God came among us, in the flesh, Emmanuel, God didn't hover over the whole human race. God came to Bethlehem. God didn't appear as some new idea or social program. God came to Mary, to Joseph. When God decided to challenge the might of Caesar's legions, God didn't come as some new philosophy of life. God came as a baby named Jesus. And I tell you that's God's way of doing things, the first Christmas or this Christmas. And so you better pay attention to your life. You better pay attention particularly to its ordinariness, its specificity. You better look into the faces, and you better notice the names, because that's how God comes among us. One by one, here. And so the ordinary things you do, like having babies, going on holiday trips to visit the relatives over at Bethlehem, PA, and paying taxes. These things get redeemed. This is exactly where you can expect to be grasped by God, here. Here. I was at a conference of learned theologians, and the speaker categorized the gospel as quote, "radical obedience to God's program of justice, righteousness and peace for the whole world." Unquote. And one of my colleagues responded that in a little town in Ohio, early morning, an old woman is getting out of bed, looking forward to another day of caring for her retarded adult daughter before she goes to work as a waitress in a local diner. And for that woman, the greatest act of radical, obedience to Jesus Christ occurs when just before she gets out of bed, she says a little prayer and asks a loving God to help her make it through one more day. Emmanuel. God with us. Here. (church music playing) (choir singing)

- Lord be with you. Let us pray. Lord, we have waited so long for you. We have waited for you to come and put an end to death. To wipe away every tear from our eyes as you promised. Until you do, teach us how to die faithfully, how to suffer faithfully the death of our friends and family. We pray for those this season who still grieve, come Lord Jesus and wipe away our tears. Come, oh come, Emmanuel. We have waited so long, oh Lord, for You to come back and rule the world in peace. To put an end to the hate and violence in our hearts, to end the age when Christians go to war. Until you do, enable us to be a witness to a world of your life of peace and suffering death. Enable the church to be the peacemakers you have called us to be, to welcome the stranger. To love our enemy. To pray for those who persecute us. We pray especially for our enemies this morning and name them now in our hearts. We pray for all the children of soldiers who will be orphan should there be war. We pray for the husbands and wives of soldiers who will be left alone. We pray

for mothers and fathers of soldiers here in American and also in Iraq and throughout the world. Come Lord Jesus and rule in peace. Come, oh come Emmanuel. We have waited so long for you to return and unify this broken church. Reconciling for us what we keep divided. Until you do oh Lord, let us remain discontent with our brokenness. Give us the true vision of the church renewed as one body, one family. And inspire us to live as members of one another. Come Lord Jesus and break down our walls, come, oh come Emmanuel. We have waited for You to come and rule with justice, blessing the poor, filling the hungry with good things, sending the rich, empty away. Setting the captives free, giving sight to the blind, we have waited for you. Until you do, enable us to be just people who will do your work of justice in the world. Unafraid of being poor ourselves, unafraid of the prisoner. Unafraid of our neighbor. Unafraid of the blind fed by your body and blood for this work. Come Lord Jesus and make us poor. Come, oh come Emmanuel. We often want you to hurry and come back Lord, because our lives are hopeless and without meaning. Some days we pray for your return just to spare us from tomorrow. To free us from our own prisons, from the world we have created. Yet we know that your coming as this infant brought us hope and this season reminds us of our joy overwhelming, your life among us then gave us meaning and showed us who we are. Because of your birth and death and resurrection, we can't wait well for your return. Because you created the church to sustain us on this pilgrimage, we will not be alone as we wait and believe and hope that you will come. Heal now our blindness so that we will recognize you when you come, heal now our blindness so we can recognize you as you come to us each day. Come, Lord Jesus, come, come, oh come Emmanuel. We have waited so long for your return. Thank you for coming to Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem during the rule of Caesar Augustus. Thank you for coming to us here and will come back to us here. In the name of the blessed trinity, who comes and comes again, amen. God has given us all good gifts, let us offer ourselves and our gifts to God with glad hearts. (choir singing) Lord, for the child, for the cross, for the resurrection, for the church we give you thanks. For all the joy of our lives, the goodness, the beauty, the hope, for all the gifts you offer, we give you thanks. Enable us this season to welcome your gifts however they come to us and to be transformed ever more into thankful people, at this celebration of your birth into this world, we thank you for making us your children and as those children, we offer you this holy prayer, saying, our father who art in heaven, hallowed by 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 power, and glory forever. Amen. Go now in peace to live and serve the Lord who came to us as friend, who comes to us again. Here, and now. In the name of the blessed trinity, world without end. Amen. ♪ Day by day ♪ ♪ Dear Lord ♪ ♪ Three things I pray ♪ ♪ To see thee more clearly ♪ ♪ Love thee more dearly ♪ ♪ Follow thee more nearly ♪ ♪ Day by day ♪ ♪ Day by day ♪ ♪ Day by day ♪ ♪ Three things I pray ♪ ♪ To see thee more clearly ♪ ♪ Love thee more dearly ♪ ♪ Follow thee more nearly ♪ ♪ Day by day ♪ ♪ Day by day ♪ (hymn music playing) (choir singing)