

♪ God and sinners reconciled ♪ ♪ Joyful, all ye nations rise ♪ ♪ Join the triumph of the skies ♪ ♪ With angelic hosts proclaim ♪ ♪ Christ is born in Bethlehem ♪ ♪ Hark, the herald angels sing ♪ ♪ Glory to the newborn King ♪ ♪ Christ by highest heaven adored ♪ ♪ Christ the everlasting Lord ♪ ♪ Late in time behold Him come ♪ ♪ Offspring of the virgin's womb ♪ ♪ Veiled in flesh the Godhead see ♪ ♪ Hail the incarnate Deity ♪ ♪ Pleased with men as men to dwell ♪ ♪ Jesus our Immanuel ♪ ♪ Hark, the herald angels sing ♪ ♪ Glory to the newborn King ♪ ♪ Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace ♪ ♪ Hail the Son of Righteousness ♪ ♪ Light and life to all He brings ♪ ♪ Risen with healing in His wings ♪ ♪ Mild He lays His glory by ♪ ♪ Born that man no more may die ♪ ♪ Born to raise the sons of earth ♪ ♪ Born to give them second birth ♪ ♪ Hark, the herald angels sing ♪ ♪ Glory to the newborn King ♪ ♪ Amen ♪

- Dearly beloved, we are come together in the presence of Almighty God and of the whole company of heaven to make humble confessions of our sins unto Him, to set forth His most worthy praise, to hear His most worthy and holy word, to declare our faith in Him, to ask for ourselves and for all men those things which are necessary for the body and the soul, and to offer unto Him the service of our lives and to receive His blessing. Therefore, let us pray and confess unto God our sins and shortcomings. Let us offer unto God our prayer of confession. Almighty God, whose mercy brought Thee to earth and the coming of our Lord in this holy season, deepen and widen our vision of Thy presence among us, we ask. That Thou mayest not be turned away from our crowded, busy hearts, but welcomed with joy and and with thankfulness on this day. Oh God, our hearts as ever rejoice in the glad tidings of Christ who was born in Bethlehem to be the Savior of all the world. Yet with all our joy and the long centuries behind us of hearts made glad by His coming, when we are honest with ourselves, we know, oh Lord, that there is much in us that deafens our ears to the sound of angel anthems. Much that blinds us to the sight of guiding stars, amid the darkness. Much that crowds our hearts and minds leaving little room for the arrival of Thy gift of Christmas. We are as lonely as shepherds, oh God; as wayfaring as the kings, as busy as the innkeeper. Forgive us, oh God, our Father, and turn us again to the quietness of Thy peace at Christmas. Come, we pray Thee, as Christ came so long ago with healing and power and with peace. Thou shalt find us proud, oh God, for we have not yet learned what it means to be humble. Thou shalt find us guarded and defensive for we are weak within and full of fear. Thou shall find us irritable and not a little arrogant for we are comfortably guilty and we have not been willing to admit our frailty or our sins. While we dress and parade like little Herods and lordly Pilates, we know we have a deeper need of Thee and Thy mercy and Thy love. And so we asked Thy forgiveness and ask that Thou would come again into our lives, Thou meekest of all kings. Come, oh Lord, save us from ourselves, create new and holy hearts within us. In the name of Christ the child who is our Lord and our Savior. Amen. Hear these words of assurance of God's mercy and His everlasting love to those who truly and earnestly repent of their sins. And this was manifested the love of God toward us because that God sent His only begotten Son into the world that we might live through Him. For God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness has shined in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, who is our Lord. And so we may say with the psalmist, "Blessed be the Lord, God of Israel, "for He hath truly visited and redeemed His people." Amen. (light organ music) ♪ What Child is this who laid to

rest ♪♪ On Mary's lap is sleeping ♪♪ Whom angels greet with anthems sweet ♪♪ While shepherds watch are keeping ♪♪ This, this is Christ the King ♪♪ Whom shepherds guard and angels sing ♪♪ Haste, haste to bring Him laud ♪♪ The Babe, the Son of Mary ♪♪ Why lies He in so mean estate ♪♪ Where ox and ass are feeding ♪♪ Good shepherd fear, for sinners here ♪♪ The silent Word is pleading ♪♪ Nails, spear shall pierce Him through ♪♪ The cross be borne for me, for you ♪♪ Hail, hail the Word made flesh ♪♪ The Babe, the Son of Mary ♪♪ So bring Him incense, gold and myrrh ♪♪ Come peasant, king to own Him ♪♪ The King of kings salvation brings ♪♪ Let loving hearts enthrone Him ♪♪ Raise, raise a song on high ♪♪ The virgin sings her lullaby ♪♪ Joy, joy for Christ is born ♪♪ The Babe, the Son of Mary ♪

- The lesson from holy Scriptures for the day is the story of the nativity of our Lord as it is recorded in the Gospel according to St. Luke. "In those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus "that all the world should be enrolled. "This was the first enrollment when Quirinius "was governor of Syria and all went to be enrolled "each to his own city. "And Joseph also went up from Galilee, "from the city of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David "which is called Bethlehem because he was of the house "and of the lineage of David. "To be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, "who was with child. "And while they were there, "the time came for her to be delivered. "And she gave birth to her firstborn son "and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes "and laid Him in a manger because there was no place "for them in the inn. "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 shown round about them "and they were filled with fear. "And the angel said unto them, 'Be not afraid "for behold I bring you good news of a great joy "which will come to all 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 clothes "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.'" Here ends the reading of the lesson. (majestic organ music) ♪♪ Glory be to the Father ♪♪ And to the Son and to the Holy Ghost ♪♪ As it was in the beginning ♪♪ Is now and ever shall be ♪♪ World without end ♪♪ Amen ♪♪ Amen ♪

- The Lord be with you.

- And with thy spirit.

- Let us pray. Oh God, our Father, who has brought us again to the glad season when we commemorate the birth of Thy Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, we laud and magnify Thy glorious name for the countless blessings which His coming has brought unto us. For the light that continues to shine out of darkness, for the love that still comes down from the heavens to announce the possibility of peace on earth among men of good will, for the star of hope, the joy of the angels, and the awe of shepherds, we give Thee thanks, oh God. Grant us grace to welcome Thy incarnate Son with gladness and to make room for Him in our common days so that we may live at peace with one another and in goodwill with all Thy family through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. Let us offer our intercessions and our petitions for the world and for ourselves. Let us pray. Oh God, in whose spirit our world hungers and thirsts, bless us with peace and righteousness the world over as a season of goodwill once again comes unto us. Let Thy spirit, we ask, rule among the nations, that concord and mutual service may be established, and the mind of Christ may bind people with people and race with

race in true brotherhood. Support all those, oh Lord, at this season who think and plan to give happiness to others and give them the deepest happiness in the task that they do. Sustain all those who must bear added burdens to provide cheer for others. Help us all to be mindful of them and to add no unnecessary task to their portion. Bring the light of Thy spirit we ask, oh Lord, into every home, that affections may be rekindled and loyalties renewed in the gladness of the time. Send new life into Thy church, we ask, oh Lord, that there may be a new spirit of devotion to Christ and to His kingdom. Free us from all concerns for the things that matter little and keep us true to all the things that matter much, justice and mercy and faith. Most merciful God, our Father, abundantly bless those in whose hearts there is little room for joy because sorrow has come close to them. May the Christ who has been the share of their joys and their comrade in toil now come to them as the great Comforter. And in the knowledge of His sympathy and love, may they find the peace that knows no end. We would pray, oh Lord, for the happiness and wellbeing of all Thy children of every race and color, of every clime and coast. We beseech Thee, oh God, to bless those who are linked to us by the bonds of family and friendship. Enable us by the witness of Thy spirit to show that love will never lose its own. And Thou dost keep Thy children ever near to Thee, both in this world and in the world to come Lord, in this season of peace, we pray to Thee for peace on earth. We pray not because we have been men of goodwill, but because we have come at last in our bewilderment to long for Thee, that we might become men of goodwill. Today, we pray for little children, hungry and helpless and longing for life. We pray for those in every land who hide amid the ruins of their hopes and suffer from the cruelties of war. We bow our heads, oh Lord, in shame for any part that we have had in visiting Thy lovely world with ghastly terror and with tears of human pain. Grant us, we pray oh God, the calm that the peace of Christmas can bring, the calm that comes when Thou dost enter into the deeper recesses of our hearts and our souls. Grant us the faith that dares to risk its all on love. Grant us the will to make our own amidst the blackness of the night, the angel song of peace on earth. Strengthen the wise and the powerful in every land to the end that love may be transmuted into deeds decisive for the ends of peace. May we live close enough to Thee to know that only holy methods will produce Thy heavenly ends, that love alone survives defeat and ushers in the resurrection morn. We seek, oh Lord, the hope of Christmas, the hope that His coming brings to all mankind for the world is very dark. And as of old, when He first came, Herod the king had sought to slay Him, so the murderous passion of men lie and wait for Him still. Yet, He is our hope. We have seen His light and once seen, we can never forget it. He is our salvation. He is the firstborn among many brethren. We would believe in Him afresh today and follow Him with more loyal hearts, oh God. Thanks be to Thee for Thy gift of Christmas. For Jesus Christ, the babe of Bethlehem, Thou didst send unto us, full of grace and of truth. Now we make bold to pray the prayer that He, in His adult ministry taught us who would follow Him to pray together, that we should say, "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." (light organ music)

- In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen. A journey of less than 100 miles seems quite routine and short to the 20th century traveler. Yet here we are in the month of December 1967, many of us already have made our journeys and we are aware that others, our family and friends, are traveling across this land and perhaps the total number across other lands will go into the millions. Travelers today are turning their thoughts to another journey. One made by a man named Joseph and a

young woman named Mary, who made a trip, the distance of which was approximately 93 miles. Traveling southward from their home village of Nazareth, they eventually arrived at a city, a small city called Bethlehem. Today, as we revive recollections of that original event, we are prone to include an abundance of sentiment as we sing in the language of Phillips Brooks' famous hymn and beloved hymn, "Oh Little Town of Bethlehem." Our mood seems to be to make it a kind of fairyland city with a romanticized mingling of shepherds and angelic choir, of stars and traveling Magi, of swaddling clothes and a manger, of camels and donkeys and gold and frankincense, and myrrh, of Mother of Pearl jewelry and olive wood souvenir camels, of candles and wreaths and bells and tinsel, and so our description might continue. Perhaps as we pause together on this particular Sunday called Christmas Eve Sunday, it might be in order to take another look at the journey which is associated so intimately with our Christian faith. As we begin, I make several affirmations asking that you keep these in mind as we review the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. First, the movement which was initiated by the nativity event in Bethlehem is, by its history and its nature, totally committed to the nurture of goodwill among men. Unless the number of persons having goodwill in the center of their living increases, the movement called Christianity is not true to its nature, nor is it faithful to its task. The second affirmation is the founder of the movement which began in Bethlehem risked the totality of His earthly mission for the cause of goodwill among men. To be known as His followers, Christian people, individually, or as an institution called the Church, must be prepared to risk the totality of their living in the cause of goodwill. And the third affirmation, the worship of Almighty God without goodwill in the heart becomes pretentious ceremony. The angelic chorus put it right, "Glory to God in the highest!" But the chorus did not end there, "And on earth, peace to men of goodwill." And the two aspects of worship must be kept in mind and in heart as Christians assemble, not only at the Christmas season, but on any occasion for the purpose of worship. Now with these affirmations in our minds, will you go with me, as it were, as companions on the journey taken by Joseph and Mary? Beginning in their home city in response to a decree that went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled for taxation. The story of that journey presents in pictorial form one of the major emphases or major themes of the whole Gospel according to Luke. In the midst of normal events, men find themselves in the presence of God. In the midst of governmental decrees, of census-taking, of taxation, of movement at the command of officialdom, men may also experience a confrontation with God. God is not to be found only through angelic songs or through sentimental celebrations of a romanticized event. God and men are related through journeys, journeys involving risks and expense and frustration and tedium and delay and excitement and joy. God and man are related through the normal experiences of pregnancy and childbirth, through unexpected changes of plans, through the dreams that abide in human hearts for a day of peace and for the security of peace. Perhaps in this connection, it might be well to remember that the length of the trip taken by Joseph and Mary was greater than the number of miles indicated as I began, approximately 93. Some of the scholars say that perhaps the journey might have been made in about four days traveling on foot or on the back of a beast. Others, in reflecting upon possibilities along the way, say it might have taken longer than that. It might be interesting to remember that there were enemies along the way. There were certain individuals aspiring to be recognized as the deliverer of a captive people, as the coming Messiah. One of the more famous of them lived in the Greek city near Nazareth called Sepphoris a man by the name of Judas of Galilee A reference to this particular man is found in the book of Acts, as the great teacher Gamaliel converses with certain questioners. This particular man, Judas of Nazareth, aspiring to be known as the Messiah, had conquered a city and perhaps was interested in others who might have similar aspirations. He might have protested or

interfered had he known what the journey made by the man, Joseph, and the woman, Mary, really involved. Along the way, there were possible stops that these two could have made. Certainly, their travel southward might have brought them to the famous well of Jacob, situated in a valley from which they could drink pure water from the depths and recall the story of their elders and look upward in one direction to Mount Gerizim on which was located the famous temple where the worship of the Samaritans centered. Or perhaps the journey might have taken them to the upland city in Judah where Zacharias and Elizabeth and their baby were living. You may recall from your reading of the Scriptures that Mary had spent three months on an earlier trip and this particular journey with Joseph was, in a sense, retracing much of the journey made earlier. And it might have happened that they took time out to go to see the other family again and to catch something of the joy that had come to them through the birth of their son whose name was John. Certainly they passed through the great city of Jerusalem and might have stopped at the temple there to offer themselves and the appropriate worship. As they entered Bethlehem only a short distance south and perhaps a little southeast of Jerusalem, they perhaps saw on the distant horizon, the great palace of Herod, an immense cone-shaped structure visible from Bethlehem. And the sight of it perhaps reminded them of the authority placed there. And later events would recall what they had seen as they entered the city. In other words, through the whole journey there was not only hope and anticipation, but a considerable amount of risk. The story of the journey to Bethlehem by these two presents in pictorial form, not only the fact that men in the presence of normal life are also in the presence of God, but that the risks associated with the Christian mission and specifically the Christian mission of peacemaking are to be found at the very heart of the Christmas story. Christianity has ever been a mobile movement or a mobile faith, a faith of mobile people. Its roots are in Judaism, in Abraham's call, in the Exodus event, in the event of the exile and the return from the exile. Joseph and Mary were destined to make additional journeys. One tradition calling for them to go to Egypt and spend some years. And of course, eventually back to Nazareth from which they started. How long they were away, several have calculated to be several years. What happened to the carpenter business in the little shop in Nazareth during the extended absence, we do not know. In any case life was unsettled and this pictorial account of what happened to them suggests the mobility of the faith established by the Son born there in Bethlehem. Referring to that Son, may I remind you that He Himself was a traveler? Let us also remember that He commanded others to travel. Frequently He said to people, "Get up, get out from where you now are, "remove of yourself from the limitations "of your palette by a pool side "or from the limitations of affliction "and move out into newness of life." Following His example in teachings, Christians of all ages have, in person, who could not settle forever in one position or upon one policy and commit themselves finally to one particular operation. Christianity involves the risk of change, the risk of the confusion related to change, the risk of weariness and frustration associated with confusion and change. I'd like us to look for a few moments at the name of the city to which these travelers came. We pronounce it Bethlehem, it really means house of bread. It has a good location on a hillside or on a considerable elevation near a fertile valley of open fields. And the produce from the field could be brought easily here. And this could be a source of nutrition and nourishment and of strength for the people, the house of bread. This again reminds us of the significance of bread as a Christian symbol. We prayed this morning as we do regularly when we gather here or in other places for Christian worship, "Give us this day our daily bread." We frequently quote our Lord saying, "I am the bread of life." And when on those holy occasions we gather to celebrate the holy communion, we quote our Lord's comment saying, "Take, eat," and remember that as He spoke those words, He was breaking bread. "Take, eat, this is My body given for

you." One of the risks of coming to the house of bread is that one continues to be hungry. And it could be that across the planet earth today, though the celebration of the holiday season is elaborate, there are hungry people seeking bread but not finding it where Christians gather or where the Christian story is told. Or another way to put it would be the temptation and risk of Christmas for many of us is that we come to the celebration in the house of bread without much appetite for bread. Our appetite being chiefly interested in the pageantry and the artificiality and the frothiness and shallowness of celebration. Perhaps you read in the Saturday Review for October 14 past an article by Anne Shamat, the title of which was, "On Being a Sheikh's Wife." Anne Shamat is an American woman married to a Bedouin sheikh. And the article describes some of the scenes of her life in Saudi Arabia soon after her marriage to an Arabian engineer trained in the United States and Europe. I quote just these brief statements of her very interesting account. "My husband," she wrote, "is one of many Arabs "who have studied engineering and technology "in the United States and Europe. "He lived for many years in America as a student, "but he has never forgotten his other culture. "If a piece of bread falls to the floor, "he snatches it, presses it to his forehead, and eats it." To an Arab, bread is the symbol of life. To a Christian, bread may symbolize even a deeper meaning as it reminds men of the mission of God to the planet called earth and to men in sin and sorrow and variety of need. God's visit here, centering in a little city called the house of bread. The risk of this particular Christmas is that we have lost our appetite for bread and also for being real men or true men of goodwill. Men of goodwill are peacemakers. Our Lord once said, "Blessed are the peacemakers," and He added, "they shall be called sons of God." But we argue, "Are peacemakers not also visionary "and impractical? "Their hope for peace is misleading, "it's only a kind of tantalizing dream "that nobody thinks will ever come true." Looking at their operation, the peacemakers of our day seem inept and their actions often ill timed. Their labor lacks glamor and excitement and the adventure and risk often, and the kind of adventure and risk often associated with warfare. Yet across the planet earth today, men's hearts cry for more peacemakers. There is a paradox of wretchedness and blessedness among peacemakers. Peacemakers are wretched because the abolition of war does seem to be something of a dream. Wretched also because the number of men of goodwill does not increase noticeably as we look around. But let us remember that peacemakers also find blessedness in knowing that they are working for mankind and working to save mankind from self destruction. Disillusioned as they are, peacemakers are never free to quit. Theirs is the blessedness of persistence, the blessedness of fellowship, the blessedness of yoke-fellowship with one who was born in Bethlehem and who is known today as the Prince of Peace. Let us pray. Oh Thou who art the God of the child of Bethlehem and the God and Father of all who in His name work for goodwill and peace, enable us in this season to become aware of the risks of peacemaking, but also to commit ourselves afresh to the task of peacemaking. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, we pray, amen. (light organ music) ♪ And there were in the same country ♪ ♪ Shepherds abiding in the field ♪ ♪ Keeping watch over their flocks by night ♪ ♪ And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them ♪ ♪ And the glory of the Lord shone round about them ♪ ♪ And they were sore afraid ♪ ♪ And the angel said unto them ♪ ♪ Fear not, for behold, I bring you good tidings ♪ ♪ Of great joy ♪ ♪ And suddenly there was with the angel ♪ ♪ A multitude of the heavenly host ♪ ♪ Praising God and saying ♪ ♪ Glory to God in the highest ♪ ♪ Glory to God in the highest ♪ ♪ And peace on earth ♪ ♪ Peace, goodwill, goodwill toward men ♪ ♪ Glory to God in the highest ♪ ♪ And peace on earth ♪ ♪ Peace, goodwill, goodwill toward men ♪ (majestic organ music) ♪ Praise God from whom all blessings flow ♪ ♪ Praise Him all peoples here below ♪ ♪ Praise Him above the heavenly host ♪ ♪ Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost ♪ ♪ Amen ♪

- Oh Lord, we turn our faces like the wise men of old toward the star of Bethlehem. And with willing hearts, we offer both ourselves and our gifts to the manger child who is our King. When at last, oh Lord, in the midst of this world's night, the Christ is born again, give us wisdom to kneel and joy to serve and courage to share the Good News which Thou has given us to all the world. In the name of Christ our Lord, amen. (uplifting organ music) ♪ There's a song in the air ♪ ♪ There's a star in the sky ♪ ♪ There's a mother's deep prayer and a baby's low cry ♪ ♪ And the star rains its fire while the beautiful sing ♪ ♪ For the manger of Bethlehem cradles a King ♪ ♪ There's a tumult of joy o'er the wonderful birth ♪ ♪ For the virgin's sweet boy is the Lord of the earth ♪ ♪ Ay, the star rains its fire while the beautiful sing ♪ ♪ For the manger of Bethlehem cradles a King ♪ ♪ In the light of that star lie the ages impearled ♪ ♪ And that song from afar has swept over the world ♪ ♪ Every hearth is aflame and the beautiful sing ♪ ♪ In the homes of the nations that Jesus is King ♪ ♪ We rejoice in the light and we echo the song ♪ ♪ That comes down through the night ♪ ♪ From the heavenly throng ♪ ♪ Ay, we shout to the lovely evangel they bring, ♪ ♪ And we greet in His cradle our Savior and King ♪ ♪ Amen ♪

- Depart now to serve the Lord in peace and in joy and may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God our Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, amen. (bell rings) (bright organ music)