

Preacher: A prayer of confession and for pardon. Let us pray. We bless and adore thee oh, Christ. Son of God yet born of Mary. Son of God yet our brother. Eternal word yet a child without speech. Clothed in glory yet wrapped in swaddling bands. Lord of heaven and earth, yet lying in a manger. We confess unto thee that we have lost our childlike innocence, and have not yet attained to holiness. We have despised, too often, what is tender and pure and have corrupted ourselves with worldly operations and ways. And this Christmastide forgive us, oh God, and make us like little children in faith and hope and love, so that we may wonder and worship at thy manger throne. Here us, oh God, and grant us pardon and remission of all our sins through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. And hear those words of assurance of forgiveness that's found in one of the Christmas carols. "God rest ye merry, gentlemen, let nothing you dismay for Jesus Christ our savior was born on Christmas day to save us all from Satan's power when we had gone astray. Oh tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy, oh, tidings of comfort and joy." So, be ye comforted, and let us offer unto God together, our unison prayer of thanksgiving. Let us pray. Almighty God, the giver of every good and perfect gift, we give you thanks for this day and your love, we thank you for friends who cheer our souls, for honest toil which challenges our best, for parents and home, for hills, the valleys and the plains, for the sea that is wonderful in its stillness and wonderful its storm. We're grateful for the changing seasons and all the beauties and mysteries of nature. We appreciate the joy that heightens our life and the faith which can sustain us in grief. We thank you for health and for courage to be steadfast through illness. Above all on our Father, we thank you for the gift of Jesus Bethlehem, your Son, our Lord. Amen. (piano music) ♪ Sweet was the song ♪ ♪ The virgin sung ♪ ♪ When she to Bethlem Juda came ♪ ♪ And was deliver'd of a Son ♪ ♪ Lord Jesus was his name ♪ ♪ Lula, lula, lulaby my joy ♪ ♪ Sing a lullaby my babe sang she ♪ ♪ She was deliver'd of a Son ♪ ♪ Lord Jesus was his name ♪ ♪ Sweet babe, sang she, my son ♪ ♪ With love and joy ♪ ♪ And eke a savior born ♪ ♪ Who hast vouchsafed from on high ♪ ♪ To visit us that were forlorn ♪ ♪ Jesus lullaby, sweet Babe, sang she ♪ ♪ And rock'd Him sweetly on her knee ♪ ♪ Jesus ♪ ♪ Amen ♪ Let us hear the word of God as it's contained in the Gospel according to Saint Luke, the second chapter at the eighth verse. "And in that region, there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night and an angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone round above them. And they were filled with fear, and the angel said to them, 'Be not afraid for behold I bring you good news of a great joy, which will come to all the people, for to you is born this day in the city of David, a savior who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you, you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel, a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace among men with whom he is pleased.'" Amen. He here end the lesson. (upbeat piano music) The Lord be with you. Let us pray. Let us offer first a prayer of intercession. Oh God, who through thy Son has taught us to make prayer for all conditions of men, we would remember them. We offer our prayers for the trustees and administration of our university, that the joy of Christmas may be in them for any work well done. For the faculty, that learning and religion, inseparably conjoined maybe recognized in Jesus of Bethlehem and Nazareth. For the students, that they may find joy in their families and return to us with Christmas gladness in their heart. For the employees who serve us with graciousness and skill, that they may know that they belong to our beloved community. For those who must spend this season in the

hospital, some in gratitude that a child is born, some in pain and others in sorrow, some offering their skill and devotion as doctors and nurses, let our hospital be a thoughtful place of love. At this holy time, we offer a prayer in particular, for one who worships here each Sunday, and whose mother went home to thee on Christmas day. We offer our prayers for all men and women in all places that peace may come because of goodwill on earth. For thy creatures here and everywhere, we offer this Christmas prayer of intercession. And let us offer a prayer of supplication. Almighty and eternal God, God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and in him, our God and Father, give us at this holy season, some share in the grace of Jesus Christ. Let his spirit enter our lives and bless them, that duty may be touched with beauty, and justice be gentled by charity. Let our hearts hear the cry of the needy and feel love for the unlovely. Give our hands strength, not to do great things, but to do small things graciously. Let our gifts be not a sacrifice, but a privilege. Let us accept kindness with humility. Let the Grace of Jesus Christ be in us all. And let us offer a prayer of dedication. Oh God, what curious praise is ours for Jesus Christ? A red tricycle for small and busy feet, skis for a boy to ride the wind, perfume for her and tobacco for him, a check or two or three or 10 for charity, 200 Christmas cards signed love by hand, letters to friends long lost in years ago, much weariness and ribbons and short tempers. Oh, find in this, oh, find in this, dear God, our human hearts, our hope for men, our praise for thee, our love for thy Son. And now as our savior, Christ has taught us, we humbly pray together, saying, "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.

Howard: Contrary to the printed bulletin for today's service, which you received on coming in the chapel. The pulpit is not now occupied by Elmer Hall. Chaplain Hall is probably propped up in bed in his parents' home at Gibsonville right now, listening to the Duke Chapel service by way of WDNC. I am Howard Wilkinson. And I share your disappointment that the first cold Elmer has had this winter saw fit to add laryngitis to its other miseries, and thus, struck him down just a couple of days before he was scheduled to preach here. We have rearranged the schedule and he is now due to preach that sermon in this chapel on January 9. The distinguished minister, also, who is presiding today is not Chaplain Wilkinson, as many of you know, but is indeed Dr. James T. Cleland the Dean of the Chapel who graciously consented to be the presiding minister today when he was expecting to have a well-earned rest. Now, I do not want you to worry about me, thinking that I may have toiled all of Christmas day over what I might preach on such short notice this morning. Actually, I will be frank and say that what I decided to do was to update an article, which I published in a magazine elsewhere at Christmas time two years ago. Had it not been for Elmer's cold and laryngitis, you might never have heard the substance of that article. You could call this sermon today, a post-mortem examination of our Christmas celebration. It will be something like that. For yesterday, we Christians observe Christmas all over the world. However, if history repeats itself this year, a great many citizens will begin now, sharply to criticize the fashion in which a great many of their fellow citizens did there celebrating. I'm not sure all of these criticism is valid for the reason that most people have only a foggy idea of what it is they were supposed to have celebrated. They're vaguely puzzled about whether the true nature of Christmas is December 25, Santa Claus, "The Yule Log", a branch of holly, Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, four Colly birds, three French hens, two turtle doves, or a partridge in a pear tree. Consequently, not being sure, which is most important, and being vaguely anxious to celebrate something

important, a whole lot of them pulled out all the stops, did a general celebration, and hope that at some moment during the Christmas season, they may accidentally have hit upon the central reality of Christmas, even if only for a few fleeting moments. What therefore, may be in order on this day after Christmas is a consideration of what it is we were supposed to celebrate. What is the nature of Christmas? And I raised that question because if we missed it, if we missed it, there still is time to find it and to celebrate it today for what it really is. If you don't win the game in the regular time, in the playoffs, you can have a little extra time, sudden death playoff and really fine Christmas. Now, perhaps the best way, or at least one way, to arrive at a positive answer to the question of what is the essence of Christmas? Would be to commence by saying that Christmas is not this and that and the other, which many people erroneously think it to be, just as Columbus attempted to sail to the East, by turning his ships to the West. I shall mention a few things Christmas is frequently thought to be, and which I believe it is not. First, Christmas is not an emphasis upon yesterday on the calendar, December 25. Simply to magnify the importance of that day on the calendar is not to observe Christmas. Some people think that if they don't attend classes, or don't report for work in their office on that day, that they have thereby celebrated Christmas. Really, it is extremely unlikely that Jesus was born on December 25, and I hope that doesn't shock you too badly. Nowhere, nowhere, does the Bible declared this to be the date of the birth of Jesus. Indeed, the Bible does not give us any clue at all as to when the birth of Jesus might have taken place, except for one indication. Luke does say this much, "And there were in the same country, shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night." Now, if you will recall that the Palestinian seasons are roughly the same as ours, you will see instantly that December 25 is a very unlikely date for the birth of Jesus. Some years ago, we had a student in our undergraduate school at Duke, Ghazi Qubein, who came from Bethlehem, and who lived outside the town near the place where it is supposed that the shepherds were. In one Christmas morning, we had breakfast at our home and Ghazi was at our breakfast table, and we said to him, "Where did you live?" He said, "At Bethlehem." And I said, "Where?" And he said, "Just outside the town, presumably, where the shepherds were when the heavenly saw the King." And we were all very still for a little bit and then he told us that at this time of year, the shepherds are not abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night, it being cold and there being no grass for the sheep to eat the shepherds have their flocks in the caves or in a fold. Shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night sounds more like a spring or summer event in Palestine. So we shall simply have to abandon our idolatry of December 25 and admit that Christmas is something other than a glorification of that date on the calendar. Now of course, this will mean that some of our sentimental carols, and some of our sentimental customs will have to be revised in honesty. For example, one carol has for more than a half century, boldly, announced, "In the bleak Midwinter, a stable place sufficed, the Lord, God Almighty, Jesus Christ." The only difficulty about that Christmas carol is that it simply isn't believable. Now what we need to understand, is that the date on which this celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ comes is not the important part of the celebration. The British have long known the truth of this as is evidenced by the fact that the Sovereign's birthday is seldom, if ever, celebrated on the actual anniversary of his or her birth. The present Queen of England was born on April 21, but her birthday was officially celebrated on June 13 this year. It may be useful, in this connection, to comment on the reason why December 25 was picked as the day on which to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. Did you know that for more than 300 years, for more than three centuries, the birth of the savior was not celebrated at all in the Christian church. His death, his resurrection, celebrated from the beginning of the church, but not his birth. In the middle of the fourth century in the City of Rome an observance of

Christmas began, but at first, the date celebrated was January 6, and that date has remained with the Eastern Orthodox Church from then until now. The Western church, however, soon moved to December 25 for two reasons, neither of which was based upon any historical document, which pretended that this was the date of his actual birth. One reason was theological, the other reason was practical. The theological reason ran something like this, the world must have been created on March 25, since that is the date of the Vernal Equinox. Jesus Christ was God's new creation. First creation, now, the second creation, and surely this must have come at the winter solstice, hence, December 25. That's the whole thing. And whatever you and I may think of that line of reasoning, that at least was their theory. The practical reason for choosing that date was suggested by Dean Cleland in his sermon last Sunday. The reason for choosing that date was, that it was the alleged birthday of the pagan god of the Mithraic religion, Sol Invictus. And there was a big pagan celebration on that day. So, if the birth of Jesus was celebrated on that day, this would give the Christians something spiritually significant to do while the pagans ran wild. Today, it's a bit difficult as one observes the typical December 25 celebration in America, to determine whether a given person is celebrating for Jesus or for Sol Invictus. So, Christmas must not be thought of as any glorification of December 25, in all historical and piety honesty. Okay? A second thing which Christmas is often thought to be, but actually is not, is an emphasis upon the infancy of Jesus. The assumption that when we observe the birthday of Jesus, we are to magnify the details of his babyhood has led to a whole rash of fairly irrelevant practices, which when combined have the effect of diverting our attention from the true purpose of Christmas, which has to do with the total impact which Christ made upon the world. Now consider how we celebrate the birth of other great people. On Lincoln's birthday, do we talk about what a sweet little baby he was, how he cut his first teeth, speculate on whether he sucked his thumb or not? No. We recall his labors for emancipation of the slaves, his great concern for the unity of America, and his dedication to freedom. We recite his "Gettysburg Address", and we rededicate ourselves to the ideals of Lincoln on his birthday. When we observe the birthday of Washington, very little is said about his infancy, a great deal is said about him as the father of our country. I recall personally, nothing about the babyhood of Washington, but I remember vividly that on previous celebrations of Washington's birthday, my parents and my teachers spoke of how Washington prayed at Valley Forge. And I was required in school to memorize that portion of his farewell address, in which he warned that America as a nation must be a religious nation or it cannot possibly survive. Washington's birthday and the celebration of it was an occasion when we gained inspiration for purposeful living by recalling the total life and work of the man who was born on February 22nd, so it should be with Jesus Christ. And while we especially celebrate his sacrificial death on Good Friday, and his glorious survival of death on Easter, at Christmas, we should consider the total impact of the incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth, who was born presumably, in Bethlehem. This is why Handel's, "Messiah" is so great for Christmas. Handel's, "Messiah" places the birth narratives concerning Jesus in the context of the total ministry of the Redeemer. If you still have your program that was given to you when the "Messiah" was sung earlier in December, read the text again. That is an adequate and beautiful and meaningful and correct celebration of Christmas. The interpretation of Christmas as an emphasis upon the babyhood of Jesus, diverts our attention from this total impact. In the 16th century, a writer composed a carol which asks us to consider while we gather around and watch the little baby Jesus, the author pretends to be watching the cradle, reporting to us. He tells us first that Jesus is now taking his milk, and next he is sleeping, and finally, we get the great news that he's not sucking his thumb now. Well, I suspect that the baby Jesus did suck his thumb at some time or other, but whether he did or not has nothing to do with the basic nature of

Christmas. Now, to be sure, there is, there is, a value in considering the birth narratives at Christmas time or any other. They do give emphasis to the fact that Jesus was an historical person, not a mythological person. He was born into human life at a certain time in history and at a certain place, and he fully shared and shares our humanity. Second value is that the birth narratives emphasized the possible grandeur of lowly and humble circumstances. The worship of a Christ who was born in a cow barn is good medicine for our sick pride and our silly vanity. We have a tendency to ignore humble people, humble events, humble circumstances. But essentially, Christmas is not properly an emphasis upon the babyhood of Jesus. Third and finally, Christmas is not a holiday for getting, but a holy day for giving. Consider, if you will, that all human beings mentioned in the Christmas story, affirmatively, were offering gifts, not receiving gifts. The owner of the stable offered his only vacant accommodation, the wise men brought gold and valuable spice, the shepherds brought the adoration of their hearts, Mary brought the priceless gift of motherhood, Joseph brought the paternal protection, tender care of a strong and loving man. In contrast to this holy day of giving, many people think of Christmas as a holiday for getting. If someone fails to send them a Christmas card, or does not return gift for gift, they cannot have a good time. For these people, Christmas was spoiled yesterday, merely if the cranberries didn't taste as good as usual, if the Turkey was not cooked to perfection, it mattered little to them whether Jesus was born in Bethlehem. The nature of Christmas is to give, just as the nature of fire is to burn, and however much we may have rejoiced when we received a present, we should rejoice even more when we have an opportunity to give. Well, in approaching the answer to our question of what is the true essence of Christmas? By stating the negatives, we have outlined some aspects of the nature of Christmas, and in closing, let me now point briefly, to three positive aspects. First, an old Testament prophecy, which Christians have always associated with Christmas is found in Isaiah 42:7. And when viewed in this context, it describes the purpose of Christ coming as follows, to open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison. We scarcely need to say, I guess that the recent prison riot at Attica was not necessarily, a manifestation of the Christmas spirit. The prisons which Christ came to open are far more deadly and more confining than the one at Attica, and the prisoners are much more in need of liberation than those. All who were imprisoned by their greed, their prejudice, their selfishness, their anxiety, are more in need of deliverance than those who are behind bars. Christ came to deliver the self-centered man from his self-centeredness, the prejudiced man from his prejudice, the anxious woman from her fears, and to open the eyes of all who cannot see God at work redemptively seeking to win the world. Second positive clue to the nature of Christmas is furnished by the angel's song quoted in Luke, which was read by Dean Cleland. "Glory to God in the highest." Think about that. The coming of the divine in the life of the human, brought and brings glory to God. Because although, he would have been justified in allowing us to perish in and because of our sins, he manifested his love toward us by sending his son to offer pardon, righteousness, redemption. That this brings glory to God is a fact so undeniable that it challenges our limits of our imagination. Isaiah, shout for joy, has been identified with the birth of Christ in this connection. "O, Zion that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain. O, Jerusalem that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength. Lift it up, be not afraid. Say unto the cities of Judah, 'Behold, your God.'" Christmas leads us to behold our God in the majesty of his redemptive power and to give glory and honor unto him because of it. It is a shout of joy, a claiming of redemption, when we didn't deserve it. Third, it is a well-known fact that Christmas signifies the goal of world peace. In that it is the celebration of the coming of the Prince of Peace. West Pakistan, East Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Israel, Egypt, Vietnam, where else? Not only are the angels represented as declaring at the birth of Jesus, on earth, peace, goodwill toward men, but

the passage in Isaiah 9:6 which Christians have identified with Christ, names him as the Prince of Peace. "For unto us, a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder and his name shall be called the Prince of Peace." Surely, this peace bringing prince was born into the right world. We need his presence here. This war-torn earth desperately must have a new birth of his spirit, giving it a Prince of Peace to replace its many princes of war. It is impossible adequately, to describe our plight. We have not suggested it even when we say that some Duke students during this period could not go home, to their real home, because of what war has done. War has robbed them of parents, of friends, and home. We have not suggested our need of the Prince of Peace even after we have counted a small part of the financial cost, staggering as that is. Listen, this may give you some idea. Recently, I received from the office of Raymond Wilson, an analysis of the cost in our federal budget, in this one country, in this one year. Just one country, just one year. The analysis shows that 71% of the billions appropriated by Congress for one 12-month period, will go for swords, and only 29% for plowshares. 71% of your taxes go for swords, and 29% for plowshares. The sum that is to be spent within this one 12-month period for past, present, and future wars, would, by itself, if used for this purpose, build 2 million homes for American people at a cost of \$20,000 each. And after those homes have been built, there would be enough money left over to construct 3,500 hospitals, 3,500 hospitals at a cost of 4 million each. And there would still be enough money left over after that to construct 4,000 schools at a cost of \$4 million each. Just on the money we were spending in one year for swords. So the Prince of Peace came to the right place. He was born into a world which still needs him. His birth brought and brings glory to God, and his spirit is still opening the eyes of the blind, bringing out the prisoners from the prison. Let us therefore, ask ourselves if we missed the true nature of his coming by idolizing December 25, or becoming preoccupied with the swaddling clothes or the straw in the manger and the cows around it, or by the worship of Santa Claus, or the reindeer, or the tinsel, or the glitter of a pagan festival? Did we? Were we so obsessed with the thrill of receiving that we missed the blessedness of giving? If we did, there is still time today, properly, correctly, to worship the Christ. To rededicate ourselves to his ideals, to the total impact of his purpose in coming to the world and to claim him as Lord and savior and acknowledge him and his way as the Prince of Peace. Let us pray. Oh God, in the highest, we ascribe unto thee blessing and honor, glory and power. We praise and magnify thy holy name because of thy mighty work in Bethlehem long ago. We now pray that the true nature of that Christ shall not only be born in us, but may grow in us throughout our lives. Amen. (upbeat piano music) (piano music) ♪ There is a child ♪ ♪ Who dwells on earth ♪ ♪ Each year he comes ♪ ♪ Rejoice in his love ♪ ♪ He comes from far ♪ ♪ He hides our hearts ♪ ♪ Bringing the world ♪ ♪ His father's love ♪ ♪ Let's all rejoice ♪ ♪ In perfect grace ♪ ♪ When Christ Lord Jesus ♪ ♪ Amen Amen ♪ ♪ For Christ I want ♪ ♪ To reach and pull ♪ ♪ To hold and pride ♪ ♪ Jehovah's perfect love ♪ ♪ Give him your tithes ♪ ♪ And see his grace ♪ ♪ Lord Christ ♪ ♪ Behold your name ♪ (upbeat piano music)

Preacher: Our Father, God, who has given us thy dearest gift in Jesus Christ. Accept these, our gifts as symbols of our gratitude to thee and of our love for him. May God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, shine every morning in your hearts to give the light of the knowledge of his glory in the faith of Jesus Christ our Lord. (soft piano music) (bell rings) (upbeat piano music)