

(church choir singing liturgical song) (upbeat music) (church choir singing liturgical song) (upbeat organ music) (church choir singing liturgical song)

- Grace and peace to you in this holy season, and on this blessed fourth Sunday in the season of Advent. Grace and peace to you from our Lord and Savior, Jesus, the Christ. O come, let us worship God, our King. O come, let us worship and fall down before Christ, our King and our God. O come, let us worship as we bow humbly in the presence of God to confess our sins, and to receive again God's forgiveness and God's mercy. Let us pray. O Lord, in this season of hope and expectancy, we look at our lives and confess that we are in need of the miracle of your love and peace. We who claim to have heard the good news live our lives defensively, we are afraid to be made vulnerable by caring too deeply, we hide from pain, loneliness, and involvement. Our lives are full of disillusionment with people and politics, we have forgotten the joy and laughter are part of your gift to us. Come to us in our fear and despair, know us as we are, feel our longing and hunger to be your faithful people, let your love grow. Amen. And the word became flesh and dwelt among us. Receive now, my friends, in Christ this good word from our Lord. Your sins are forgiven for the sake of Christ. Amen. Amen. (church choir singing liturgical song) (church choir singing liturgical song)

- Let us hear the word of God. First as it is recorded in the Book of Isaiah, chapter seven, verses 10 through 14. Again, the Lord spoke to Ahaz, "Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven." But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test." And he said, "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." Let the congregation stand for the reading of the gospel lesson for the day. The gospel lesson for this fourth Sunday in Advent is from the gospel according to St. Matthew, chapter one, verses 18 through 25. Let us hear the word. Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with the child of the Holy Spirit; and her husband, Joseph, being a just man, and unwilling to put her to shame resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary, your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Immanuel, which means, God with us." When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took his wife, but knew her not until she had borne a son; and he called his name Jesus. Here ends the reading of the lesson for this day. May God's spirit give us the meaning and the message of these words from his word. Amen. (upbeat organ music) Let us join together with one voice as we affirm our faith. We are not alone, we live in God's world. We believe in God who has created, and is creating, who has come in the truly human Jesus to reconcile and make new, who works in us and others by the spirit. We trust God who calls us to be the church, to celebrate life and its fullness, to love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil, to proclaim Jesus crucified and risen, our judge and our hope, in

life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us, we are not alone. Thanks be to God. The Lord be with you. Let us pray. With reverence and with awe, we come to this holy day, O God. This day when we celebrate the Advent, the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ to live among us, to be one of us, and to care for us. O holy God, ever loving, ever merciful, for the gift of your blessed son, Jesus, the Christ, who will save his people from their sins, who is Immanuel, that is God with us. We give, O God, you, thanks and praise for this most blessed gift. And as we celebrate this holy day this holy season, your holy gift, we rejoice in the sights and sounds that remind us of your love, the laughter of children and young people, the warmth of handshake of an old friend, the caring and the reaching out that goes from person to person in unique and distinctive ways in this particular time of the year. The sounds, O God, that warm our hearts, that open our eyes to see new sights that lift us when we are weary or when we are down, that call us to lift up our eyes and to behold the goodness of the Lord. The sights and sounds, O God, of your love ever present, but uniquely revealed in this holy experience of Christmas. And as we celebrate, O God, in this chapel, and as we gather to hear the word, wherever we maybe in this moment, we remember that there are those, O God, whose hearts are heavy, whose lives are intruded upon by some experience, which brings sadness as well as joy at this moment, or there are those who are sick, and those who wait beside the sick. There are those who are lonely, and those, O God, whom we should care for. There are those in prison, some there to serve because they have been sentenced justly, and yes, O God, we dare to believe, some there because they have been sentenced wrongly. There are naked, hungry, and those, O God, who need our loving care more so at this time when love should be present than at any other time of the year. God, we ask that your spirit, the love of Christ will be beside those beds of pain, work acts of healing through those who care for them and nurture them. Walk through those prison walls and minister to those who are desperate and afraid. Be with those who are lonely, O God, in ways in which no human can be, but continue to call us also that we might visit the lonely. For surely, O God, it was to make light shine in darkness, to bring healing where there is sickness, to bring wholeness where there is brokenness, to bring reconciliation where there is hatred, to bring love to us all. It was for all this that the Christ came, and that we are called in his name. O God, now we ask for those who worship you this day here and everywhere: joy, peace, understanding, and goodwill that we might be men and women, boys and girls who know that we are loved, and who in turn can be loving to others. Give us indeed the spirit of Christ. And now, O God, hear us as we offer the prayer, which our Lord has taught us to pray 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. We rejoice in the beauty and the goodness of this day, and welcome you to this worship service in Duke Chapel. If you are a regular worshiper here, it's good to have you home; if you are visiting with us this day, we pray that God's spirit may also speak with you as you come to share in the fellowship of this hour. I want to say a special word of welcome to the Burlington Boys Choir who have probably gotten up a little earlier this Sunday morning than they might on some Sunday mornings, to leave Burlington and to drive here and to become ready, to sing and to praise God and to worship with us this day. So to Miss Eva Wiseman and the members of the Burlington Boys Choir and their accompanists, and the members of the family who helped to make this possible, may I say thank you very much for being with us, and for sharing God's word in song with us on this particular day. We invite you to worship with us in this chapel on Christmas Eve, Wednesday night the service will actually begin at 11 o'clock with the processional, but prior to that at 10:30, there will be carillon music, and then organ music.

As we celebrate Christmas Eve once again with our traditional Christmas Eve service here, if you would like to sing in the choir or that service, let me invite you to come this afternoon at 1:30 for a practice here in the chapel, and to come on Wednesday evening at 9:30 for practice for that service. A time of rejoicing and singing and real celebration that we all have come to love and to share rejoicing together. We continue our worship of God and the celebration of this Advent Christmas season, as Helen Crotwell, the Associate Minister here brings to us God's word with the sermon entitled, "We are not alone." Helen?

- Advent, a time of heightened memories of joy and sadness, a time of preparation, of waiting, of expectation, a time of movement of our hearts and our minds to the celebration of the birth of Jesus, the celebration of the love and hope, which is given to us in Jesus, the Christ. Listen to the footsteps moving to Bethlehem, listen to the beating of our hearts, the excitement and the hope that this year we will be renewed, this year we will meet the Christ again. Here are some of our yearnings, our longings, our search. Many of us feel alone, separated, isolated, unloved; many of us are searching for meaning; many of us are saddened because those we love are ill or have just died; many of us are frightened, confused, rushed, busy; many of us feel hopeless, insignificant, unimportant. These are some of the places we come from as we begin our final walk to Bethlehem. Can you think back to the first time you were aware of the vastness of this universe when it suddenly dawned on you that you were not the center of the world? I still remember the fear and the awe, the first time I looked out at the stars and tried to comprehend all that space, my mind stretched trying to think how far it was to that farthest star. What was it like to live in a world that had no limits, but then suppose the world, the universe had limits, what was beyond the limits? What was that nothing? I was finite trying to comprehend infinite, and I was frightened and afraid and felt insignificant. And it gave some comfort to me when I discovered Pascal's famous quote, and knew that I was not alone in these feelings. When I consider the short extent of my life swallowed up in the eternity, before and after, the small space that I fill or even see engulfed in the immensity of spaces are known to me, and which know me not. I am terrified and astounded that I find myself here and not there. And these are the same feelings expressed by the writer of the eighth Psalm centuries earlier. When I consider the heavens, the moon and the stars, who am I that you should be mindful of me? But now I sense that our feelings of insignificance and loneliness come from another source. For many the vastness of the heavens have been blocked out, we don't see the stars anymore, We now live in a world which is a low hovel, we feel alone and insignificant because of the world we have created, a world of frenetic activity, trying to get ahead to make ends meet, a world of endless pressure, demands made on us by our family, our friends, our work, ourselves. And if we keep busy enough, if we move fast enough, we won't have time to dwell on our sense of isolation and separation, but it sneaks up on us. Our world is chaotic, and those who try to put it back together can't find the pieces, the patterns, the rules, and many can't find meaning in all the movement, and wonder, is it worth it? Life is not seen as a gift but an accident and a happening. Eliot captures these feelings in some of his poetry: "We measure out our life with coffee spoons." "Our dried voices, as we whisper together are quiet and meaningless as wind in dry grass or rats' feet over broken glass." "Endless invention, endless experiment, brings us knowledge of motion, but not of stillness; knowledge of speech, but not of silence; knowledge of words, but ignorance of the Word. Where is the life we have lost in the living? Where is the wisdom we have lost in the knowledge?" And so we move toward Christmas waiting, hoping, expecting to hear again, to believe again the word that just was read to us, his name shall be called Immanuel, God is with us. The word we affirm each Sunday: God is with us, we are not alone, thanks be to God. We move

toward Bethlehem again this year to remember and to recall, not only the birth, the beginning, but the total life of Jesus, which includes death and resurrection. And it just maybe that the hope for, but yet somehow unexpected will happen, that that which we have longed for will become ours. For it is possible that some of our knowledge can become wisdom, and some of our frenetic activity can become silence and stillness, and some of our words will be the word. For the word which we hear from Bethlehem that God has come to us in human form may explain that our lives have meaning. This is a given, this is the starting point. Life is a gift to us from God. Our lives have meaning and value. We are important and valuable and loved ultimately. And not only is our life given to us by God, but we have not been abandoned by our creator. For God is with us creating, restoring, healing, sustaining us. And we are most ready to hear this word when we are faced with what seems to be an impossible task or situation when we are most discouraged, when we know our limits, then in some strange way our ears open up and we hear and we believe that we are not alone, that God is with us. This was the word Moses heard when he panicked saying, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh? I'm not capable or qualified." And the answer came to him from God, "I will be with you." This is the word that Mary and Elizabeth heard. In fact, it is a recurring word in our Scripture. And this is the word we can hear when we are called forth to what seems to us to be impossible task. When we are called to work to change or break down institutions and structures, which dehumanize persons, limit their growth, their potential, and we say, "I am not capable, I am not qualified", but if we listen, we will hear the word, "I will be with you." This is the word we hear when we are trying to find the courage to say to our family and our friends, and our coworkers. You do not see me as a person, but as a machine: a cooking machine, a typing machine, a money-making machine, a decision-making machine, a dean machine, a teaching machine, a studying machine, a cleaning machine, a workhorse machine. And we are afraid to say, "I am a person, a human. Look at me. Don't dismiss me as a machine." And we can hear the words, "I am with you, and I will be with you as you try to breakthrough those dehumanizing relationships." We are so close to Bethlehem to the time of our celebration of the Advent, which makes most plain to us that we are not alone, that God is with us. And this Advent, God becoming human not only affirms God's presence in this world, but helps us understand how we can meet this holy and loving presence in our neighbor and in our solitude. Both of these dimensions of our meeting are equally important. When I look again at the life of Jesus, I am always keenly aware of the time he spent alone when he withdrew from the crowds. And this stillness, this silence is important to us. This waiting for the awareness of the presence of God, we do not have to do a lot of talking, it made me more important that we remain silent and allow our souls to sigh without words to God, then we may find that rest, which Augustine says is our search. Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God. And it is as we can be alone with ourselves and the presence of God that we become able to be more fully in community with other people. Many people are using this very Advent season as a time to wait and to listen in preparation and anticipation. Some are not sending Christmas greetings, later perhaps, but not now. Some have decided not to spend the time in the rush and the push to try to buy a lot of presents. In fact, some in this faith community have decided to contribute the money they would have spent to the children in Edgemont community. Advent, a time of waiting, a time of listening, a time of preparing. Now the second dimension. Because God came to us in human form, we can recognize God's coming to us through other humans. We cannot live in isolation, we need love and support from other persons. I remember once when I was feeling especially alone and separated, I kept hearing words from the pulpit, "God loves you." That's all you need to sustain you in this life. And my response was, "Intellectually I accept that to be true. It is a true statement, but it is an abstract statement, which offered me little comfort, for I was lonely and

needing evidence of God's love coming to me through a human community. God comes to us not as an abstraction, but very specific as the person of Jesus and through other persons who are willing to be bearers of God's love and comfort. But we are frail human vessels, and human community alone will not and cannot always sustain us. And when these human communities and relationships breakdown and are no longer bearers of God's love and comfort, then we can be sustained by the other dimension of God's presence, which comes to us in our solitude. Each of these dimensions support and inform the other. Both of these dimensions are promised to us, but this promise is not a guarantee that we will never be lonely, that we will be protected from painful experiences. There's no indication in the life of Jesus that we are being promised a life without pain, suffering, rejection, loneliness. For all of these experiences are recorded as a part of Jesus' own life, even the agonized cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" So our hope does not mean that we will never feel lonely or abandoned, it does mean that we have the confidence and assurance that even then God is with us, and we can be sustained even in our abandonment, our rejection, our loneliness, and our sorrow. Our hope does not mean that we will not be afraid and feel alone when we are called forth to take stands, and fight for causes and people who need our help. And because these are not popular will bring us grief and pain and threats. We remember that these are the places Jesus lived his life with the rejected, the oppressed, the outcast. It does mean that God is with us, and that the God of the crucified and risen Jesus will support and sustain us even if it looks like we have been defeated. The good news we hear at Bethlehem is the assurance that the whole world does not rest on our shoulders. As the spiritual says, "God has the whole world in his hands." Or as an old German hymn says, "As a mother holds her children during the storm, so God holds us when life gets rough. And God will be with us sustaining, supporting, correcting, loving. This good news frees us to respond to the call to work in this world, frees us to give of ourselves to become bearers of God's love and comfort to those who need it, and frees us to say to another, "At this particular time, I am lonely, or I am hurting, and I need your presence and your support. With the certainty that if we are rejected and there will be times when we will be pushed away, and these times will be painful, but even so we will not be destroyed by this pain, even then God is with us." Have I shown you pain and suffering and loneliness? (indistinct) in one of his poems, "Tired and lonely. So tired, the heart aches." He also says that, "We die on the day when our lives cease to be illumined by the steady radiance renewed daily, of a wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason." This wonder, this radiance comes to us in the Christ child, in this holy Christmas season. What is the expectation that you are bringing with you today? Where are you? What are you waiting for? Let us wait, let us open our hearts to this mystery and this joy, we are not alone, God is with us. Thanks be to God. Amen, and amen. (upbeat organ music) (church choir singing liturgical song) (upbeat organ music) (church choir singing liturgical song) (upbeat organ music) (church choir singing liturgical song) (upbeat organ music)

- O God, from whom we receive all, and upon whom we are ever dependent, accept this offering of ourselves before you, we pray that you will use both, our being and our doing, our gifts and our goods for your glory, and the helping of those who are in need through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (upbeat organ music)

- The grace of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, the love of God, the communion and fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you, and with those whom you love now and forever. (church choir singing liturgical song) (upbeat organ music)