

(choir singing)

- Good morning. Welcome to this service of worship here at Duke University Chapel. Our guest preacher today is Dean Dennis M. Campbell, Dean of our divinity school. Our lector is Mark Lamb, a junior in Trinity College. We are pleased to welcome our guest choir this morning, the Kostroma Choir. And their director is Ms. Safronova. They are on a 10-day tour of the United States, and they will be singing here in Duke Chapel at five this afternoon. Last summer, Dr. Wynkoop and Ms. Sparks led a group from Durham, and they visited Kostroma with the choir. Kostroma is Durham's sister city, and they're part of the Sister Cities program. Welcome. Let us stand for the greeting. The grace of the Lord, Jesus Christ, be with you.

Congregation: And also with you.

- The risen Christ is with us.

Congregation: Praise the Lord. (organ plays) (congregation sings) (congregation sings)

- Let us pray. Oh creator, giver of life, you are always more ready to bestow your good gifts on us, than we are to seek them. You are always more willing to give than we desire or deserve. Help us so to seek, that we may truly find, so to ask, that we may joyfully receive, so to knock, that the door of your mercy may be opened to us. Through Jesus Christ, our savior, amen. You may 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. This reading is taken from chapter five of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, starting with verse one. "Now concerning the times and the seasons, "brothers and sisters, you do not need "to have anything written to you. "For you yourselves know very well "that the Day of the Lord will come "like a thief in the night. "When they say there is peace and security, "then sudden destruction will come upon them, "as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, "and there will be no escape. "But you beloved are not in darkness "for that day to surprise you like a thief, "for you are all children of light, "and children of the day. "We are not of the night or of darkness. "So then let us not fall asleep as other do, "but let us keep awake and be sober. "For those who sleep, sleep at night, "and those who are drunk, get drunk at night. "But since we belong to the day, "let us be sober, and put on the breastplate "of faith and love, and for a helmet, "the hope of salvation. "For God has destined us not for wrath, "but for obtaining salvation through our Lord, Jesus Christ, "who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, "we may live with Him. "Therefore, encourage one another, and build up each other, "as indeed you are doing." This is the word of the Lord.

Congregation: Thanks be to God. (If We Believe That Jesus Died)

- Let us sing responsively Psalm 76 on page 797. Please stand for the song and Gloria. (organ plays) ♪ In Judah, God is known ♪ ♪ Whose name is great in Israel ♪ ♪ Whose abode has been established in Salem ♪ ♪ Whose dwelling place is in Zion ♪ ♪ There he broke the flashing arrows ♪ ♪ The shields and the swords, the weapons of war ♪ ♪ You are glorious, more majestic ♪ ♪ Than the everlasting mountains ♪ (background noise drowns out other sounds) ♪ All the soldiers were unable to use their hands ♪ ♪ At your rebuke, oh God of Jacob ♪ (background noise drowns out other sounds) ♪ You who indeed are to be feared ♪ ♪ Who can stand before you ♪ (background noise drowns out other sounds) ♪ From the heavens you uttered judgment ♪ ♪ The earth feared and was still ♪ ♪ When God arose to establish judgment ♪ ♪ To save all the oppressed of the earth ♪ (background noise drowns out other sounds) ♪ Make vows to the Lord your God and keep them ♪ ♪ Let all the neighboring lands ♪ ♪ Bring gifts to the One to be feared ♪ ♪ Who cuts off the spirit of monarchs ♪ ♪ And makes the rulers of the earth afraid ♪ ♪ All the glory be to you, creator ♪ ♪ And to Jesus Christ our savior ♪ (background noise drowns out other sounds) ♪ As it was ere time began ♪ ♪ It shall be forever more ♪ (choir sings)

- Thank you. Thank you. Hear now this lesson from the Holy Gospel as recorded in Saint Matthew, the 25th chapter, beginning at verse 14. "For it is as if a man going on a journey "summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them. "To one he gave five talents, "to another two, to another one, "to each according to his ability. "Then he went away. "The one who had received the five talents "went off at once and traded with them, "and made five more talents. "In the same way the one who had the two talents "made two more talents. "But the one who had received the one talent "went off and dug a hole in the ground "and hid his master's money. "After a long time, the master of those slaves "came and settled accounts with them. "Then the one who had received the five talents "came forward bringing five more talents saying, "'Master, you handed over to me five talents; "'see, I have made five more talents.'" "His master said to him, 'well done, "'good and trustworthy slave. "'You have been trustworthy in few things. "'I will put you in charge of many things. "'Enter into the joy of your master.'" "And the one with the two talents also came forward saying, "'Master, you have handed over to me two talents; "'see, I have made two more talents.'" "His master said to him, 'well done, "'good and trustworthy slave. "'You have been trustworthy in a few things. "'I will put you in charge of many things. "'Enter into the joy of your master.'" "Then the one who had received the one talent "also came forward saying, 'Master, "'I knew that you were a harsh man, "'reaping where you did not sow "'and gathering where you did not scatter seed. "'So I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent "'in the ground. "'Here, you have what is yours.'" "But his master replied, 'you wicked and lazy slave. "'You knew, did you, that I reap "'where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? "'Then you ought to have invested my money "'with the bankers, and on my return "'I would have received what was my own with interest. "'So take the talent from him, and give it to the one "'with the ten talents. "'For to all those who have more will be given, "'and they that have will have an abundance. "'But from those who have nothing, even what they have "'will be taken away. "'As for this worthless slave, "'throw him into the outer darkness "'where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'" This is the word of the Lord.

Congregation: Thanks be to God.

- Several years ago, our family came home from a business and pleasure trip to the coast of North Carolina. Tired and hungry from the long drive, we pulled into our driveway late on a Sunday afternoon and entered

the house. The minute the door was opened, we experienced the sinking feeling that someone had been in our house. The silver chest was sitting open on a kitchen counter, and there was a note from our neighbor to call him. A thief had come in the night, entered from our deck, gone all over the house, stolen silver and jewelry, left the door open, and abandoned the silver chest in the yard where our neighbor found it the next morning. The same thief hit seven other houses in our area that night. We were devastated. Knowing that a thief had been in our house made us feel violated and vulnerable. For weeks, every time one of us came home, we got a sinking feeling in our stomach. Probably many of you here this morning have had this experience. Yours might have been worse. We experienced no bodily harm, and no serious vandalism. Nevertheless, it was a terrible experience. We live in a society in which, increasingly, we all fear thieves in the night. Yesterday morning while I was working at home on this sermon, the telephone rang. I answered. "Good morning, Mr. Campbell, how are you today?" Recognizing the beginning of the script, I interrupted and asked politely, "what are you selling?" She said, "this is AT&T. "I want to talk with you about our home security service." Home security is a rapidly growing, billion dollar a year business. We accept the fact that there are certain places that we do not go in the darkness of night. We caution visitors to our cities. Here at Duke and on other campuses, we have Take Back the Night marches. I get the weekly safety report here at Duke, and even here, students, faculty, staff, and visitors regularly experience theft of their possessions from cars, offices, and dorm rooms. Our family has talked many times about our own visit from a thief in the night. We had a number of reactions. The first was surprise. Arriving home happy after a time at the beach, we never dreamed of a burglary. After the shock of surprise wore off, we were thankful. We began to think about what was really important. We had many losses; the thief even stole my Duke undergraduate class ring, and Lisa's Wellesley ring. When the appraisal report came back for the insurance, we were shocked at how valuable they were. 25 years ago, those rings were made of heavier gold than the ones you can buy now. But our losses were relatively unimportant. Most could be replaced. More significantly, we were safe, as was our house. In a funny way, the thief in the night had relativized our possessions. Another result of our conversations was that we resolved not to live in fear. Caution is wise, but fear can be paralyzing. Now here we are this morning in the closing days of the Christian year. Now the Christian year does not conform to the civil calendar. It begins instead with the first Sunday in Advent, four weeks before Christmas, during which the Church prepares to celebrate the birth of the Messiah. The first Sunday in Advent this year comes on November 28th. Even though I was in Chicago a month ago, and the first week of October, Marshall Field & Company was putting up its in-store Christmas trees on North Michigan Avenue. Always in the last weeks of the Church year, the scripture lessons call our attention to themes having to do with end times. The end of the cycle reminds us of God's promised future, and the fulfillment of faith. What happens to us when we die? What about the end of the world? We talk about the Parousia, or the Day of the Lord, or Judgment Day. The theological word for consideration of ultimate future is eschatology. You will hear that frequently. Now, some popular preachers approach these topics in terms of Heaven or Hell. Charles Spurgeon, the great 19th century preacher and teacher of preaching, was concerned, among other things, about the style of the preacher. How the preacher looks and speaks. He once remarked, "when you talk about Heaven, "put a smile on your face. "Make sure your countenance and expression "are appropriate conveyors of the Heavenly bliss, "and maybe elevate your eyes." On the other hand, he said, "when you talk about Hell, your normal looks with do." (laughter) Now, both scripture lessons this morning that we've read point to this eschatological reality of Christian faith. The gospel I just read from Matthew is known as "the Parable of the Talents." It tells the story of a man who goes away and leaves his servants in charge of his property. After a

long time, the master returns and settles accounts. Judgment is rendered. The parable is rich, and like most of Jesus' parables, can be interpreted in a number of ways. One of the things the gospel writer clearly wants us to understand is that there will be a Judgment Day. On the Day of the Lord, we will be held accountable for what we have done. God gives us lives and opportunities, and we are responsible for what we do with what we are given. The passage from First Thessalonians that Mark read deals with questions the Christian community and Thessaloniki was asking about the Day of the Lord. Some of its members were dying, and the Church wondered what would happen to those who died before Christ returned. They also wondered why the end times had not yet come. These same questions are asked by Christians in our own time. Maybe a preacher has tried to scare you into being good by talking about Judgment Day and Hell. Millions of books are sold every year in this country that purport to predict the Day of the Lord, or when the Parousia will occur. And numerous sects have developed followings on the basis of a leader's convictions about the end times. We need only think of the tragic case of David Koresh and the Branch Davidians of Waco Texas to realize how serious and contemporary these questions are. At times, we all ponder the question of the future, and what these passages of scripture really mean that have to do with judgment and the end times. In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul offers pastoral guidance to his young church on this difficult problem. In the fourth chapter, he assures them that the Day of the Lord will unite all Christians, and that it will be the fulfillment of faith for believers in union with Jesus Christ. Now some in the Church were speculating on how this would happen, and when it would happen, just like Christians do today. But Paul rejects this kind of speculation. He writes, "now concerning the times and seasons, "brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything "written to you, for you yourselves know very well "that the Day of the Lord will come "like a thief in the night." As my family and I discovered, a thief in the night comes without warning, and leaves us surprised. We are taught by the scriptures that we are not to speculate on when the Day of the Lord will come. No one can know. We are to live in anticipation, ready at any and all times. But debate and calculation are a waste of time. In fact, they distract us from getting on with our Christian lives in this world. Thomas Wolfe in his novel "Look Homeward Angel" tells the story of a family waiting for a difficult, sick, old grandfather, Gant, to die. His protracted illness seems endless. Meanwhile, the favorite young son, Ben, the pride and joy of the family, contracts a deadly viral pneumonia and dies instantly. The novelist observes, while they watched and waited at the front window, death crept in the cellar door. Like a thief in the night, the Day of the Lord will come as a surprise. The Day of the Lord will also bring judgment. I told you that after our robbery, we made some judgments. We judged that it was most important that we still had each other. We judged that what we lost was unimportant in comparison to many things we take for granted. Paul Mineer, a former teacher of mine at Yale, once suggested that Jesus Christ is himself the greatest thief of all time. Remembering the two thieves crucified on either side of Jesus, he asserted that, in fact, there were three thieves crucified on Golgotha that awful Good Friday afternoon. At first, his statement shocked me. But if you think about it, you will have new insight. Jesus Christ brings judgment on all our earthly goods and possessions. Judgment on all our assumptions about what is valuable. Judgment on all our pretense about position and privilege. Christ steals from us the treasure in which we have trusted. Other theologians have used the image of Christ as thief. The Danish theologian, Søren Kierkegaard, suggests that Christ is a far more terrible robber than those who assault travelers along a highway. Jesus assaulted the whole human race at the point where that race is most sensitive: it's desire for security, and superiority. Christ steals from us our self-satisfied assumptions about who and what is important. He steals from us our estimations of ourselves. He steals our sense of what security means. The Day of the Lord will bring

judgment when our hidden secrets and motives are exposed. Our real values will be weighed and certified. What we have will be assessed for what it really is. We will be seen for what we really are. On his death bed, Martin Luther looked up and said, "in the end, we are all beggars; that's the truth." Now this may not sit well in this university congregation. We like to think that here at Duke, we know what is valuable, and what it is to be successful. And it certainly does not include the idea that you end up a beggar. Unless, of course, you end up a beggar because you've given everything you have to Duke. (laughter) These scripture passages should cause us to think about what we really value, and what it is that really endures, and cannot be taken away. For those of you who are students, your education here is something that can never be taken from you. The more you put into it, the more you will have that can never be lost. Two years ago, I was in Denver, at Trinity Methodist Church. It is in the middle of downtown, and directly across the street from the Brown Palace Hotel. The building is magnificent. When it was built in 1887, its sanctuary was the largest auditorium in the state. It housed the important civic meetings, and was the place the symphony played. The organ, which is still in use, was built by the Roosevelt Organ Company of New York. And at the time it was completed, it was declared the greatest organ in America, and one of the greatest in the world. The papers declared that its amazing power and volume will be the pride and delight of Denver for many years to come. The organ was the gift of a man named Isaac Elder Blake, who also gave a great deal of money toward the rest of the building. Blake was the son of a Methodist minister who became fabulously wealthy as founder and president of Continental Oil and Transportation Company. As well as being a major benefactor of the Church, he was a musician who directed the choir without any salary. (laughter) His gifts to build the church and organ would be equal to more than a million dollars today. Later in the mid-1890s, Blake lost his entire fortune when the Silver Act led to one of Denver's worst depressions. He died in relative poverty, a harsh example of the fleeting nature of worldly success and material possessions. He loved to point out that his gifts to Trinity Church proved a lasting investment, long after his other investments were lost, and his achievements were forgotten. He said, "what I gave, I still have, "but what I kept, I lost." Our works of love, what we give away, what we do for others, cannot be taken from us. Encounter with Christ robs us of all our earthly security and reminds us that it is in God alone that there is real security. Paul tells us that Christians, therefore, need not fear the coming of the Day of the Lord. This is so because we are children of light, and of the day. He means that Christians have already experienced the coming of the Lord, even as we wait for his coming again. We stand between the times. But because we've already experienced his coming, his life, death, and resurrection, we know the nature of God, and we know that therefore we need not fear the future. We are given our lives and opportunities by God, and what we do with them is our responsibility. To do that which will endure and which can never be taken away. We have a charge to keep. The Day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. There will be surprise. We know not what a day or an hour may bring. There will be judgment. All our earthly assumptions and values are evaluated for what they really are worth. And there is no need to fear. God has destined us not for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord, Jesus Christ. Therefore, let us live as children of light, and of the day. We have a charge to keep. Amen. (organ plays) (congregation sings)

Man: The Lord be with you.

Congregation: And also with you.

- Let us pray. You may be seated. Loving, gracious God, time and again you reach out to us. You knock at our door. You offer yourself to us, giving unto us, holding nothing back. We are hesitant to respond in kind. Clutching our lives as if they were our possessions. Gripping our houses, our cars, our goods, as if we could hold onto them forever. We are unable to return your embrace, fearful. Lord, teach us how fragile are our lives, how finite our age. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Lord, we pray for brothers and sisters around the world separated from us by language, culture, nationality, but not separated from you. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. We pray especially for our sisters and brothers in Kostroma, Russia. We pray for them during this time of difficult national transition. We pray for their leaders, for their families and loved ones, that this hopeful, difficult, expectant time, may lead them into brighter and better future. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. We pray for those in great need, this day. We pray for families under stress. We pray for children in poverty. We pray for the sick and infirm in body and in soul. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Oh God, we pray for victims of crime, those who are victimized in body or in goods, those whose lives have been violated by criminals. And Lord we pray for the perpetrators of criminal activity. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Everything that we have and hold dear, oh Lord, has come from you. Help us wisely to discern the times in which we live. Give us grace not to put our trust in things which pass away, but to trust in you, both in your love for us and in your will for our lives. And all these things we pray, knowing that you will for us what is good, and just, and lasting. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Amen. As a forgiven and reconciled people to whom much has been given, let us offer ourselves and our gifts to God. (organ plays) (Hallelujah) (organ plays) (congregation sings)

- Let us pray Accept our sacrifices of praise, oh God, for we bring them with great joy. Receive our thanks for all the mercies granted us by your divine majesty. May you be glorified by these gifts, even as they encourage us and our work together. May the ministries they enable carry good news to many we will never know, and may our lives bear witness to the love of God through Jesus Christ to all the world. Amen. 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. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen. (organ plays) (congregation sings)

- And now may the grace of our Lord and savior, Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and always. Amen. (choir sings)