

(upbeat organ music) ♪ Praise God, from whom all blessings flow ♪ ♪ Praise Him, all creatures here below ♪ ♪ Praise Him above, ye heavenly host ♪ ♪ Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost ♪ ♪ Amen ♪

- Most merciful and gracious of whose bounty we have all received, accept we beseech Thee this offering of Thy people. Remember in Thy love those who brought it and those for whom it is given. And so follow it with Thy blessing that it may promote peace and goodwill among men and advance the kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

- Our text is from the 78th verse of the first chapter of Luke. "The dayspring from on high hath visited us." This Advent sermon really began a few months ago at Cornell University. After the chapel service, I had lunch with a casually collected company of people. One young instructor, a very courteous man said to me he said, "I didn't hear you this morning. I don't ever go to church." He said, "The fact is that the Christian religion is just about washed up. In 50 years more, the church will just be a little company of people on a side street singing ditties about Heaven." That threw me back for about 10 yards. I finally recovered a bit, however, and I hope later to tell you what I said. Perhaps that will keep an element of suspense in the sermon. (congregation laughing) But that Joe did bring up an issue. Just how relevant is Christianity to our world? It is the Advent theme. The meaning of the coming of Christ to our world. And we had better face the fact that the mood of many serious people today is that it does not have any very close meaning. They do not deny the faith. That is out of style. The loud village atheist is out of date. They just ignore it. They feel that it's not close to life. Something like the man who's taking a civil service examination for postman. One of the foolish questions was, "How far away is the planet Saturn?" He gave a good answer. He says, "It's so far away that it won't make any difference about my delivering the mail on Main Street." (congregation laughing) And some people feel that our Gospel is so far away that it's irrelevant to our world and to our lives. During the Second World War when Eve Curie the scientist visited Jerusalem, she looked back on that hill of Zion and said she felt like saying, "Ah Jesus. So powerful and yet so powerless." You told us to be kind and forgiving yet for 20 solid centuries wretched, incorrigible men have gone on being merciless full of violence and hatred. Religious men and atheists alike have lived and ruled in a non-Christian way. And look at us now. We've never been in a worse mess. Those words, "so powerful and so powerless," if we dismiss them lightly or take them casually, we have not faced a challenging mark of our time. So I would ask this morning, how relevant is our religious space to the life of the world today? The opening of the 20th century, Thomas Hardy wrote a poem with the arresting title, "The Funeral of God." He described seeing a funeral train move across a valley. Then he discovered that the figure that they were burying was God. He said, "O man-projected Figure, whence came it we were tempted to create One whom we could no longer keep alive? How sweet it was in years far hied to start the wheels of day with trustful prayer, to lie down liegely at the eventide and feel a blest assurance He was there." Now, in the minds of many, that is all over. Many feel as Bliss Carman puts into the words of grass. The birds ask the grass, the Church, what the people are doing inside with all the music and the grass answered, "They're praising God on Sunday. They'll be all right on Monday. It's just a little habit they've acquired." Now, in that whole question first, is our Christianity out of

relation to our world? We must say this, that many kinds of Christianity as practiced are terribly irrelevant to the world. And the sooner we recognize it the better. Here are a few of them. One of 'em is this. That a religion of words is irrelevant to human needs. Saying something, letting it in there, feeling that something important is done if only the right words are said. In our Protestant churches we do not go around swinging incense, but we have another kind of incense, abstract words. We swing them through the sanctuary and they're dead in the mind. Forget the words of Jesus. Not those who say, "Lord, Lord" but those who do what I say. James A. Michener out there in South Pacific in the recent article on holiday described Buddhism. He said a Japanese scholar said to him, "Buddhism suits us exactly. It does not concern itself with this life but with a life after death, therefore it does not set up a system of day behavior or a weekly demand of church going. The services are conducted in Chinese and cannot be understood by the worshipers. It's a very lovely religion." Well, it is a very lovely little religion. It doesn't bother you at all. And there are a great many Christian Buddhists who enjoy that kind of a religion. No demand on life, no effect. Everything is lovely. And many people just listen for words and not sing. John Wesley said, he was getting a little angered once, "Let but a pert, self-sufficient animal bawl out something about the blood of Christ and people will say, 'What a fine Gospel sermon.'" That was true 200 years ago, and as many of us know it's true in many places today. Jesus knew the difference between words and the real thing. He said about a Roman Centurion who didn't have any of the proper words at all, "I have not seen such faith in all of Israel." A second kind of religion very popular today that is completely irrelevant to the world's need is the cult of comfort in which the Christian Gospel has degenerated in many places. I do not mean there is no place in our religion for comfort. We've all seen people held up by the faith and on their knees. Or the everlasting arm. We have seen people go through experiences we wonder how they could stand up, saying, "I am cured. That neither life nor death nor anything else in all creation can separate me from the love of God." But the cult of comfort, just for comfort and ease itself is a shabby thing. And it frequently comes when we substitute psychology for religion, that is, a complete substitute. It's often done. One woman sitting under the ministry of a very up-to-date preacher thought that the words neurosis and psychosis were the names of two women in the New Testament to whom Paul sent his greetings. (congregation laughing) Something like Tryphena and Tryphosa. That kind of a comfort makes God not enough the sovereign of the whole world but an office boy who is busy looking after my wants. And no idea of how not pray? Many do. Marie Bashkirtseff, an ego as to the point of genius, wrote this prayer in her journal. She'd repeat it every day. "Oh God, grant that I may never have the smallpox and that I may remain pretty and that I may have a beautiful voice and that I may have a rich marriage." That was not just what Jesus had in mind when He said, "After this manner pray ye." The second kind of irrelevant religion is one that's in a social vacuum. It does not make any difference to human needs nor do anything for human welfare. I remember one day in a class in sermon in the seminary, Dr. Henry Sloane Coffin, so recently gone from us, said about a student sermon. It wasn't mine. I wouldn't tell you what he said about mine. He said about a student sermon, he said it was a hoop skirt sermon. It went all around the subject without touching it at any point. (congregation laughing) And there is religion. It goes around life without really touching it. So an instance of it in the 1840s. The House of Lords was considering the Ten Hour Bill. A bill designed to limit the work of little children under 10 years of age to 10 hours a day. And the English bishops voted solidly against it. It didn't touch lives. Now, that's one side of the picture. The other side of the picture, true side, the disturbing side, there is the other evidence that our Christian faith does come into light with very close relevance. When a man said that the church would be a little company of people on a side street, singing ditties about Heaven, after I got my breath, I said, "Thank you. You put it

beautifully. And you have just described the most powerful force in history." A little company of people on a side street singing ditties about heaven. That's what it was in the upper room when it all began. That's it was in the Roman catacombs, a small company of people, but it was a larger place than the Coliseum because the future was there. That little church where the Pilgrims gathered in Leiden, Holland was just a little company of people on a side street. Theirs was the power of shaping a nation. I made a sentimental pilgrimage, a pious pilgrimage a few years ago to a little place on a side street in London in Aldersgate Street where there began the movement that went out to take in a world in its parish. Very swiftly, the evidence that Christianity is relevant to our world. Jesus does not come into our world like a Rip Van Winkle, alien in speech and garb but a contemporary. For one thing, He gives to life great meaning. That is the one of deepest human need. I've had young people in school, in college, I've had people in the last hours in their hospital ask me the same question, "What is it all about?" And Jesus breaks the code of mystery's existence and floods you with meaning. We know the stories that have come with the breaking of a code. Jesus gives the key to the mystery. If the world is not an accident nor a whirling bit of gas and mud, nor a machine shop or an orphan asylum, but a home. Now, you can't prove that. You can't prove any of the most precious things in life at all. You can prove that Beethoven was born in 1770, but you can't prove that the Ninth Symphony is great music. Many people prefer Hernando's Hideaway. (congregation laughing) You cannot prove that the one more deeply loved by you is lovable. I might be ridiculous by scientific fact. You can say with feeling, "Music I heard with you was more than music, and bread I ate with you was more than bread." But a literally-minded person would say, "You're ridiculously exaggerating the differences between individuals." You can't prove it, but if faith does put high meaning into life, it puts foundations against our insecurity, it puts ultimates against our relativism, it puts community against our separateness, it puts liberty against our enslavements and hope against our despair, and it comes close to human need. Our religion is relevant that it comes at the particular time now close to man's need of a sense of worth that is slipping away from multitudes of people in this impersonal age. I heard a man say this summer that the most important thing in a person's life is he's answered the question, "Who do you think you are?" What do you think of yourself? For that determines what you get from life and what you put into it. A man's sense of his own significance is shrinking. There's a tremendous need. The need of the assurance of this light from the dayspring on high that man is not just an accidental collection of atoms but a child of God with an irreplaceable and eternal value that's desperately needed for a mood of our time is the feeling of the insignificance of persons. Here's a vivid picture, I think, of our age and of our Gospel found in a poem just published a few months ago in the volume, "The Love Letters of Phyllis McGinley." It pictures two people overwhelmed with the bleakness of the world and its threatening dangers say that they have nothing but their own human love as a shield. Nothing but that. Here's a few lines from it. "Stay near me. Speak my name. Oh, do not wander by a thought's span, heart's impulse from the light we kindle here. You are my sole defender as I am yours. In this precipitous night which over the Earth, is falling, without stars, and bitter cold. Stay near me. Spirit, perishable as bone. In such winter one cannot survive alone." That is the mood of many today. There's no hope in the world picture. There's nothing but our human love and in a remarkable way that's a perfect echo of another love poem also which might be called a mid-century love letter saying the same thing in the 19th century, Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach." Do you remember the words? He's saying, "We too have nothing but each other. In a bare world, that's all love. Let us be true to one another for the world, which seems to lie before us like a land of dreams, so various, so beautiful, so new hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light, nor certitude, nor peace, nor help nor pain. And we are here as on a darkling

plain swept by confused alarms of struggle and flight, where ignorant armies clash by night." Now, in such a mood so near to despair, in the 19th century or the 20th, of course, two heads are better than one. Two hearts that reach out to each other are better than one, but they're not enough in the desperate darkness. Here is the mid-century love letter, adequate for any century. "God so loved the world that He gave." That is something to sing about so we sing about it, "O Love that will not let me go." That is the meaning of Advent. That that sustaining love letter comes into life, makes it clear that we have something deeper and longer than our human love. And we can see the gifts to life that come with our faith that are sharply relevant to our needs. I was thinking of those gifts that faith brings. Bringing the other day that the author of a novel published this fall, a Literary Guild Selection, Miss Mary Deasy had to undergo a press interview not long ago. One of the questions was, "Do you collect anything? First editions, paintings or etchings, ships' models, glass paperweights, buns, boats, guns, or dogs?" And this is the way she answered. She says, "I collect sunsets, foggy mornings, old houses, summer afternoons, wet fall evenings, and silhouettes of chimney pots on roofs." Those are all good collectors' items, but faith, Christian belief and discipleship make possible rare collections as we go through life. We all collect something. Some people collect gripes. Other people collect grudges as they go along. Some people collect coins. Not rare coins but just current coins. (congregation laughing) The sweetest music to them is not a hallelujah chorus but the tinkle on a bell of a cash register when it goes ping. But a vibrant religion enables us to make collections. High moments when we can say, "Surely God is in this place." Hours of trust when we can say, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." And when that final question comes to us, as it will come, the same question they put to you in a customs house when returning from a journey, "Have you anything to declare? Have you anything to declare?" Did you pick up anything on your journey through life? With our faith we can say, "I have much to declare. Collections of friends. Memories of service." We can make that faith far more relevant than we do. Finally, this last affirmation. Religion is closely relevant to the making of a livable world. We can't obliterate history. We must grant that in times past and present the Church and its faith has made little or no difference to the world. Worse still, many times religion has been on the reactionary side of a human question. All true, but on the other side it has been relevant to the human family coming up from bondage. Those words echo from one of the early centuries down through the years, the words attributed to the monk Telemachus who jumped down into the arena and by the sacrifice of his life put an end to the gladiatorial contest. He said, "In the name of God, stop." So with slavery, with child labor, with other evils, there has been the word, "In the name of God, stop." There's a great sentence of T.R. Glover's. He said, "Four words destroyed slavery. For whom Christ died." And it is our faith that those same four words will destroy racial conflict and ultimately destroy war. Our task is to make religion more closely related, doing what we can. The picture I like to keep in my mind of the early days of Marshall Field in Chicago, he didn't spend all his time selling ribbons. He went out there and contracted to raise a whole city block full of buildings from the marshland foundation. He got 6,000 jackscrews under the base and a small army of 600 men and each of them turned to the signal the screws half a turn, raising the whole block a fraction of an inch. Picture of our task raising the level of life in city or state maybe just a fraction of an inch, but that's what it is, a fraction of an inch. And our gospel has a saving meaning for the hope of survival. A picture of our task by a traveler coming back from Russia saying that one of the great favorites of Russian children at the present time is a new variation of fairy story. The favorite picture story is how a man became a giant. And this giant has telescope and television for eyes, radio and telephone for ears, airplanes for legs, and atom bombs for hands. That would be a giant. It is. And ours is the story of Jack the giant killer for our generation.

Can we control him, the giant? And our faith points a way to mastery. People in one blood living together. And it induces us and throws a light on our path patiently to labor for what contributes to survival together for world welfare that reduces the appeal of the mirage of communism, strengthening the means of avoiding war for all of existence means that we can add our opinions, strengthened this Advent season for the things that make for survival. I've been greatly disturbed in recent weeks. Two United States senators seem to be competing for some kind of a prize in their lusty denunciations of coexistence. Someone oughta tell him if he ever stopped talking that the only alternative to coexistence is no existence. The only alternative to get along with something that we don't like is not getting along. And in that endeavor, we have in the words of the Advent song, the dayspring from on high hath visited us. And into every nook and corner of our world, there floods the light of the revelation of God in Christ and the way that we can safely walk. He is not far from any one of us. Let us pray. Let Thou come into Thine world, O God, through the life of Thy servants. Breathe on us the breath of God. Fill us with life anew that we may love what Thou dost love and do what Thou wouldst do. And may grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore. ♪ Amen ♪ ♪ Amen ♪ ♪ Amen ♪ (church bell ringing) (stirring organ music)