

(organ music)

- Good morning, welcome to this service of worship at Duke Chapel. You will note that the world moves on immediately after Christmas to something else. The church in its wisdom has declared that this is the first Sunday of Christmas and we continue our reflections upon the nativity of Christ. Helping to lead the service today is Dr. Karen Westerfield Hucker. Who teaches worship at the Divinity School. Eliza Ferguson, graduate student at Duke and member of the congregation of Duke Chapel. Our guest organist is Dr. Joseph Kitchen, distinguished Durham musician and teacher of musicians and again we have with us helping to lead us in our music, the Crown Chamber Brass. One correction, in the bulletin, the congregational 12th night party will be held, not as listed in the bulletin, but will be held on Friday, January the fifth at 6:00 p.m. in the Episcopal Center and all are invited. Please stand for the call to worship. Praise the lord. God commanded and all was made. ("The First Noel") ♪ The first Noel ♪ ♪ The angel did say ♪ ♪ Was to certain poor shepherds ♪ ♪ In fields as they lay ♪ ♪ In fields as they lay ♪ ♪ Keeping their sheep ♪ ♪ On a cold winter's night ♪ ♪ That was so deep ♪ ♪ Noel Noel ♪ ♪ Noel Noel ♪ ♪ Born is the king of Israel ♪ ♪ They looked up and saw a star ♪ ♪ Shining in the east beyond them far ♪ ♪ And to the earth ♪ ♪ It gave great light ♪ ♪ And so it continued ♪ ♪ Both day and night ♪ ♪ Noel Noel ♪ ♪ Noel Noel ♪ ♪ Born is the king of Israel ♪ ♪ And by the light ♪ ♪ Of that same star ♪ ♪ Three wise men came ♪ ♪ From country far ♪ ♪ To seek for a king ♪ ♪ Was their intent ♪ ♪ And to follow the star ♪ ♪ Wherever it went ♪ ♪ Noel Noel ♪ ♪ Noel Noel ♪ ♪ Born is the king of Israel ♪ ♪ This star drew nigh ♪ ♪ To the northwest ♪ ♪ Over Bethlehem it ♪ ♪ Took its rest ♪ ♪ And there it did ♪ ♪ Both stop and stay ♪ ♪ Right over the place ♪ ♪ Where Jesus lay ♪ ♪ Noel Noel ♪ ♪ Noel Noel ♪ ♪ Born is the king of Israel ♪ ♪ Then entered in ♪ ♪ Those wise men three ♪ ♪ Fall reverently ♪ ♪ Upon their knee ♪ ♪ And offered there ♪ ♪ In his presence ♪ ♪ Their gold and myrrh ♪ ♪ And frankincense ♪ ♪ Noel Noel ♪ ♪ Noel Noel ♪ ♪ Born is the king of Israel ♪

Woman: Let us pray. Almighty God, you have shed upon us the new light of your incarnate word. May this light, enkindled in our hearts, shine forth in our lives through Jesus Christ our lord who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the holy spirit. One God, now and forever, amen. Please be seated.

- Let us pray together the prayer for illumination. Open our hearts and minds, oh God, by the power of your holy spirit so that as the word is read and proclaimed, we may hear your message with joy this day. Amen. The Old Testament reading is from the book of Isaiah, chapter 63, verses seven through nine. I will recount the gracious deeds of the lord. The praise worthy acts of the lord. Because of all that the lord has done for us and the great favor to the house of Israel, that he has shown them according to his mercy, according to the abundance of his steadfast love. For he said, surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely and he became their savior in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them. In his love and in his pity, he redeemed them. He lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. This is the word of the Lord.

- The psalm appointed for this day is psalm 148. Would you please stand? Praise the lord. Praise the lord from the heavens. Praise the lord in the heights. Praise the lord, sun and moon. Praise the lord, all shining stars. Let them praise the name of the lord, who commanded and they were created. Praise the lord from the earth, sea monsters and all deeps, mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars, kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the Earth. Let them praise the name of the lord, whose name alone is exalted, whose glory is above Earth and heaven. Praise the lord. (organ music) (hymnal singing) Please be seated.

- The epistle reading is from Hebrews, chapter two, verses 10 through 18. It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom, all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering, for the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one father. For this reason, Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters saying, I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters. In the midst of the congregation, I will praise you. And again, I will put my trust in him. And again, here am I, and the children whom God has given me. Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death that is the devil and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. Therefore, he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested. This is the word of the Lord. (horn music)

- One of my fondest memories as a parent are when our children were being put to bed they always ask, tell a story, read a story. Children love stories. But there's a certain sense in which it can be said, children not only love stories but children need stories. In a soon to be published book on the gospels of Mark and John, Duke writer, Reynolds Price begins by telling what bible stories meant to him growing up. Can any of you relate to this? Price says, I'm hardly alone in the world in saying that the central narratives of the Bible drew early at my mind and have kept their magnetism for me. In my case their hold has lasted undiminished nearly six decades. Before I could read, I often turned to profusely illustrated pages of Hurlbut's story of the Bible, imagining what tales it produced, such warming pictures. By the age of eight I began to make drawings of my own from knowledge I had gained in reading the tales my new won literacy and yielding to the pool of their fresh, unnerving actions. Abraham bent on butchering his Isaac. The boy, David, with a hacked off head of the monstrous Goliath and the strangest and most riveting of all, the birth of a unique, glistening child in a straw table with attendant angels, shepherds and wise men. By then in the countryside near my parents home I had also undergone solitary apprehensions of a vibrant unity among all visible things and the thing I guessed was hid beneath the visible world. The reachable world of trees, rocks, water, clouds, snakes, foxes, myself, beneath them all I loved and feared. Even that early, I sensed the world's unity as a vast kinship far past the bond of any route I shared with other creatures in evolutionary time. The Bible stories have begun to engage me steadily in silence and to draw me toward the singular claim of their burning heart. Your life is willed and watched with a care by a God who once lived here. Price illustrates that children need stories. I wonder why? Here's what my theory is, that children need these stories because a child's life can be so confusing and incomprehensible. The world, so strange that children are desperate for

some means of making sense of it all and making some kind of predictability and coherence. Each day a young life can be so strange that they long for experiences that always begin the same way, once upon a time. And then move to some reassuring, predictable end, and they lived happily ever after. I think that's one reason why children demand to have the same story told over and over again and you can't leave out one word of it or one experience. It has to be exactly the same over and over again and I think the reason that when you're four years old there is so much that you don't know. Adults are so unmanageable and odd. It's reassuring to know that some things do turn out right. That even little people like Red Riding Hood or Jack can figure things out, they can triumph over giants and wolves, they can live happily ever after. They love to hear the same stories. And so do we. Now I know that this first Sunday of Christmas there are lots of reasons for you to be here in church. But I want to suggest one. And that is that you are here in search of a story so reliable and true. You are here to hear something that you already know by heart in the deepest meaning of that expression and I'm talking about today's gospel from Luke. The story of the birth of Jesus. This is not new information for you, you know this by heart, having heard it over and over again since childhood. You know it by heart. This is the most beloved story in the Bible and I say that you have come here this morning not only because you love this story but because you need this story. Hear the gospel. In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered and this was the first registration taken while Corinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph went also from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea to the city of David called Bethlehem because he was descended from the house, the line 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 firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger. Because there was no place for them in the inn. In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night, then an angel of the Lord stood before them and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were terrified. The angel said, do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all 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 lying 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 and on Earth peace among those whom God favors. And the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place which the Lord has made known to us. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Our modern lives are characterized by incoherence. If you look in our brains, they would resemble the yellow pages. A catalog of assorted stuff. Images come at us in 10 second sound bites like the evening news, there's a bit of tragedy here, a bomb going off in Bosnia, numbers on the economy, a child has died in an accident, someone's head is blown off in downtown Durham and now a word from our sponsor. It tends not to add up to anything, it doesn't go anywhere, it has no plot, disconnected, incoherent. What we're missing is some master story and as we've said, we live by stories. These stories tell us where life is moving, where we're going. As a child I was told the story of George Washington cutting down the cherry tree and refusing to lie about it. Nevermind that the story is apocryphal, not exactly the way things happened. But from that story learned my heart, you see I learned that the world belongs to the honest. That even though one does wrong, one must not lie after all, look at George Washington. An earlier generation learned the story of a Horatio Alger. The story of a kid who grows up poor but through hard work gets to the top. Another generation learns the story of Batman and Robin. The story of the triumph of good, the defeat of evil. Then there's the Helen Keller story about

victory over life's disabilities or the Florence Nightingale story about the goodness of compassion. These are among the master stories which we've heard from childhood which tell us who we are and where the world is going. And yet in a recent book, Neil Postman, the book is entitled, "The End Of Education," Neil Postman says, that we no longer live in a world ruled by certain master stories. Postman says that what we lack is a comprehensive narrative about what the world is like and how it got to be that way. There was a time when Israel's story of the creation of the world, Genesis one, rendered the world into a place of divine work and destiny. It moved the lives of millions. That master story was replaced by Newton's account of the world as a predictable, purely mechanical, clockwork, perpetual motion machine, gift of science, tool of technology. But now, says Postman, both of these master stories, the Genesis story of God's creation of the world and the Newtonian account of the clockwork universe. Both of these stories have been displaced are in jeopardy. There is now no commonly accepted master tale that in the telling gives life coherence and direction. We shuffle through the pages of old stories which used to make sense. The stories of King David or King George or Martin Luther King or Burger King. They no longer speak to us. We don't tell stories to our children with as much conviction because life appears to have lost its narrative framework. Now it's just one dumb thing after another life is to quote Shakespeare, "A tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury signifying nothing." Yesterday, CNN's, Jill Dougherty, in reviewing the past year in politics, the troubles of the current presidential administration says, President Clinton's biggest problem is he's never been able to come up with a good bumper sticker. The interviewer said, what do you mean by that and says, the American people don't want anything that cannot be put in the space of a bumper sticker that explains things. Neil Postman says that our schools purchase expensive computers for our kids because we can't think of anything more significant to do for them. These machines crunch more and more facts and figures and data. They manage more information but it doesn't add up to anything. It doesn't go anywhere. It doesn't have a beginning a middle and an end. All we're doing is sort of shuffling the cards, moving around information, rearranging disconnected images, blips on the computer screen. When what we need is a story. Now today, as another year ends and we slouch toward the end of what may have been the bloodiest century in the history of the world. We have yet to find in all of this century's inventions, the computer or the motion picture, or the bomb, the modern state, the welfare system, internet, we have yet to find anything that really connects us, that anything would suggest that we're moving towards some destination worth having, something that makes life worth living. We need a story, we need some account that is more interesting than the one we have attempted to devise for ourselves. We need to know that there's something there, someone acting in a world greater than our actions and our devices. We need a conviction that history is really going somewhere other than where we ourselves are going. We need to have our lives set in some larger framework. We need a story. And thus I have told you a very old story, strange, true. It's a story which has the power to rearrange the world, to open your eyes, to construct a tomorrow more interesting than today. It begins the way we usually begin stories. It begins, you will note, this story of the Nativity, it begins with men, powerful political men. Men who are named Caesar Augustus or Quirinius But go ahead you could name them Pol Pot, Stalin, Churchill, Roosevelt, fill in the names, you know this story. The story of power. The story of government regulations and registrations and the paying of taxes, of mandated enrollments, of decrees handed down from Jerusalem or Washington or Moscow. You know that story. But then the story takes an unexpected turn and by the way, much unexpected is going to happen in this story. An unexpected turn, when into the story, intrude two unknown, non-powerful people, Mary, Joseph and you will note that these Mary, Joseph, they don't live in places like Rome or London or Moscow

but in places nobody's ever heard of. Nazareth. See? The story is already having its way with you. Already your gaze is being turned away from CNN, away from history as we have been told it is, to places like, away from people like Augustus living in Rome to places like Mary, Bethlehem, people. People that you thought were so big and important are getting displaced. Places where you expected history to be made are being dismantled and there in a little out of the way place called Bethlehem, Mary gives birth to a baby and wraps the baby in rags and lies the baby in a feed trough because there was no room for them in the official, normal places. See, we expect history to be a story about the turning, about power turning on the hinges of movements of men, the trooping of armies, the trumpet's blast, the cannons roar but here history has been transformed by a baby, fragile, dependent, needy. God with a human face. Very, very strange story. And maybe that's why the church never tires of telling it. Maybe that's why we have to retell it every year. That's why we have to sing it in Christmas carols and do it up in Christmas children's pageants. It's so strange, the story, so against our inclinations and expectations. So we got to tell it over and over again to get the point. Our stories, our stories tell of the triumph of human potential. The upward, ever upward ascent of humanity toward ever greater humanly devised goals but this story tells about God's gracious intrusion into human history. God's taking charge, God's moving, acting in ways beyond our puny conception. Our stories tell us that history is what happens up at prominent places but this story tells of a night among poor peasants at a backwater place named Bethlehem. You could've watched CNN for a lifetime. You could've read Time from cover to cover. You could've earned your PhD at some of this country's best institutions including this one and you will never have heard this story. Who is the first to get the news? The good news, it's not the Associated Press, CBS, MTV, ABC, it is this news, so wonderfully strange. It can't come through conventional media. It's got to come through angels and it comes to poor shepherds out with their flocks, working class shepherds and of course this is all to say that if the good news of God can come to a place like Bethlehem, there's even a chance it could come to Durham. If it could come to shepherds, it could come to us. And we see, here is a story that doesn't just simply want to impart more information to you. This story wants to get in your brain, change your field of vision, it wants to lodge deep in your heart until your world is rearranged. After you hear this story and get it in the heart, it will be impossible for you hereafter to say things like, well we might as well give up hope, I think we've done all we can here. Or I believe in God and prayer and all of that, however, there are times when one must be realistic and accept the current situation. It'll be difficult for you once this story gets in your heart to pick up tomorrow's newspaper and ask, well, what is the news today because you know a story of how the people missed the news first time around and may well miss news again, how the things we call news are not always news. Next time you get a bad report back from your doctor, next time when you are confronted by some terrible, bleak situation, next time your family gets unglued, next time you're tempted to throw in the towel, call it quits. I want to tell you a story. It's not only a good story, it's also true. It's not only a story that you love but it's one that you need. Now more than ever. In those days Cesar Augustus sent out a decree that all the world should be enrolled and Joseph and Mary went up to Bethlehem where she gave birth to her first born child. (organ music) (hymnal singing)

Woman: Please be seated. The lord be with you. Let us pray. In peace let us pray to the lord saying, hear our prayer. For the holy church of God, that it may be filled with truth and love and be found without fault at the day of your coming. We pray to you, oh lord, hear our prayer. For the leaders of the church, for all ministers and for all the holy people of God, we pray to you, oh lord. Hear our prayer. For the mission of the church, that in faithful witness it may preach the gospel to the ends of the Earth, we pray to you, oh lord, hear our

prayer. For those who do not yet believe and those who have lost their faith, that they may receive the light of the gospel, we pray to you, oh lord, hear our prayer. For the peace of the world, that a spirit of respect and forbearance may grow among nations and peoples, we pray to you, oh lord, hear our prayer. For the homeless, the outcast, the pursued and the persecuted, that they may be relieved and protected, we pray to you, oh lord, hear our prayer. For the sick and the infirm and for those who remember and care for them, that they may know your healing touch, we pray to you, oh lord, hear our prayer. For our families, friends and neighbors, that being freed from anxiety, they may live in joy, peace and health, we pray to you, oh lord, hear our prayer. For all who have died in the communion of your church, that strengthened by their witness we may be grateful for their example, living in justice and love until by your grace, we join them in life eternal. We pray to you, oh lord, hear our prayer. For yours is the majesty, oh God, holy and eternal. Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory, now and forever, amen. We remember and celebrate during this holy season, the gift of God with us. In gratitude, let us return to God the offerings of our life and the gifts of the Earth. (horn music) (organ music) (hymnal singing) Let us pray. Great God of power, we praise you for Jesus Christ who came to save us from our sins. We thank you for the hope of the prophets, the song of the angels and the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. We thank you that in Jesus, you became flesh and dwelt among us, sharing human hurts and pleasures. Glory to you for your grace filled love. Glory to you, eternal God, through Jesus Christ, lord of lords and king of kings, now and forever, amen. And now with the confidence of children of God, we are bold to pray, 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, the power, and the glory. Amen. ("Joy To The World") ♪ Joy to the world the lord is come ♪ ♪ Let earth receive her king ♪ ♪ Let every heart ♪ ♪ Prepare him room ♪ ♪ And heaven and nature sing ♪ ♪ And heaven and nature sing ♪ ♪ And heaven and heaven ♪ ♪ And nature sing ♪ ♪ Joy to the world the savior reigns ♪ ♪ Let men their songs employ ♪ ♪ While fields and floods ♪ ♪ Rocks hills and plains ♪ ♪ Repeat the sounding joy ♪ ♪ Repeat the sounding joy ♪ ♪ Repeat repeat ♪ ♪ The sounding joy ♪ (hymnal singing)

- The grace of our lord and savior, Jesus Christ, the love of God, the fellowship of the holy spirit be with you now and throughout the coming year, amen. (organ music)