

(tranquil organ music)

- I welcome you on this the first Sunday in the Christian season of Advent, a time of repentance and preparation for the nativity of our Lord. We welcome back to the Duke Chapel pulpit today a good friend, Elizabeth Achtemeier, professor at Union Seminary and one of this country's outstanding preachers and teachers, teacher of preachers and we're glad to have Betty back with us today. Our lector is Mr. Jason McStoots, a undergraduate here at Duke, member of our chapel choir and we're pleased that he's come in early from his Thanksgiving vacation to be our lector today and as always we welcome our guest musicians, the Crown Chamber Brass. Let us stand for the greeting. I will hear what the Lord has to say. (congregation mumbles) Peace for all people and for God's friends. (congregation mumbles) Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord. (congregation mumbles) (lively brass band music) (congregation sings) Let us pray. Oh merciful God, you sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and to prepare the way for our salvation. Give us grace at this the beginning of the season of Advent. To heed their prophetic warnings and forsake our sin that we may celebrate aright the commemoration of the nativity that we may await with joy the coming and glory of Jesus Christ our redeemer who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen. Be seated.

- Let us pray together the prayer for illumination.

- [Lector And Congregation] 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 taken from Jeremiah chapter 33 verses 14 through 16. The days are surely coming, says the Lord when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous branch to spring up for David and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days, Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety and this is the name by which it will be called, the Lord is our righteousness. This is the word of the Lord.

Congregation: Thank you, God.

- The Psalm appointed for this day is Psalm 25 verses one through 10 found on page 756 in your Hymnal. Please stand and sing the Psalm and Gloria responsibly. (tranquil organ music) ♪ To you, oh Lord, I lift up my soul ♪ (congregation sings) ♪ Let none that wait for you ♪ ♪ Be put to shame ♪ (congregation sings) ♪ Make me to know your ways, oh Lord ♪ (congregation sings) ♪ Lead me in your truth ♪ ♪ And teach me ♪ (congregation sings) ♪ Be mindful of your mercy, oh Lord ♪ ♪ And of your steadfast love ♪ ♪ For they have been from of old ♪ (congregation sings) ♪ Good and upright is the Lord ♪ ♪ Therefore the Lord instructs in us in the way ♪ ♪ And leads the humble in what is right ♪ ♪ And teaches them the way ♪ (congregation sings) ♪ All glory be to you creator ♪ ♪ And to you Jesus Christ our savior ♪ (congregation sings) ♪ As it was at time

began ♪ (congregation sings) Be seated. The epistle today is from 1 Thessalonians chapter three verses nine through 13. How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith. Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus Christ direct our way to you and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all just as we abound in love for you and may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. This is the word of the Lord.

Congregation: Thank you, God. (lively inspirational brass band music)

- Before I read the New Testament lesson, just let me say it is always a pleasure and an honor for me to worship with you in this chapel. Our New Testament lesson is taken from the gospel according to Luke, the 21st chapter beginning at the 25th verse. Jesus is speaking here about the end of world history and the coming of the kingdom of God on Earth. And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars and upon the Earth distress of nations in perplexity of the roaring of the sea and the waves. Men and women fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world for the powers of the heavens will be shaken and then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now, when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads because your redemption is drawing near and he told them a parable. Look at the fig tree and all the trees. As soon as they come out in leaf you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near, so also when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I say to you this generation will not pass away 'til all has taken place. Heaven and Earth will pass away but my words will not pass away. But take heed to yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life and that day come upon you suddenly like a snare for it will come upon all who dwell upon the face of the whole Earth but watch at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that will take place and to stand before the Son of Man. This is the word of the Lord. (congregation mumbles) Shortly after World War II my husband and I were graduate divinity students at Heidelberg University in Germany. During a vacation from university classes, we rode our bicycles from Southern Germany up to Denmark. City after German city that we rode through lay still in ruins from Allied bombing during the war. And at one place where we stopped to eat our lunch beside the road, there were the shattered ruins of a stone church. Only one wall of the church remained and on the place where the alter had been, someone had nailed together a wooden cross, but on that one remaining wall an unknown German had chalked the words of our morning text. Heaven and Earth will pass away but my words will not pass away. Jesus promised to his disciples that though we blow up this world so that nothing of it remains, his word for the future from his God and his salvation for his faithful followers will come to pass. It is a word we need in our atomic age, isn't it? As you all know, there are a lot of ideologues, various groups who are trying to identify God with the natural world these days. God is simply the vital force we find in nature, they tell us, the energy in all living things. Or God is some numinous spirit that is under, in and through all being. Or God is primal matrix, Gaia, the great goddess, Mother Earth from which all existence has come forth. But what if we incinerate Mother Earth, dear friends? What if some terrorist loses the final missile? What if our power and greed and selfishness finally destroy the world of nature so that there is no bird left to sing on a bush and no air left to breathe and no light to penetrate the radioactive dust that envelops the planet? Is God then gone too, destroyed as all nature is destroyed? No,

the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is other than nature and he is more than nature. Heaven and Earth may pass away but my word will not pass away. And the faithful can still be taken into the fellowship of his eternal kingdom. And that's a promise we need too in the midst of our crumbling culture. All the old values, institutions, authorities seem to be passing away now but so many of us have the idea that our God was identified with those fading certainties. We thought that God was the God of American democracy. The God of the American way of life. And now we find ourselves desperately trying to preserve that way. God was the God of American prosperity and Anglo Saxon religion and loving nuclear families, of decent schools and peaceful streets and effective civil authorities and as we experience our culture's chaos undermining those firm foundations of our former lives, we get the awful feeling sometimes that perhaps there is no longer a God in charge. But our text brings a promise to overcome all of our fear and confused anxiety. Heaven and Earth, your culture and mine may pass away but my words will not pass away. Long after our society and our way of life are but short paragraphs in a history book, the words of God spoken by our Lord will still come to pass. So, just what are these words that Jesus speaks to us here from the gospel according to Luke? What is the content of these words that are so certain and lasting? What is the whole shape of the promise that is given the faithful here? The promise is that our Lord Jesus Christ will come again as he came once at Bethlehem but this time he will return as our risen and exalted Lord to set up his rule over all the Earth. You see, always on this first Sunday in Advent, the church looks in two directions. It looks back to remember the birth of Jesus who was laid in a manger but it also looks forward to the promised return of Christ when he comes to establish his kingdom. Now, to be sure, we do not know when that second coming will be. As Jesus says in the book of Acts, it is not for you to know the times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority but the scriptures tell us that when that takes place and the kingdom comes, then God himself will be with us and wipe every tear from our eyes and death shall be no more. Neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore for the former things will have passed away and the faithful will inherit eternal life in God's good new heaven and Earth and that says our text is Jesus' sure promise to us. It is, however, the faithful, the faithful who trust their whole lives to Christ who will inherit that kingdom. Take heed to yourself, says our Luke in text, lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this world so that you cannot stand before the Son of Man. In other words, when Christ comes again, he's going to evaluate and judge our lives. Have we trusted him and therefore walked in his ways? Have we been his followers, his disciples? Now, we are not used to seeing and conducting our whole lives in relation to God in Jesus Christ of course, even we good church people are not used to that. When we make our crucial decisions we so rarely think about God. For example, our marriage is getting rockier every day and so, we ask should we get a divorce? Our questions always are could I make it on my own or would it be better for the kids or what will this mean for my financial future or can I reenter the job market? But our question seldom is is this divorce the will of God? Or we deal with all those burning issues of our time with the proper use of sex, with homosexuality and AIDS, with unwed mothers and single-parent homes and abortion on demand and we talk in terms of rights and needs, in terms of money and legislation but we seldom stop to ask what is the will of God? We do not see ourselves always related to God and Jesus Christ as the ones made in his image who cannot be understood in our personhood except in relation to him. As the ones who never can go from his presence though in the highest hell, in the highest heaven or the deepest hell. As the ones whose names he has engraved on the palm of his hand he tells us and whom he never forgets though earthly mother and father should forget us and all our friends desert us but human life was made to be lived in the company of our God, our God revealed in Jesus Christ whose will is set forth in

the scriptures. We human beings were created to glorify God and enjoy him forever as the confession has it. And so, our gospel lesson tells us that when Christ returns, he's going to ask us how well we have done with that purpose for our living. Or as Luke puts it elsewhere, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the Earth? Now, you and I are likely to flunk the test of course because we have not lived in fellowship with our God very often nor have we rejoiced in his commands and made our lives a shining witness, a glorification of his love and lordship. And so, there will be a judgment, friends, a final eternal decision of life or death and though heaven and Earth may pass away, that word will not pass away. Indeed there is already taking place in our world a foretaste of that judgment. How does Luke describe it in his 21st chapter? He says nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes and in various places famines and pestilences for great distress shall be upon the Earth and wrath upon this people, the stress of nations in perplexity and men and women fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming upon the world. And though that is apocalyptic language our Lord is using in the first century AD, we can pretty well fit it together with what we hear on the evening news. We too live in an apocalyptic age and the distress and fear and pestilence are still very much with us. This generation will not pass away 'til all this has taken place, Jesus says and our generation, like every generation, knows those calamities because our God works his judgment upon our sin, not only at the end of the world but now, ever anew in our time and place. You see, God is not mocked. When we ignore his will and presence, we reap ruinous results. God gives us over to our willful ways and let's us wallow in their consequences. Or God returns our violence, our hatreds, our lusts, our corruptions and our distortions of life upon our own heads. Surely, he says to us through the prophet Ezekiel, with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with wrath poured out, I will be king over you. God is Lord of our lives and he will not be less than that. And our lives belong to him alone and he will destroy every other loyalty that would claim them. And you and I and our sin-stricken planet face God's final assessment of us not only at the end of time but now and tomorrow and the next day. So, you see, this text from Luke, for this the first Sunday in Advent is not only a joyful promise, that Christ will return to set up his rule though heaven and Earth shall pass away, it is also a warning to be prepared for that coming that we may survive in the final judgment and enter into the eternal realm of goodness which is known as the kingdom of God. Take heed to yourselves, Jesus tells his disciples, watch at all times praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that will take place and to stand before the Son of man. Take heed, take heed and do not forget the presence of your God with you every moment of your life. And follow, follow daily what he commands you through the scriptures. Watch, look for his actions in your daily round, his guidance, his forgiveness, his admonition and expect and act as if his kingdom really is coming near. And pray at all times. Pray for the one gift that can give us eternal life, namely God's mercy. For let's face it, friends, you and I do not stand a chance of being acquitted in that final judgment anymore than we can claim innocence and righteousness for our lives yesterday and today. I think the older I get, the more deeply I know that I literally have not a ghost of a chance of claiming any good deed or pious commitment that would qualify me for eternal life in the company of my God. As our Psalm passage says in a following verse, for thy name's sake, oh Lord, pardon my guilt for it is great. Oh Lord, be merciful to me a sinner. That is the only prayer that you and I can lay before the judge of all the Earth. But when we pray that prayer, good Christian friends in the midst of our chaotic world, when apocalyptic terrors surround us and our sins lay heavy on our hearts, our Lord Jesus gives us one more promise in our scripture lesson. When these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads because your redemption is drawing near. When we cast ourselves on the mercy of our Lord, when we trust

him with our eternal lives, when in the midst of our imperfect days with all of our blunders and wrongs and forgetfulness of our God, marring even our finest moments, when we nevertheless turn to our Lord Christ and plead his grace and surrender ourselves to his loving guidance, then friends, then our redemption begins to draw near and then too we have his promise of everlasting good in his kingdom for he comes, friends, he surely comes to set up his rule over all the Earth and by his love and mercy and sacrifice for you and for me, he can take even us, even us into that eternal realm of life. And you see, that is a promise that is forever sure though heaven and Earth pass away. Amen. (tranquil brass band music) (congregation sings)

- The Lord be with you. (congregation mumbles) Let us pray. Be seated. Oh God, who speaks to us in the signs of the times, in the moon and in the stars, in the change of the seasons from fall to winter, all these things of your creation speak to us. Oh God, who speaks to us in our yearnings, yearnings too deep for words, yes, even in our forebodings and fears, grant us grace this Advent to lift up our heads, to hear your abiding word, to see our salvation drawing nigh, Lord, in your mercy heard our prayer. Lord, we confess that we are too easily pleased, contenting ourselves with mere earthly pleasures, that which we can touch and have and hold, things, accumulations, fleeting passions, momentary enthusiasm, confining ourselves to merely secular programs for human betterment, merely political dreams of a new world. Life up our heads. Make us eager and believing of your promise to make for us much more of the future than we could make merely for ourselves. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. In the light of your sure, bold promises to us, we are bold to pray for our great needs. Living as we do in one of the most violent societies on Earth, we pray for children, for children here in Durham who are hungry and need food, children who deserve better schools than we have provided, who yearn for peace in their homes and among their families, who are fearful to walk their neighborhood streets. Lord, because you were so vulnerable and you loved the little ones, we pray for these most vulnerable little ones. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. With the onset of winter and your Son's Advent among us, we rush to buy more things, things we don't need, our brothers and sisters in our own town fear that they will be cold for lack of fuel. Teach us our responsibility and complicity in their want. Lord, in your mercy hear our prayer. And for the victims of war and civil strife, for those who perish from too much and for those who die by having too little, for those who are lonely or confused, for those whose pain makes this Sunday a dark gloomy day, we pray your light. Lord, in your mercy hear our prayer. Come, oh come Emanuel, this spring on high, word that remains, promises that are fulfilled, liberator of captives, recovery of sight to the blind, come and make good your sure promises to us. Lord, in your mercy hear our prayer. Amen. During this time of national Thanksgiving, we have been reminded of how much our lives have been blessed. This past year, the offerings at Duke Chapel gave \$40,000 to community needs here and afar. All of the offerings in this chapel go to help the needs of those who are less fortunate than ourselves. I urge you to give generously. (lively brass band music) (lively organ music) (congregation sings) Lord, we do not deserve all the gifts which you have showered upon us, gifts of family and friends and food, a holiday from work, the gifts of your word, the gifts of your sometimes painful yet always healing truth and so, in thanksgiving for all of these undeserved blessings we pray that you would receive these our gifts as signs of our thanks, use them for your good. And now we pray as we have been taught by our Lord Jesus.

- [Congregation And Minister] Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be they name, they kingdom come, they 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, the power and the glory forever. Amen. (lively inspirational music) (congregation sings)

- And now may the grace and peace of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with you now and always, amen. (lively inspirational music)