

- The birth of our nation. Please stand as we join in worship with the greeting. The beginning of wisdom is to give reverence to God.

Congregation: God grant us wisdom and worship to live with reverence.

- The wise delight to meditate on God's will and way.

Congregation: They are like a tree, planted by streams of water, that yields fruit in its season. Its leaf does not wither.

All: We come to worship God with reverence, hoping to send down the roots of righteousness. (religious music) (singing in foreign language)

- Let us pray. Oh, God, who makes us glad with the weekly remembrance of your glory resurrection. We, your children, come gathered here to worship you, oh God, in spirit and in truth. We pray today that as we raise our psalms of Zion, and as we sing songs of praise to your glory name, oh God, that indeed all that we do and say will be to your name's honor and glory. Grant us blessing in worship, that this day and ever more, earth will proclaim thee blessed Lord of peace, amen.

- Let us pray together the prayer for illumination.

All: Open our hearts and minds, oh God, by the power of your holy spirit, so that as the word is read and proclaimed, we might hear your word with joy this day, amen.

- The first lesson is taken from the second book of Samuel, chapter five, verses one through five and verses nine through, nine and 10. "Then all the tribes of Israel came "to David at Hebron and said, "look, we are your bone and flesh, "for some time while Saul was king over us, "it was you who led out Israel and brought it in. "The Lord said to you, "it is you who shall be shepherd of my people, Israel. "You who shall be ruler over Israel. "So all the leaders of Israel came to the king at Hebron. "And king David made a covenant with them at Hebron "before the Lord and they anointed David king over Israel." David was 30 years old when he began to reign and he reigned 40 years. At Hebron, he reigned over Judah seven years and six months. And at Jerusalem, he reigned over all Israel and Judah 33 years. David occupied the stronghold and named it the city of David. David built the city all around from the Millo inward, and David became greater and greater, for the Lord, the God of hosts, was with him. This is the word of the Lord.

All: Thanks be to God.

- Today's Psalm is Psalm 48, found on page 782 in the hymnal. Please stand and sing the Psalm and glory responsively. (organ music) ♪ Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised ♪ ♪ In the city of our God ♪ ♪ His

holy mountain, beautiful in elevation ♪ ♪ He's the joy of all the earth ♪ ♪ Mount Zion in the far north, the city
♪ ♪ Of the great ruler ♪ ♪ Within its citadels, God has proven a sure defense ♪ ♪ For lo, the kings assembled ♪
♪ They marched together ♪ ♪ As soon as they saw it, they were astounded ♪ ♪ They were in panic, they took
to flight ♪ ♪ Trembling took hold of them there ♪ ♪ Anguish as of a woman in travail ♪ ♪ As when an east wind
shatters ♪ ♪ The ships of Tarshish. ♪ ♪ As we have heard, so have we seen ♪ ♪ In the city of the Lord of hosts ♪
♪ In the city of our God ♪ ♪ Which God establishes forever ♪ ♪ We have thought on your steadfast love, oh
God ♪ ♪ In the midst of your temple ♪ ♪ As your name, oh God, so your praise reaches ♪ ♪ To the ends of the
earth ♪ ♪ Your right hand is filled with victory ♪ ♪ Let Mount Zion be glad ♪ ♪ Let the daughters of Judah
rejoice ♪ ♪ Because of your judgements ♪ ♪ Walk about Zion, go round about it ♪ ♪ Number its towers ♪ ♪
Consider well its ramparts, go through its citadels ♪ ♪ That you may tell the next generation ♪ ♪ This is God,
our God forever and ever ♪ ♪ God will be our guide forever ♪ ♪ Oh glory be to you, creator ♪ ♪ And to Jesus
Christ, our savior ♪ ♪ And to the holy spirit, blessed will it be ♪ ♪ As it was when time began, he is God ♪ ♪ And
will be forever more ♪

- You may be seated.

- The epistle reading is from second Corinthians, chapter 12, verses two through 10. "I know a person in
Christ, who 14 years ago was caught "up to the third heaven, whether in the body "or out of the body, I do
not know. "God knows and I know that such a person, "whether in the body or out of the body, "I do not
know, God knows was caught up "into paradise and heard things that are not to be told, "that no mortal is
permitted to repeat. "On behalf of such a one, I will boast, "but on my own behalf, I will not boast "except of
my weaknesses. "But, if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, "for I will be speaking the truth. "But I refrain
from it so that no one may think better "of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, "even considering
the exceptional character "of the revelations. "Therefore to keep me from being too elated, "a thorn was
given to me in the flesh, a messenger "of Satan to torment me, to keep me "from being too elated. "Three
times I appealed to the Lord about this, "that it would leave me, but he said to me, "my grace is sufficient for
you, for power is made perfect "in weakness, so I will boast all the more gladly "of my weaknesses so that
the power of Christ "may dwell in me. "Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, "hardships,
persecutions and calamities "for the sake of Christ. 'For whenever I am weak, then I am strong." This is the
word of the Lord. ♪ I got a crown up in that kingdom ♪ ♪ Ain't that good news ♪ ♪ I got a crown up in that
kingdom ♪ ♪ I'm gonna lay down this world ♪ ♪ Gonna shoulder up my cross ♪ ♪ Gonna take it home to my
Jesus ♪ ♪ Ain't that good news ♪ ♪ I got a robe up in that kingdom ♪ ♪ Ain't that good news ♪ ♪ I got a robe up
in that kingdom ♪ ♪ I got a crown up in that kingdom ♪ ♪ I'm gonna lay down this world ♪ ♪ Gonna shoulder
up my cross ♪ ♪ Gonna take it home to my Jesus ♪ ♪ Ain't that good news, good news ♪ ♪ I got a savior in that
kingdom ♪ ♪ Ain't that good news ♪ ♪ I got a savior in that kingdom ♪ ♪ Ain't that good news ♪ ♪ I'm gonna
lay down this world ♪ ♪ Gonna shoulder up my cross ♪ ♪ Gonna take it home to my Jesus ♪ ♪ Ain't that good
news ♪ ♪ Good news, good news, good news ♪ ♪ Good news my lord ♪ ♪ Ain't that good news, good news, my
lord ♪ ♪ Ain't that good news ♪

- Our gospel lesson this morning is from Mark, chapter six, verses one through 13. "He left that place and
came to his home town "and his disciples followed him. "On the Sabbath, he began to teach in the
synagogue. "And many who heard him were astounded, "they said, where did this man get all this? "What is

this wisdom that has been given to him? "What deeds of power are being done by his hands? "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary? "And brother of James and Joseph and Judas and Simon "and are not his sisters here with us? "And they took offense at him. "And Jesus said to them, "prophets are not without honor, except in their home towns, "And among their own kin and in their own house. "And he could do no deed of power there, "except he laid his hands on a few sick people "and cured them. "And he was amazed at their unbelief, "then he went about among the villages teaching. "He called the 12 and began to send them out, two by two, "and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. "He ordered them to take nothing for their journey "except a staff. "No bread, no bag, no money in their belts, "but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. "He said to them wherever you enter a house, stay there "until you leave the place. "If any place will not welcome you, "and they refuse to hear you, as you leave "shake off the dust that is on your feet "as a testimony against them. "So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. "They cast out many demons and anointed with oil many "who were sick and cured them." This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

- One of the things we learned at a very early age, is that we are judged on the basis of our strengths and weaknesses. She's so pretty, he's smart as a whip. You're so stupid, God, what a wimp. Strengths are good, weaknesses are bad. Strengths bring praise, weaknesses condemnation. We learn very early to lead with our strengths, to show these proudly to the world and to work to overcome our weaknesses, or failing that to hide them in shame. Our entire educational system, beginning with preschool is designed to enhance strengths and minimize weaknesses. At the university level, we strive to help students develop their intellectual, emotional, physical, spiritual, and social skills. We believe that college should strengthen them to face the challenges of life, through education we hope they will learn to recognize and overcome their weaknesses. We hope that they will leave Duke smarter, stronger, better than when they came to us. Our success as a university is based upon how much we enhance our strengths as an institution and how much we develop the strengths of our students. The successes of our alumni have a lot to say about our success as an institution. The judgment of your success as an individual is usually based upon how well you have developed your strengths. The number of degrees that follow your name is an indication of your intellectual prowess. The prestige of your job reveals how well you measured up against other people. The significance of your research, the quantity and the quality of your publications speaks to your ability to produce. The size of your bank account shows your business savvy. The duration of your marriage is an indication of your skill in relationships, the achievements of your children tell what kind of parent you've been. You and I are judged every day on the basis of our strengths and weaknesses. Knowing that, we work very hard to maximize our strengths and minimize our weaknesses. In the church, at Corinth, Paul was also being judged for his strengths and weaknesses. The church wasn't so much concerned with his educational or economic background, but with his strength and power as an apostle. After he founded the church at Corinth, some other apostles came to them who were much more impressive. They had much better credentials than Paul. They performed miracles and told of mysterious and dramatic religious experiences. They were charismatic leaders and powerful speakers, in fact, beside them, Paul looked weak and ineffective. He never performed any miracles for them. He never talked about visions, he was an awful, stumbling speaker, painful to listen to. He was in and out of jail all the time. If he was truly an apostle of Christ, one of the chosen favorites, one of the chosen few, then why did he seem so pathetic, beside these others? This gave rise to a debate about which apostle they should follow? Who was best? Who had the most spiritual strength? Who had the best

credentials? Paul was being asked to prove himself as an apostle, or lose the church to the influence of someone else. Our text is Paul's response to that demand. Earlier in the letter he told them that he thought it was ridiculous to boast about himself, that they ought to be able to judge him on the basis of what they had seen and heard in him, but if it was necessary, if they forced him to, he would boast and make a fool of himself like the others. He told them, you want me to boast about my visions, I'll tell you about a vision. I had a vision where I went up to the third Heaven, I saw things that can never be repeated to anyone. But what good does that do you? I didn't have anything to do with it. God did it. And it does you no good whatsoever. You want me to boast about my miracles? I'll tell you about my miracles. I have this thorn in my flesh, that I prayed to be removed from me, three times I prayed for the thorn to be removed from me. And the answer to my prayer was, live with your thorn. My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness. You want me to boast about my strength, I'll tell you what I boast in, I boast in my weakness. This was some answer that Paul gave to his critics. Instead of giving them the litany of his accomplishments and strengths, his apostle resume, so to speak, he held up the mirror image of their expectations. They wanted proof of his spiritual credentials, dramatic descriptions of visions and revelations, but he told them that his vision, any vision, was God's doing. They wanted proof of his spiritual power, of healings and miracles, but he told them of his own failure to be healed. They wanted to know about his strengths, but he told them about his weaknesses. He boasted of his weaknesses. What does this mean? Does it mean that Paul gloried in his weaknesses? Was he glad for the thorn in the flesh, which scholars have speculated was anything from epilepsy to depression, to an eye disorder. We all know people, people who take a kind of perverse pleasure in their sufferings, folks who talk about them all the time. Who see life as one long pity party. Is that what Paul meant? Look at me, look at all I've suffered, nobody has suffered as much as I have, I am the best because I've suffered the most. Was that what Paul meant? Or could it be that he saw weakness as the most true expression of faith. Power is made perfect in weakness, when I'm weak, then I am strong. What does it mean to be strong in weakness? This very concept goes against everything we've been taught since birth. Strength, self mastery, competence is the goal. Weaknesses are to be avoided, or when they can't be avoided, to be hidden from view. We spend our whole lives trying to strengthen our strengths and lessen our weaknesses. So what does it mean to say when I am weak, I am strong? I must confess that I've been struggling with this text for some time. The truth is, I don't like to be weak. I like to be strong, in control. I am a child of my culture, and I have learned well the lessons of strength and weakness. Everything within me rebels against the concept that to be faithful, I must be weak. As a woman, I've also learned to be suspicious of anything or anyone that tells me I need to forfeit my strength, give away my power. I know too many women who lead with their weakness because they've never learned to trust their power. What does this scripture say to them? What does it say to the battered wife, or the sexually abused child? She knows what it's like to be weak and powerless to stop the violence against her. There's nothing to boast about in that. What does it say to the men, the women, and children in Rwanda who've seen atrocities that no one should ever have to witness? As hundreds of thousands have died at the butchering hands of the powerful. What does it mean to say to them, when I am weak, then I am strong? I cannot, I will not tell the battered, abused, war-torn powerless that God desires their weakness and powerlessness. I don't believe in a God like that. So what does this text mean? Power is made perfect in weakness. When I am a weak, then I am strong. Paul was certainly a person who understood what it meant to be weak. He knew what it felt like to be powerless to stop the violence against him. He'd been beaten, he'd been stoned, he'd been in prison, he'd been starved. This was not a lofty spiritual principle for Paul. It touched very close to home. In his life as an

apostle, Paul had learned that the mountaintop experiences of the third heaven were few and far between. It was easy to believe in the power of God at times like that. But his life was much more marked by times of weakness and danger. The pivotal question for Paul was to discover where the power of God was when he faced the 40 lashes minus one. Not one time, but five separate times. Where was the power of God in that? Where was the power of God when he was adrift at sea for a night and a day? Where was the power of God when stones were being hurled at him and he feared for his life? Where was the power of God when he wasn't healed of the thorn in his flesh? Where was the power of God in that? This was the pivotal question. The answer that Paul received allowed him to make sense out of his life and empowered him to face hardships with unshakeable confidence. The key for Paul was God's answer to his request that the thorn in his flesh be removed from him. God's answer was, my grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness. The key is not the fact of our weakness, weakness is part of the inescapable human reality. The key, the key is the sufficiency of God's grace and power. Power and grace which are known perfectly, made fully present, fully known, fully realized, fully sufficient in moments of our weakness. God didn't will the sufferings of Paul, but when Paul had no strength of his own, when he had no personal resources left, he discovered that the grace and power of God were present with him and that they were sufficient, enough, nothing more required. When there was no question about his strength, or his confidence or his power, when he had nothing left to rely upon, Paul discovered that the God of power was perfectly present in his weakness and that was enough. In those moments, when he could no longer depend on his own power, he was strengthened by the very power of Christ dwelling within. That is what he boasted in. Not his weakness, but that through his weakness the God of power was made perfectly present, perfectly sufficient, perfectly visible, perfect. It isn't that God's power isn't present all the time, all the time God's power is present for not one of us could live one single moment apart from the power of God, which sustains the whole creation. It isn't that God's power isn't present, it's just that it's so easy for us to overlook God's power in moments when we're filled with our own strength. When everything's going great, when we often believe that we're in control of the situation, everything's going our way, it's easy for us to feel responsible for the blessings that we enjoy. Self made is the highest praise you can have in America. When our power is at its height, it's difficult to make room for God. Perhaps that's why so many of us only become aware of the presence of God in times of weakness, when we have no inner resources left. God doesn't set out to prostrate us, but when we find ourselves through the vicissitudes and the troubles of life, laid out flat with no resources of our own left to turn to, we discover that the power and grace of God have been there all along and they are sufficient for us. Whatever our need, whatever our pain, whatever our suffering, God's grace and power is sufficient. They are sufficient for the battered wife, sufficient for the abused child, sufficient for the tortured and murdered, sufficient for the grieving, sufficient for the hurting, God's grace is sufficient, God's power is made perfect, perfectly present in our weakness. That doesn't mean God wants us to give away our strength or wallow in our weaknesses. Paul kept on preaching the gospel in spite of the persecution, in spite of the pain that he lived with every day of his life. He used every ability, every skill that God gave him in his mission to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ. More than any other than Christ, Paul was responsible for the spread of Christianity throughout the world. He was a man of tremendous power and he continues to have an incredible influence upon our world 2000 years later. But, the power of Paul was the power of Christ, dwelling within him. God doesn't diminish or take away our strength, indeed when the power of Christ dwells within us, we have more strength than we could ever attain on our own. The difference is whether we look to our own power or to the power of God. What matters is where we place our trust, where is our

confidence? What do we rely upon? Is it self or God? What Paul was trying to convey to the Corinthians is that the center of our life and the focus of our trust, ought not be our own strength, but God's strength. Our power is limited, no matter how impressive our credentials may be. But, God's power is inexhaustible. He had learned that the indwelling Christ, was the source, the only source of authentic power. And that is what gave him the strength to endure and triumph through all the difficult and weak situations of his life. What matters is what we put at the center of life, what we base our confidence upon. Will we rely solely upon our own strength and accomplishments? Or upon the power of God? The world teaches that we should cultivate our strengths because self is all that there is to rely upon. But, Christ teaches a better way, a way that sustains even in times of greatest weakness. My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Thanks be to the God of sufficient grace and power, amen. (organ music) (singing in foreign language)

- The Lord be with you.

- And also with you.

- Let us pray. Some trust in chariots, and some in horses. But we will remember the name of the Lord our God. Dear God, we call upon your name because we recognize you as creator and preserver of our lives. We humbly beseech thee to pour down all mercies upon your people here assembled. We come today lifting our supplication for the church universal. We pray, oh God, that the church throughout the world would be guided and governed by your holy spirit. So that all who profess your name, oh God, might be led in the ways of truth and righteousness. So that we may hold a faith in unity of spirit, in bond of peace, and the righteousness of life. We commend to you all those who are in affliction, we remember especially the sick and the suffering, and pray, oh God, that today you would visit their beds of afflictions and cause them to be aware of your ever healing presence. To assure, to touch, and to heal. We lift before you the needy and the poor, the homeless and the destitute, help us, oh God, to see your face in their faces. And grant to us love and confession to minister to them faithfully as brothers and sisters in your creation. Today we remember the nations of the world, and we pray that everywhere your people might be led, in righteousness and truth, and this our anniversary of independence, oh God, we remember this nation of America. And we pray as we celebrate the spirit of birth, that you might remind us of what it means to be born in you. Help us not to put our trust in military or economic powers, but to trust in your truth and in your righteousness. So that as a nation, oh God, we might proclaim to the world what it means, oh God, to truly trust in you. As we continue to think of the world, we think especially of troubled parts of the world. Remember your people in Palestine and Israel. We lift up especially the cities of Gaza and Jericho and Jerusalem and pray, oh God, that your spirit of peace would reign. We remember your people in Haiti, and Rwanda and Columbia. Oh God of deliverance, cause us to know and cause your people who are oppressed to know that you are a God who identifies with your press and that in their weakness, oh God, you will make them strong. Grant them hope, grant them to see in you justice and peace, and live ever more reassured that you are faithful to deliver. Hear our prayer today, oh God, and grant these petitions through Jesus Christ, our Lord, amen. And amen. Let us prepare ourselves to continue to worship God with our offertories as the choir leads us in an anthem. (organ music) (singing in foreign language) (organ music) (singing in foreign language)

- Almighty God, father of all mercies. We your unworthy servants give you most humble and hearty thanks, we thank you for all your goodness and loving kindness. We pray, oh God, that you might accept our thanks for being the blessed God of creation. Preserve us, oh God, with all your blessing in this life. We also pray that you will accept our thanks for the redemption you gave us through Jesus Christ, your son. That through him we might have life and have it more abundantly. Accept these and all our gifts. We recognize, oh God, that what we bring to you is but a reasonable service, but we present ourselves to you, oh God, as living sacrifices, hear us today and accept our thanks as we ask all these things through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who taught us when we pray, to say.

All: 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 to temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever. (organ music) (singing in foreign language)

- May the God of sufficient grace and power be with you and keep you always, amen. ♪ Hallelujah, amen ♪ ♪ Amen ♪ (organ music)