

(organ music) (harmonizing choral music)

- We welcome you on this second Sunday of Lent to this service here in Duke University Chapel. Our preacher for the day is the Reverend Nancy Ferree-Clark, associate minister to the university. We want to announce that the service planned for this afternoon will go on as scheduled at five PM. This is a very special event here in the chapel. A sacred service written by Duke's Pulitzer Prize winning composer, Robert Ward. A sacred service involving a mystery play, and special music sung by the Duke Chapel choir, and that will go on at five o'clock this afternoon. We expect all the roads leading to campus and on campus to be well-cleared by then. And we hope that you will be here. There is no admission charge; five PM this afternoon. And now, let us continue our worship. (organ music) (echoing hymnal singing) (organ music) (reverberating choral music) These 40 days of Lent are traditionally time for reflection and introspection and self-examination. Therefore, let us begin this time of worship by confessing our sin before God and one another. Be seated. O Lord, you open your hand and all the Earth is filled with good things, but we have cried out against you, saying: what shall we eat, and what shall we drink? Lord, have mercy upon us.

Congregation: Christ, have mercy upon us.

- Lord, have mercy upon us. O Lord, you have said: in returning and rest, you shall be saved. And quietness and trust shall be your strength. But we have shouted: no, we will speed upon horses. We will ride upon swift steeds. Lord, have mercy upon us.

Congregation: Christ, have mercy upon us.

- Lord, have mercy upon us. O Lord, you have said: let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. But we have said: when will the sabbath be over, that we may buy the poor for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals? Lord, have mercy upon us.

Congregation: Christ, have mercy upon us.

- Lord, have mercy upon us. O Lord, we have come before you with thousands of rams and 10,000 rivers of oil, and we have caused you to cry out: O my people, what have I done to you? And what have I wearied you? Answer me. Lord, have mercy upon us.

Congregation: Christ have mercy upon us.

- Lord, have mercy upon us. O Lord, you have said: how can I give you up, O Ephraim, how can I hand you over, O Israel? But we have cried out: away with him, away with him! We have no king but Caesar. Lord, have mercy upon us.

Congregation: Christ, have mercy upon us.

- Lord, have mercy upon us. Hear these comfortable words from scripture, all ye who with true repentance turn to the Lord. The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. This is the message that we have heard from him and proclaimed to you, that God is light, and in God is no darkness at all. If we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his son, cleanses us from all sin. Your sins are forgiven, for his sake. Amen.

- Let us join in the prayer for illumination. Open our hearts and minds, O God, by the power of your holy spirit, so that as the word is read and proclaimed, we might hear with joy what you say to us this day. Amen. The first lesson is taken from the book of Genesis. After these things, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: fear not, Abram, I am your shield. Your rewards shall be great. But Abram said: O Lord God, what will thou give me? For I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus. And Abram said: behold, thou hast given me no offspring, and a slave born in my house will be my heir. And behold, the word of the Lord came to him. This man shall not be your heir. Your own son shall be your heir. And he brought him outside and said: look toward heaven and number the stars, if you are able to number them. Then he said to him: so shall your descendants be. And he believed the Lord, and he reckoned it to him as righteousness. And he said to him: I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess. But he said: O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it? He said to him: bring me a heifer, three years old. A she-goat three years old. A ram three years old. A turtle dove and a young pigeon. And he brought him all these, cut them in two, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in two. And when birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, Abram drove them away. As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram, and lo, a dread and great darkness fell upon him. When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold a smoking fire-pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day, the lord made a covenant with Abram, saying: to your descendants, I give this land. From the River of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates. Thus ends the reading of the first lesson.

- Let us stand for the psalm. Unless the Lord builds the house, those who labor it, labor in vain.

Congregation: Unless the Lord watches over the city, the sentry stays awake in vain.

- It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil. For God gives to his beloved sleep.

Congregation: Lo, children are a heritage from the Lord. The fruit of the womb a reward.

- Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth.

Congregation: Happy is the one whose quiver is full of them.

- That one shall not be put to shame when speaking with enemies in the gate. (organ music) (echoing

hymnal music)

- The second lesson is taken from Philippians, chapter three, verse 17 through chapter four, verse one. Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me and mark those who so lived as you have in an example in us. For many of whom I have often told you, and now tell you even with tears, live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame. With minds set on earthly things. But our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body. By the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself. Therefore, sisters and brothers whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved. The gospel lesson is taken from the Gospel According to Luke chapter 13, verses 31 through 35. At that very hour, some Pharisees came and said to him: get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you. And he said to them: go and tell that fox, behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day, I finish my course. Nevertheless, I must go on my way today and tomorrow, and the day following, for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you. How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings? And you would not. Behold, your house is forsaken. And I tell you, you will not see me until you say: blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Thus ends the reading from the gospel. (organ music) (harmonizing choral music)

- As we in the church journey together through these 40 days of Lent, we give special attention to the nature of our relationship to God. This season has long been observed by Christians as a time for deepening one's spiritual life. Back in the early church, the practice was to baptize new Christians, early on Easter morning. And so the time before Easter was designated as a period of fasting, study and prayer for candidates for baptism. Since then, Christians have come to recognize this season as one when spiritual disciplines should assume the highest priority, although, that seems to occur with a varying degree of sacrifice. I have one friend who always tells me that he gives up sugar in his coffee for Lent. But quite frankly, I don't think he ever uses sugar in his coffee. Some of us consider that trekking to church in the middle of snow and ice is probably an adequate Lenten discipline. I won't ask you what yours is for yourself, but regardless of the approach that you choose, our goal for Lent is to make time for in-depth reflection upon a subject which is always deserving of ever more reflection: our relationship to God. So it is that we turn in today's Old Testament reading to Abraham's relationship with God, as he received God's promise of a great nation. And land which they would dwell upon. Abraham, the father of all believers, according to Paul the Apostle. There he stands from the very beginning, all alone when there are no other believers. He answered God when he did not know who he was answering. He agreed to leave home without knowing where he was going. It is Abraham who teaches us about the peculiar dynamics of faith, that it is a continuous unfolding of our relationship with God. More a process than a possession, more a verb than a noun. Faith is something akin to embarking on a journey without a map. As the exemplar of our faith, Abraham would probably be the first to explain that faith is hardly the kind of abstract quality high above the doubts and uncertainties of this life, which we so often imagine it to be. Rather, as Abraham's own life reveals, faith is a hard-won struggle over recurring doubt and unfaith. It all started when God, who as you may remember, didn't even have a name at that point, at least that he had told anybody, told Abraham to leave his homeland and go to the land of Canaan, where he promised to make him the father of a great nation. And so Abraham went. But the first

thing that happened was no sooner had he answered God's call to go to the promised land then he deserted it, fearful that God couldn't deliver on this promise in the face of a famine. On a sojourn to Egypt, Abraham proceeded to use his wife, Sarah, to deceive the innocent Pharaoh, while sinking to an all-time low in his own morality. Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, he says to Sarah. An invitation to Pharaoh to take Sarah as his own wife, and a not very pleasant reminder of the plight of women, in biblical days. But the Lord graciously intervened to save Abraham and his kin, in spite of Abraham's failure to believe. By afflicting Pharaoh and by sending great plagues upon his house. So the next thing that happened was that the nephew, Lot, which Abraham had graciously brought along, he and Abraham couldn't get along, so great were their possessions between them that the land could not support them. Abraham then suggested that they go their separate ways, but that Lot should choose first. As he might have predicted, Lot took that rich bottom land, along the Jordan Valley, leaving Abraham with the scrub country, something like Dead Man's Gulch. But even that didn't divert Abraham. He was beginning to actually recognize the sincerity of God's promise that this land would be his. And so he did deal generously with Lot. Now throughout this time, God continued to repeat the promise to Abraham that he would be blessed with a multitude of descendants and land where they could live. But to Abraham, who didn't like delays better than any of the rest of us, it was beginning to look as if it might never happen. So finally, in today's lesson, Abraham decides to ask God, point blank: O Lord God, what will you give me? For I continue childless. Keep in mind that Abraham was at least an octogenarian by that point, and so the Lord took Abraham by the hand and led him out underneath the starlit sky. Just look towards the heavens and count the stars, if you can, Abraham. So it shall be when your children and grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren gather around you at a family reunion, stretching farther than the eye can see. Imagine. Perhaps you, yourself, have received a piece of news kind of like that, almost too good to believe, but at the same time too good not to be believed. You either wanted to shout for joy at the top of your lungs because it was true, or lie down and weep because you didn't believe it ever would be. Like a lonely man or woman, scarred by the wounds of a loveless childhood, who meets finally a genuinely giving person with love and warmth to spare, but is afraid to trust enough to be a friend. Could I ever be so fortunate as to be loved this much, they ask in disbelief. Likewise, Abraham had reason to hesitate in accepting God's promise. He had been sorely disappointed before. But in the face of this promise that mattered more than life itself to him, too good to believe, yet too good not to, Abraham held his breath. And he believed in silence. It was that look of faith in his eyes, which God beheld, and God recognized as righteousness. And there in a moment's glance, lies hidden a very valuable insight for understanding faith. When we think of righteousness, we often define it in terms of specific behaviors that are related to ethical, legal or religious norms. A sort of legalistic term. But in fact, righteousness, in this context, has nothing to do with legalism, but everything to do with grace. That to be righteous is to fulfill the demands of a relationship. All God could ask of Abraham at that point was to trust him, and so he did. God didn't attempt to measure Abraham on some scale of worthiness; Abraham quite frankly couldn't have stood up under that kind of test. Nor could we. Rather, standing underneath a starlit sky in the darkness of night, Abraham accepted the gift of a relationship with God, as one that could never be revoked. Abraham and all of Israel after him could reject God, and thereby bring God's wrath upon them, but Israel's relationship would never be dependent on her righteousness. God had initiated it. God alone upheld it. And God alone could nullify it. As Saint Paul would later write to the Romans: if God is for us, who can be against us? This is a story full of unbelievable moments. But for all the strange elements in this story, perhaps we in our own time are most amazed by the depth of the

commitment which God and Abraham could actually make to each other. We live in a fast-tracked society, where you're here one day and you're gone the next. And genuine commitments are hard to come by. With more options open to us than ever before, we face almost overwhelming choices in terms of relationships, vocations, even religious affiliations. Or in some cases, non-affiliations. Let's get married; divorce is always an option. Let's have sex. We can always have an abortion. Let's join the church; we can always drop out. This seems a special burden on college aged men and women where freedom enjoys the highest regard. Explore, experiment, get around, are the catch phrases. And so in the name of freedom, commitments become more provisional, in order that doors may be left open. With Iran Contra affairs and staggering divorce rates, making us slow to trust anyway, we're all beleaguered by a certain weariness, a suspicious attitude towards commitments. It's almost as if we're becoming a people of observers, who on the surface engage in a series of authentic relationships, but just underneath the surface, we feel alone, afraid, and vulnerable to the consequences of taking a risk. It's no wonder that faith in God seems oddly out of step with the rest of the world. We've been well-trained to take charge of things, and while taking charge is a good thing in many instances, there are other times when a healthy relationship calls for not always being in control. But still promising to keep the commitment. Like being ready to be surprised by the other party in a relationship. Surely Abraham and Sarah were grateful for that aspect of their relationship to God. Remember the angel's surprise announcement of Isaac's birth. They actually laughed. A healthy relationship also means taking the risk to fully reveal oneself in that relationship. For all of Abraham's shortcomings, he was especially committed at that point. Or to put it another way, he expressed his faith by revealing his doubts. Most of us think of doubt as the antithesis of faith. But in fact there is a different point of view worth noting. The likes of theologians to Paul Tillich have said that doubt isn't the opposite of faith. It is an element of faith. Fredrick Buechner called doubts: "the ants in the pants of faith." "Whether your faith is that there is a god, or that there isn't one, if you don't have doubts, you're either kidding yourself or asleep," he wisely wrote. And so Abraham, within moments of accepting God's promise of a great nation and land for them to dwell upon, asked God yet again: how am I to know that I shall possess this land? God does not rebuke him for his question, but instead he makes a covenant with him, renewing his promise of this land, and even filling him in on exactly where the borders would be. Abraham's inquisitiveness had been rewarded. And so even doubt can lay the groundwork for a dynamic, flourishing relationship. Abraham could express all, like the psalmist, bringing to God his loss of confidence and fearful moments, while tenaciously holding on to his belief in God. Abraham did not attain perfection in his pilgrimage of faith, just in case you're waiting for that part of the story. There was the terrible injustice forced upon Hagar, their made, by Sarah and Abraham, who bore Abraham a son, Ishmael, and whom they cast into the wilderness. Many of you remember the Lenten art exhibit which was held here in the chapel three years ago, and there the sculptor and painter captured the anguish of this story: Sarah, Hagar and Abraham. A terrible failure on their part to trust in God. But even then, Abraham was exonerated when God chose on Abraham's behalf to make Ishmael into a nation also. Therefore delivering twofold on his original promise. In the meantime, Abraham did grow in his faith, as he pled for Sodom, winning God's assurance that the city would be spared, if only for 10 people. But not until God called Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, did his real test of faith come. A test is always a part of faith, as Christ himself repeats. Every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes to make it bear even more. Abraham's test seemed particularly severe, that he should have to sacrifice his beloved and long-awaited son. But his faith had grown, and it served him well. Without understanding why God would make such a request, Abraham knew only that God was reliable. And so to Isaac's question: here

are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering? Abraham could reply to his son: God himself will provide the lamb. Abraham was confident, you see, that God had the power even to raise the dead. When Abraham and Isaac descended from that mountain, they must have looked the same as before. But Abraham had grown a lifetime in his faith in God. In the face of such remarkable obedience, God could now reaffirm his promise to Abraham: by your descendants shall all the nations of the Earth bless themselves, because you have obeyed my voice. Such flourishing of faith could never have occurred without Abraham's willingness to leave behind, to make a commitment, to ask questions. And so his participation in the old covenant enlightens our Lenten journey as we prepare to respond to the new covenant. God does have the power to raise the dead. As revealed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That much we know and affirm. But as his body, here on Earth, we must ask ourselves this season: what have we learned from Abraham, the father of our faith? Perhaps you heard a story about the atheist who sincerely believes there is no God, and lives as though there is. Or about the believer who sincerely believes there is a God, and lives as though there isn't. I thought I'd ask you about that, because you might know one of them. (organ music)
(solemn choral music)

- Let us unite in this historic confession of the Christian faith. I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and Earth, and in Jesus Christ, his only son, our Lord. Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried. The third day, he rose from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father almighty. From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen. The Lord be with you.

Congregation: And also with you.

- Let us pray; be seated. O God, creator of the world, by your promise to Abraham and Sarah, you have claimed us. O Jesus, savior of the world, by your cross and passion, you have redeemed us. Save us and help us, we entreat you, O Lord, from the impatience that prevents us from discerning your purpose and pain and sorrow. From refusing to share the suffering of the world. From seeking only comfort and pleasure, and from forgetting those in distress. From the selfishness that brings needless grief to others. Save us, good Lord. Almighty Father, in the afflictions of your people, you are yourself afflicted. Hear us as we pray for those who suffer. For all who are hindered in the race of life through no fault of their own, for the defective and the delicate, and for those who are disabled. For those whose livelihood is insecure. And for the hungry and the homeless, the destitute. For those who are overworked and downtrodden and in despair. We entreat you to hear us, good Lord. For little children whose surroundings hide from them your love and beauty. For the fatherless and the motherless, and for the unwanted. We entreat you to hear us, good Lord. For prisoners and captives, and all suffering from oppression. For all who are suffering because of their faithfulness to conviction and duty. For those who have to bear their burdens by themselves. For those who are in doubt and anguish of soul. Those who are oversensitive, and for those who suffer through their own wrongdoing, we entreat you to hear us, good Lord. For all who do not pray for themselves, and for all who have not the consolation of the prayers of others, and for all whose anguish is unrelieved by the knowledge of your love, hear us, good Lord. For the infirm and the aged, for all who are growing weary with the journey of life. For

those who are ill, and for all who are passing through the valley of the shadow of death, we entreat you to hear us, good Lord. And for all those who are forgotten by us, but still so dear to you, we entreat you to hear us, good Lord. O God, our Father, have regard to our prayers. Answer them in your infinite compassion, and make us the channels of your everlasting pity. And helpfulness. This we pray. Amen. As a continually forgiven, reconciled and gifted people, let us offer ourselves and our gifts to God, who has offered so much to us. (organ music) (harmonious choral music) (organ music) (reverberating choral music) Gracious God, for all the blessings of this life, for the promises that you have made to us, and the enumerable promises that you have kept to us, for your faithfulness in spite of our infidelity, for all the good things, the small and the great and the good things with which you enrich our lives, we give you thanks and pray that you would accept these our gifts as token of our thanksgiving. And pray that they would be used in your service in the world. Praying as our savior has taught us: 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. (organ music) (echoing choral music) Now may the grace of our Lord and savior, Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now, and always. Amen. (intricate organ music)