

- I will be at work for two more weeks, and so I will not say goodbye yet. Thank you Deborah, for those kind words. As our ship approached the sun-baked isle of Patmos, the scene was charged with the air of expectancy. We would see the place where a man named John wrote the most unusual book in the New Testament. The contrast of ancient Greek Orthodox monastery, contemporary church and world somewhat distorted our view. We were surrounded by an assortment of people. Tourists on holiday, scholars and pastors on study or religious pilgrimages, and a beautiful TV evangelist from Texas with her entourage who profaned the holy places with their glaring camera lights, and her smooth, easy comments. Yet even for the early church, it was a time of contrast between the old and the new, between believers and non-believers, between the political intrigues and loyalties, among the Roman government, the Jewish authority, and the ever-growing church who was hammering out its mission and message, and differing theologies. The writer in his solitary confinement on that remote prison island seemed to have let his imagination run away to the margins of sanity. Or was it that coupled with his deep Christian conviction, his literary and religious genius gave birth to the most awesome of revelations concerning the mysteries of God's kingdom, of what had been, what was, and what was to come. Was it the intensity of the light of the sun reflecting on the blue Aegean Sea that played mind tricks on his thinking, which formed his visionary shapes, and nightmarish images? Was it partly illusory hopefulness that stirred John to write as he did? Or was it sheer madness, as some have concluded, stating that his writings make little or no sense at all. Even some of the greats in church history failed to value what is there. Luther states, "My spirit cannot accommodate "itself to this book." And Jerome admits that the book has as many secrets as it has words. In a place like Duke Chapel, or in most Protestant churches, we find it hard to appreciate a book with references to a horned, seven-headed dragon, and creatures covered with eyes. Were it not for a few good scholars, and the fact that the new heaven and new Earth language seems appropriate for graduation, and for this politically uneasy time, I would not have attempted to preach on a text from Revelation. Politics and religion had put John where he was, separating him from his Christian friends, who were under siege by the powers of the Roman state, and civil religion. The colliding of church and state can be dangerous, even deadly. Paul the Apostle on more than one occasion was thrown into prison because of his strong conviction that Christ was the God who met him on a lonely road one day, and to whom he thereafter gave his complete allegiance. The early church father, Athanasius, five times was hounded into exile by three different emperors. Augustine as a pastor found himself in the midst of the chaotic breakup of Roman order, and following the charge that Christianity had set the strength of Rome, he wrote a defense of Christianity called, "City of God." Joan of Arc, after her conversion, plunged into the 15th century French political religious arena, and at the early age of 20, died a martyr's death. Bonhoeffer, before he was executed, at the age of 39, led a fugitive existence in Nazi Germany. Bishop Romero battled with the El Salvadorian government and the church hierarchy for reforms which would save his people from cruel persecution and death, and ended up one day riddled by an assassin's bullets. Virtually unknown, American missionaries named Becky McKinley, David Jean Dickman, and Ann Neal made a place among the people of Yemen, Gaza, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe, often being caught in the crossfire of political revolution, religious conflict, and church reform. Without these, and countless other men and women, we would be far less able to understand our faith, and our life, and our role in the

ongoing saga of the Christian church. The task of these, and any of us who are brave enough to do so, was and is to demonstrate a gospel which orders a new heaven and a new Earth in the chaos of evil. Sin, defeat, suffering, persecution, and politics are thrust into our worlds over against the realities of God and Christ, holiness and healing, heaven and hell, victory and judgment, beginning and ending. Recently there have appeared in our newspapers and journals, articles about the disintegration of our society. Corruption in politics, loss of values, and the low morale which has swept across our land. Hear the voices of the people. We're experiencing a floating anxiety, a nameless, shapeless dread. Washington shares the disgust with Washington. We have given our children a legacy of bankruptcy. Our writers and artists help us see our pain, and our defeat, our heaven, our Earth, our hell. Gail Godwin, one of our current Southern novelists, shows us a picture of the state of things. In "Father Melancholy's Daughter", Margaret, a senior at the University of Virginia, is described as being absent of all energy and desire. Unable to go back to her studies to her final exams, to puzzle out a few more pages of Chaucer, she ponders. The man who had written it had perished, so had Shakespeare, and Thomas Jefferson, and Jesus, yet she continues, these great ones had perished, and the sun went on rising and setting without them. And the current crop of living bodies shuffled through the shopping malls of their lives, coveting, and spending, and wasting, and always wanting more. The more powerful and greedy among them tearing down whole mountains, and causing landslides and traffic jams because they wanted more. More, more. "What good was it to try to do anything?" she said. Christ had died to prove that his kingdom was not of this world, and the world had taken him at his word. The hopeful pictures from our text of the new heaven coming down to Earth, of the new creation, of the old passing away, of the ministry of reconciliation given to us are not visions of a fanatic or a madman. The message here is true. God's salvific power will be in our future, and is in our present. The new Earth mentioned here is one we all long for. A world of no more human brutalities, a world of no more miscarriages of justice, a world of no more war in the Middle East, in Ireland, in Eastern Europe. A world of no more riots in Los Angeles, or Atlanta. A world of no more hatred, cruelty, and murderers. A world of no more greed, of no more bloated stomachs of starving children, of no more paralyzing and debilitating drugs, of no more separation from the saving power of God. A renewed Earth, a renewed heaven, renewed cities, the reality of God with us. How is that accomplished? In this life we enter heaven not by escaping what we don't like, but by the sanctification of a place in which God has placed us. Heaven is formed out of our dirty streets, our murderous alleys, our adulterous and embattled bedrooms, our corrupt courts, our greedy politicians, our ruthless managers and CEOs, our lukewarm and divided churches. Christ's blood makes it possible. Our blood makes it possible. In a recent book, Dominique Lapierre tells a remarkable story, recently made into a movie. It's a true story taking place in a wretched, overcrowded slum in Calcutta, called the "City of Joy". This place is a microcosm of the worst and the best in all cities. Dispossessed persons from city and countryside, undesirables, the mentally and physically ill, criminals grinding what little life there is out of desperate people by their thievery and manipulation. Yet in the midst of all of the filth, the murder, and corruption, something eternal is happening. The new heaven is breaking in to renew the Earth. A small number of doctors, priests, pastors, and nurses have come to live among the sea of humanity. A community of love, in that most uninhabitable place, has been and is being formed. The response to this story two years in the writing has been overwhelming. Mr. Lapierre writes that one day as he was leaving his apartment in Paris, the doorbell rang, and standing at the door was an old woman with a travel bag who said, "I've just arrived by train from Toulouse." "I've come to write my will "in favor of your heroes of light." The vision of John breaks the barriers of time. It speaks a word of hope to all people in all times. It's message has to do

not only with God's eternal kingdom in the great beyond, it has to do with a renewed Earth. In a slum in Calcutta, a ghetto in New York, a gangland in Los Angeles, a decaying inner city in Durham. Thank God for visionaries. For writers, for prophets, for artists, for old women who support our heroes of light. Thank God for churches, whose musicians, organs, stringed instruments, soloists, and choirs stir our spirits to the grand and glorious things which God has spoken through a man named John, through a savior named Jesus. The riddle of the present, over against eternity, is the deepest of all the riddles of time. Every moment reaches into the eternal. Eternity is part of the air we breathe. It breaks powerfully into our consciousness, and gives us a certainty that God is alive, that resurrection is real, that Christ's blood and our blood, shed for the world, makes all the difference. Within history, we live in an ambiguous world. The forces of evil spread their nets to enslave and to entrap us, but there are time warps, where redemption and hope light up a city, light up a despairing heart. There is transformation in our time and space world, when members of our graduating class go out into the world with impossible dreams that become realities. When politicians care enough to risk losing votes and party favor to offer moral leadership for the task of building a new future for our nation and world. When churches preach and live the gospel. The new heaven and the new Earth is a vision where there is no vision, but people perish. The new heaven and the new Earth is also a reality. Thanks be to God. (organ music) (audience members singing softly) The Lord be with you.

- And also with you.

- Let us pray. Oh God, we come before you this morning with hearts full of hope and longing, for a new heaven and a new Earth. The theme of life for so many of us has been fear of the future. Fear that we would be inadequate to the demands. Fear of ill health, loss of independence, or death. Fear that there will be no place for us. Fear that we will not have enough. Fear that the mess that we've created has stolen our children's future. Fear of a world spinning out of control with corruption, violence, and greed. Truly we have been in the grips of a floating anxiety, overwhelmed with the pain and suffering we see in the world, but not sure how to handle even our own pain and suffering, much less that of others. God of the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, remind us that no part of our past, our present, or our future is separate from you. You break into our lives to sanctify them. You call us into the future that you have envisioned for us, by transforming our present. There is no need to fear the future when we live with the sure knowledge that you are with us. Give us the courage, oh God, to follow the example your disciples have set in every age, of faithful living. Give us the faith to believe in the transforming power of your love and grace, manifested in the lives of committed men and women. Give us the vision of a new Earth invaded by your heaven, where all places become cities of joy. A world where the unhappy, discouraged, ill clad, ill fed, thirsty and desperate multitudes will have their hunger satisfied, their tears wiped away, their thirst quenched, and their longings fulfilled. Give us the compassion, the will, and the grace to work for such a world. Remind us Lord, that in reaching out to others in love, we too are transformed by love, and we become new persons who have been touched by the divine. Remind us that we do not reach out alone, that you work through us as we open ourselves to your power, and that you fill us and those we serve with living waters. It is in your power and your love that we hope for a new heaven and a new Earth. In the name of Jesus Christ, who made the eternal visible among us, amen.