

- Sunday service December 26th, 1976, 11 o'clock. (Hymn is sung) (Oh Come All Ye Faithful plays on organ)

- Pastor] It is the God who said, let light shine out of darkness, who has shown in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. Therefore, let us confess our sins. Let us pray. In the presence of the celebration of the birth of Jesus. Our hearts are moved to awe and gratitude, but also touched by a deep disquiet. Forgive us for so being involved in the preparation for Christmas, we missed the quiet benediction of your birth. Our intentions are good, oh God. But we get caught up in the business of our lives. We confess our sin, oh God, and pray that we can accept the life, and love, and hope, and peace, you offer to us through Jesus Christ. And now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace. Comfort your hearts, and establish them in every good work and word through Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen. Amen. (I Wonder As I Wander plays) ♪ I wonder as I wander ♪ ♪ Out under the sky ♪ ♪ Why Jesus our savior ♪ ♪ Did come for to die ♪ ♪ For poor on'ry people like you and like I ♪ ♪ I wonder as I wander ♪ ♪ Out under the sky ♪ ♪ When Mary birthed Jesus ♪ ♪ T'was in a cow's stall ♪ ♪ With wise men and farmers and shepherds and all ♪ ♪ But high from God's heaven a star's light did fall ♪ ♪ And the promise of ages ♪ ♪ It then did recall ♪ ♪ If Jesus had wanted for any wee thing ♪ ♪ A star in the sky or a bird on the wing ♪ ♪ Or all of God's angels in heaven to sing ♪ ♪ He surely could have it ♪ ♪ For he was the King ♪ ♪ I wonder as I wander ♪ ♪ Out under the sky ♪ ♪ How Jesus the savior ♪ ♪ Did come for to die ♪ ♪ For poor on'ry people like you and like I ♪ ♪ I wonder as I wander ♪ ♪ Out under the sky ♪

Pastor: From the writings of the prophet, Jeremiah. Hear the word of the Lord, oh nations, and declare it in the coastlines of far off. Say, he who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd keeps his flock. For the Lord has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord. Over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young flock and the herd. Their lives shall be like a watered garden, and they shall languish no more. Then shall the maidens rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be married. I will turn their mourning into joy. I will comfort them and give them gladness. Gladness for their sorrow. Will you stand for the reading of the gospel. The gospel of Luke. The second chapter. Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous, and devout. Looking for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit, that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And inspired by the spirit, he came into the temple. And when the parents brought in the child, Jesus, to do for him, according to the custom of the law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, Lord, now let us die servant, depart in peace, according to thy word. For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou has prepared in the presence of all peoples. A light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for the glory of thy people, Israel. And his father, and his mother marveled at what was said about him. And Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary, his mother, behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken and the sword will pierce through your soul also, that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed. May the Lord bless to our hearing and understanding, this holy gospel. (Hymn played on organ)

Let us affirm what we believe. We believe in God, who has created and is creating. Who has come and the truly human Jesus, to reconcile and make new. Who works in us and others by the Spirit. We trust God, who calls us to be the church, to celebrate life in it's fullness, to love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil, to proclaim Jesus crucified and risen. Our judge and our hope in life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. We are not alone, thanks be to God. The Lord be with you.

Congregation: And with your spirit.

Pastor: Let us pray. Oh Holy Spirit of God. Thou who art, a gracious and willing guest, in every heart that with humble spirit will receive thee. Be present now within our hearts. Be present in this place, and guide our prayers. Guide our prayers of Thanksgiving. For all the gracious opportunities and privileges of this day and of this good land, we give thee thanks, oh Lord. For the rest of this holiday, for the special peace that comes from the daily round of deeds, we give thee thanks, oh God. And for thine invitation to keep the day Holy to thy self, oh God, we give thanks. For this cathedral of prayer, and for the ministry of public worship, we give thanks. For all the earthly symbols by which heavenly realities have today laid firmer, hold upon our souls, we bless thee, oh God. For the story, of a manger and the mother of Stardust, and stable straw, of shepherds, and angels, we give thee thanks, oh God. And for all the words that have been read, and for all the music that has uplifted us, we give thee thanks. For the good gift of family and friends, for the good gift of those who love us, and the ones who we love, we give thanks, oh God. And for every evidence of peace on earth, goodwill to men, we give thee thanks. Oh thou who has commanded that we love our neighbor, guide us, that we may pray for others. We pray for those who are alone today and lonely, grant them thy nearness. We pray for all who are powerless and oppressed, make us to labor for their freedom. Make us to honor justice, but correct the foolishness, and sinfulness of our ways, oh God. And grant thy freedom and justice to the oppressed. We pray for all who hunger, for those who are poor and cold. We pray for all who sin. Grant them thy forgiveness. We pray for those who will die today, take them to thy safe care. And if there are those for whom no prayer is said today, let these prayers rise to thee, oh God. Grant, oh heavenly Father, that the spiritual refreshment we have these days, enjoyed, may not be left behind and forgotten, as tomorrow, we return to the cycle of common tasks. Here in this Holy Christmas, is a fountain of inward strength. Here is a purifying wind that must blow through all our busy-ness and all our pleasures. Here is light to enlighten all our road. Therefore, oh God, do thou enable us so to discipline our will, that in the hours of stress, we may honestly seek after those things for which we have prayed in the hours of peace. And 'ere we leave this place. We commit all our dear ones to thy faithful care, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who hath taught us when we pray to say, 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, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen. God. So what? I get up every morning, I look the same. I wonder how I can look so old. Would there be a difference if I woke up with God? Would I be cheerful? Transfigured? Probably not. Can you tell by looking at a man if he knows God? Probably not. Does it mean anything to you? So what? Go back in time. Back until you are very young. Don't forget to say your prayers, dear. Remember, God is listening, and he always knows when you don't say your prayers. Sure, there are 3 billion, 20 million, 700 thousand people in the world, and God is listening to my prayers? When you were young, maybe God was very real to you. A little girl played by herself on the living room rug. She

had a pretend friend with whom she was talking. The little girl's mother walked in and watched for a moment, dear, who are you talking to? Godi mom. Godi. Godi? Godi, mother, how could you be so stupid? I mean, what else is there? If you have faith, dear, your prayers will be answered. Just like in the Bible. Faith can move mountains. Then when you were a little older, perhaps you were like Philip in Somerset Maugham's, 'Of Human Bondage'. Phillip was very young, and very self-conscious, and he had a clubbed foot. He decided he would pray so that his foot would be healed. He did not want to rush God. So he set a date about a month in advance for his recovery. When the morning arrived, Philip did not look at his foot, nor would he even feel of it. After all he had faith, and God would certainly think he doubted if he, if he looked right away. But the good foot touched the clubbed foot, and it was still a clubbed foot. If you have faith, dear, your prayers will be answered. You wanted to believe in God very much. Doubt never crossed your mind. God listened to every one of your prayers. And if you had great faith like Paul, for instance, he would answer your prayers, and you could still call him Godi if you wanted to, but still, maybe he was not quite real to you, God. He was kind of thin, in a strong sort of way. He had a white beard, carefully combed. He would smile the way every grandfather, especially yours, smiled when you were good. But when you were bad, he was the Lord mighty in battle. God is spirit and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth. Daddy, what's spirit? Well, dear, spirit is what people have in their minds, their heads, I mean. It's what you think, dear. Daddy, is God what he thinks? No, dear, God is what you think. God is love. Just like they tell you in Sunday school. But daddy, I thought God was spirit. God is, oh, ask your mother, dear. God is spirit and they that worship him, must worship him in spirit and in truth. Two young girls were talking, do you believe in God? The younger was eager to talk, but don't laugh, she said. That's all right. I won't laugh. Who's taking you to the dance Saturday night? What's God? Is God? What am I going to do about it? I'm 17 years old! You see, I've got to know, and I'm asking you, and you, and you, and more important your little child will ask you. And even more important than that, you will ask yourself. These words, vivid, candid, and pointed, come from a young lady who is now at University of Minnesota co-ed. What's God? Is God? Don't laugh. And don't divert my attention to Saturday night's date, or the football game, or the weather, or that new sport jacket you want to know. You want. Because I want to know, is God? And so now it is the morning after Christmas Day, December 26. Yesterday was the date of one of the three most significant days in the life of the church, and indeed in the life of Jesus Christ. The other two being Good Friday and Easter Day. I wish, oh, how I wish this morning, that I understood Christmas. How I'd like to have just some slight insight into the wonder of what it was that took place on that first Christmas night, or first Christmas morning. But I do not understand. I guess that's why the words of Simeon, read in one of our scripture lessons this morning, express so much of my feeling of awe and wonder, the majestic poetic. And isn't it strange how when confronted by the ultimate, and by mystery that is beyond our understanding, poetry is, is one way of expressing the inexpressible? The poetic words of the (indistinct) reveal this amazement and this affirmation. Lord, now let us bow, thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation. A light for revelation to the Gentiles. That's us folks. And for glory to thy people, Israel. And now, look what has happened. Just a few days, a few short days after Jesus was born and, and Simeon is certain, the salvation of all peoples is now at hand. Now present in this little bitty, baby called Jesus, born of Joseph and Mary. I wish confronted by the reality of Christ that I could so confess as Simeon did. Oh I can confess it. I do believe it. I do not understand it. I feel much like T.S. Eliot describes in his poem, Coker. In order to arrive at what you do not know, you must go by a way, which is a way of ignorance. In order to possess what you do not possess, you must go by the way of dispossession. In order to arrive at what you

are not, you must go through the way in which you are not. And what you do not know is the only thing you know. And what you own is what you do not own. Or again, Eliot in, in Little Gidding. If you come this way, you would have to put off sense and notion. You're not here to verify, or instruct yourself, or inform curiosity, or carry a report. You are here to kneel where prayer has been valid. What you do not know is the only thing you know. And you are here to kneel. That's how I feel. That's what I think. That's the message of the day after Christmas. And now look what has happened. Sometimes, I wonder, as I wander out under the sky. How Jesus the Savior did come for to die. For poor common people like you and like I. I wonder as I wander out under the sky. Yes I do wonder. On the morning after Christmas we're face-to-face indeed, we're in the very midst of one of those few exhilarating moments of life. A moment, a time, an experience of real wonder when really all we can do is gasp, and stand back, and take off our shoes, and bow our heads, and bow our hearts. A moment like the late (indistinct) once said. In describing life, where he said, for life is truly measured and not by the number of breaths we take, but by the number of breaths not taken. Those occasions when our breath stops in amazement, an experience, an awareness, an acknowledgement, a recognition. That, as Paul puts it, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. Or as John puts it, the word was made flesh and lives among us. Or as Matthew puts it, you shall call his name Jesus for he shall save his people from their sins. Intellectually, there is a mystery. Experientially, there is wonder. And now look with me at what has happened. Jesus was born. Jesus. Man. Human. When we were embroiled recently in some non-sexist language, controversy. And some of us were trying to take some of the masculine language out of prayers and hymns and liturgy, and even out of some passages of scripture. For example, when Jesus says greater love has no man than this, that a man should lay down his life for a friend. I don't think he was talking just about men, but was saying, greater love has no one than this, that one should lay down one's life for a friend. And we were trying to change some of the sexist language and make it all inclusive. And someone asked me, are you trying to make Jesus over into some kind of neuter person? Are you trying to say that he was not a man? And I replied, no, not at all. Jesus was a man. Scripture says that. Tradition teaches that. Our creeds affirm that. I believe that. But Jesus was more than man. Jesus was the fulfillment of personhood for all peoples. Male and female. He was fully human. Or as Dr. George Buttrick says, he was painfully human. Carlyle Marney tells us that, that the real heresy of the modern church, is that we never let Jesus' feet quite touch the ground. And we don't. We want to keep him above the earth, hovering somewhere between heaven and earth. Make of him some kind of curious mixture of God and man, and angel and spirit. Someone with a capital S. Man with a capital M. But never just human. Never just man. Never just a human being like you and me. No, because for most of us, that's too threatening. That puts too much pressure on me. Too much responsibility on me. There is too much demand for me. Too much expectation on me. If Jesus, the man, was just plain, old human, physical, fleshly person like you and me. But Jesus, this babe, this Christ child, could not and did not remain a child. If so, we would have less problem today understanding the mystery. He grew up and became a real human being. A real human person. A historical figure. Some of Jesus' contemporaries thought that he was a prophet. Some thought that he was Elijah. Some wanted to make of him a king. Some thought that he was the expected one. Some thought even that he was of the devil. But one thing's for sure, none of the contemporaries, according to all of the evidence that we have ever doubted that Jesus was a real man. A real human being. And now look what has happened. God is a human being. Jesus was human. He was curious. He was tempted. He got tired. He had to rest, had to eat, had to pray. He cried. He laughed. He had a human family. He had human friends. He suffered a human day. When He was stuck, He bled. When He was hurt, His heart broke. He

trusted. He loved, He cared, He grew. You name it, He was human. But there was more, where had Jesus been only human. We would probably not ever have heard of him. But there is more, He is more. How much more is the mystery, and how He is much more, is the mystery. George Gordon Lord Byron once wrote, if ever man was God, or if ever God was man. Jesus Christ was both. And now look with me if you will, at what has happened, Jesus was born. Jesus. God. Divine. And here's the part which I absolutely do not understand. Jesus divine that is holy. That is the perfect one. That is God. God was in Christ reconciling that is redeeming, pulling, loving, bringing the world to himself. How do we know? Not through any doctrine or creed, or theology, but through personal, firsthand experience. Someone said that that the Bible is the most biased book that has ever been written. And that's absolutely correct, because all of the accounts in the New Testament were written by the most biased people you can ever possibly imagine. People who had had a personal firsthand encounter, or experience with Jesus the Christ, and they were telling about it. This Jesus who is God, is the one who, in the words of Charles Wesley's great hymn, Charms our fears. Bids our sorrows cease. Breaks the power of canceled sin. Sets the prisoner free. Makes the foulest, clean. His life, and health, and peace. Listen, he speaks. And listening to his voice, new life. The dead, receive. The mournful broken hearts, rejoice. The humble poor, believe. Hear him, ye deaf. His praise, ye dumb. You're loosened tongues employ, you blind. Behold, your savior come and leap, you lame, for joy. And someone has said of the three ways of acquiring knowledge, that is by way of authority, or by reasoning, or by experience, only the last is really effective, and only that which comes through experience stays with us. And experience tells us, that Jesus was God. Experience like that of Peter, where Peter says you are the Christ. The disciples tried to explain Jesus as less than that. They talked about him as prophet, as leader, as teacher, as good man. But none of these would do. We can almost imagine how their thoughts about Jesus developed. At first, they may have said that God sent him, but that was too cold, too automatic, as though God was a bow and Jesus were an arrow. That wouldn't do. And then they said, God was with Him. That was a little bit deeper, and yet, as I saw more of him, that seemed inadequate also. And then finally, there was a deeper conviction that God came in Jesus. Jesus is God in human form. God become visible and real in our human experience. And now look what has happened. Jesus was born. Man. Person. Fully human. God, divine. Messiah. Christ. Jesus, divine and human. I do not understand. I do not understand how or what. I think I have some slight understanding of the why, though. And that is that Jesus was born to change lives, and to change this world. Jesus was born to give hope, to show love, to bring peace, to care for you and me, and for every other child of God. Jesus was born to bring to loneliness, a presence. To bring to sin, a forgiveness. To bring to a estrangement, and atonement. To bring to separation, a reconciliation. To bring to hunger and heartache, a hope. To bring to tragedy and death, and how our hearts bleed in this community, this week, for those close at home, and those neighbors in Durham who have suffered tragedy. To bring to tragedy and death, a new life. So you see why, when I say that I do not understand what has happened. I must say that. For I really don't. But understanding not, I still believe. For there is something magnetic. There is something mystical. There is something mysterious about Christmas, and we're drawn to it. Yet in all its wonder and mystery, we still know not how to respond on the day after Christmas. And it reminds me of the story that Abraham Lincoln told of the little girl who wanted a set of building blocks, letters, with which she could make out words for Christmas. She was given this set of 26 blocks and she worked with them all day long on Christmas day, and come evening and come time for her to go to bed, she was worn out and weary, and as she knelt to say her prayers, she said, oh Lord, I'm too tired, and too sleepy to pray. There are the letters. You spell it out for yourself. My friends, God in Christ has spelled it out for us.

That's what has happened. Lord, now let us thou thy servant depart in peace. In the face of such mystery, such wonder, such miracle. What is there to do, but to stand in awe? What is it? I'm not sure. But let me quote for you some lines from De Profundis, as Oscar Wilde wrote them from his jail cell. And then let me paraphrase that same line, the words which Wilde wrote were, Everyone is worthy of love, except him who thinks that he is. Love is a sacrament that should be taken kneeling. And these words should be on the lips, and in the hearts of those who receive love. Domine non sum dignus. Oh Lord, I am not worthy. What has happened? I do not know. But I know and believe only that everyone is worthy of Christ, except him or her who thinks that he or she is, for Christ is a sacrament that should be taken kneeling. And these words should be on the lips, and in the hearts of those who receive him. Domine nom sum dignus. Oh Lord, I am not worthy. Lord, now let us thou thy servant depart in peace. For mine eyes have seen thy salvation. In the name of the father, and the son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. (What Child is This plays on organ) (Coventry Carol plays) ♪ Lully lullay thou little tiny child ♪ ♪ Sleep well lully lullay ♪ ♪ And smile in dreaming little one ♪ ♪ Sleep well lully lullay ♪ ♪ Oh sisters two what may we do ♪ ♪ To preserve on this day ♪ ♪ This poor youngling for whom we sing ♪ ♪ Farewell lully lullay ♪ ♪ Herod the king in his raging ♪ ♪ Set forth upon this day ♪ ♪ By his decree no life spare thee ♪ ♪ All children young to slay ♪ ♪ The woe is me poor child for thee ♪ ♪ And ever mourn and say ♪ ♪ For thy parting neither say nor sing ♪ ♪ Farewell lully lullay ♪ (Hallelujah hymn plays on organ)

- Our eyes have seen thy salvation, oh God. We bless thee for thy gifts so freely given. Grant now to bless these gifts of ours. And each one who gives. And make us strong to do thy will through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Joy to the World plays on organ)

- May the God of hope fill you with all joy, and peace, and believing. So that by the power of the Holy Spirit, you may this day and forever more abound in hope through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Gloria in Excelsis Deo hymn plays on organ)