

(lively organ music) ♪ Beautiful Savior ♪ ♪ Lord of all nations ♪ ♪ Son of God ♪ ♪ And Son ♪ ♪ Of ♪ ♪ Man ♪ ♪
Glory ♪ ♪ And honor ♪ ♪ Praise ♪ ♪ Adoration ♪ ♪ Now and forevermore ♪ ♪ Be thine ♪ ♪ Now and forevermore
♪ ♪ Be ♪ ♪ Thine ♪ (tonal singing)
(lively organ music)

- Please be seated. With humble hearts seeking to know the will of God let us confess our sins against God and our neighbor. Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed. By what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent for the sake of your son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways, to the glory of your name. Amen. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him as far as the east is from the west so far does he remove our transgressions from us. Amen.

- In this grand place, generations of Duke students have come to meditate, to be challenged, to be inspired. Today, the chapel welcomes you, the class of 1985. As well as your families and your friends to this baccalaureate service. Today's preacher is one of our nations great religious leaders, the Reverend Dr. William Sloane Coffin, Pastor of Riverside Church in New York City. In my own student days, when I sat where you sit, Dr. Coffin's sermons challenged us to act upon those principles which we had only affirmed. Therefore, it is a matter of great personal joy for me to welcome him back to the pulpit of Duke University chapel. And I have no doubt that Dr. Coffin will likewise challenge you.

- Let us pray. Open our hearts and minds, oh 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 from Micah. It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be raised up above the hills. And many nations shall come and say, "come, let us go up to the mountain of the lord "to the house of the God of Jacob, "that he may teach us his ways and we may walk "in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth the law. and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples and shall decide for strong nations of far off and they shall beat their swords into plow shafts and their spears into pruning hooks and nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. But they shall set every man under his vine and under his fig tree and none shall make them afraid. For the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken. For all the peoples walk each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God, forever and ever. This ends the reading of the first lesson. (operatic singing)
(organ music)

- The congregation will please stand for the reading of the gospel. The gospel is from Saint Matthew. Then he made the disciples get in the boat and go before him to the other side while he dismissed the crowds.

And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. And when evening came, he was there alone. But the boat by this time was many furlongs distant from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. And in the fourth watch of the night, he came to them, walking on the sea. When the disciples saw him walking on the sea they were terrified saying, "it is a ghost." They cried for fear. But he immediately spoke to them saying, "take heart, it is I, have no fear." And Peter answered him, "Lord if it is you, bid me to come to you on the water." And he said, "come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me." And Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "oh man of little faith, why did you doubt?" And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased and those in the boat worshiped him saying, "truly you are the son of God." Here ends the reading of the gospel of our Lord. Amen. (tonal singing)

(organ music)

- Dearly beloved, as Saint Paul would say, sisters and brothers, hermanas y hermanos, permit me four prefatory remarks. One, let me assume that you know that I know that it's a great honor to be in the great state of North Carolina at the great university of Duke. And particularly on the occasion of the retirement, at least from Duke of a great President and great Governor. President, Uncle, Terry Sanford. I have no qualms about his future, this Yankee has watched Southern Poles neither die nor fade away. But I would like to simply say to him, I'm sure on behalf of everybody, although everybody said this or something like it. What the Poles said to their beloved Pope when he came back to Poland, Sto Lat! May you live to be a hundred. Second remark is addressed to seniors and departing graduate students. Could you imagine anything more depressing than to look back, say 50 years hence, on a springtime of your life, and say, ah, those were the days, and be right? (attendees laughing) That remark I make is a sign of burr under the saddle. When I used to be Chaplain at Yale, I always used to wonder at this time, whether graduating seniors were more or less concerned with their neighbors good when they came in as freshmen. Third remark is to Jews. I hope you will forgive a Christian preacher if he takes as his text a story from a Christian part of scripture, let me assure you, the sentiments expressed will be very Jewish. And fourth and last, once again to all of us. I have composed this baccalaureate sermon mindful of the fact that at this time this graduation coincides with the 10th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam war, the 40th anniversary of the end of World War II, and the 30th anniversary of the first reunion of non-allying nations. Last week, representatives of some 80 African and nation states declared that they felt the world was in far worse shape today than it was 30 years ago. Which reminds me of Camus' great statement on a day like this. There is in the world beauty, and there are the humiliated, and we must strive, hard as it is, not to be unfaithful, neither to the one nor to the other." And now let's go to that story just heard, read by the president, of Jesus walking on the water. What if modern scholarship should one day establish that the silver dollar that George Washington reputedly hurled across the mighty Rappahannock, had in fact splashed. Would that mean that George Washington was no longer as we were taught in grammar school first in war, first in peace, first in the hearts of his countryman? Obviously, no. Because the story is an expression of faith not a basis of faith. Its the kind of story that followers of George Washington committed to him on other grounds. Would just love to tell about him. Around a good campfire. Likewise, if Jesus never walked on the sea of Galilee, that does not mean that to Christians, he is not the Messiah. For Christ was not God's magic incarnate, but God's love incarnate. Christ is not one to go around Houdini like, breaking the laws of physical nature, but rather was one who, beyond

the limits of human nature loved as none before or since, so we believe has left. In the face of such awesome love, why even the waves rise up and the winds bow down, just as at his birth, a star stood still. And at his death, earth quaked, splitting rocks, and breaking graves wide open. What is the meaning of the story? Ask a crowd, straining their necks, to see the Sistine Chapel ceiling, what they are looking at. Ask an audience listening to Beethoven's Ninth, what they're hearing and no two answers will be the same. Such is the evocative power of great works of art. Now as the Bible should stimulate the imagination even more. No one should be surprised if I see in a story a perfect three act drama for a baccalaureate summon at Duke University on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the fall of Saigon and the 40th anniversary of the war ending reunion on the Elbe River. As the first act opens, the disciples are boarding a boat for what appears to be a routine crossing. But at some distance from the shore, they find themselves buffeted by an unexpected terrible storm. Their boat begins to sink. And not only because the winds are high and against them, but also as it turns out because Jesus is not there. Were we not also taught in grammar school Thou, too, sail on, O Ship of State! Sail on, O Union, strong and great! And in the middle of World War II, didn't Churchill send Roosevelt a morale building telegram quoting that Longfellow poem at great length? Thou, too, sail on, O Ship of State! Sail on, O Union, strong and great! Humanity with all its fears, With all the hopes of future years, Is hanging breathless on thy fate! But nobody sends us telegrams like that anymore. We too, in this country, seem at sea, caught in a storm, with no compass to point us toward a clear and promising future. That we've come a long ways, there's no denying. Even though we were a white nation founded on the genocide and bondage of other races, and though we have a long way to go in our treatment of blacks and Indians, ethnic minorities, and women, what's one woman on the Supreme Court but hollow symbolism when death comes to the equal rights amendment? Still ours is the longest lasting revolution in the world. Over 200 years old. And the liberties established way back then in a remote, agrarian backwater of the world, and miraculously survived, and at times positively flourished. But something today has happened to our understanding of freedom, to our understanding of democracy. Our 18th century forebears were enormously influenced by Montesquieu, the French thinker who differentiated despotism, monarchy, and democracy. In each he found a special principle governing social life. With despotism, the principle was fear. For monarchy, honor, and for democracy, take heed, virtue. It is this quality, he wrote, rather than fear or ambition that makes things work in a democracy. Samuel Adams agreed. We may look to armies for our defense, but virtue is our best security. It is not possible that any state should long remain free where virtue is not supremely honored. Freedom, virtue, these two were practically synonymous in the minds of our revolutionary forebears. To them, it was inconceivable that an individual would be granted freedom merely for the satisfaction of instincts and whims. Freedom, virtue, they were still practically synonymous 100 years later in the mind of Abraham Lincoln when in the course of the second inaugural address, he called for a new birth of Freedom. Freedom and virtue, they seem to embrace one another. And the greatest, perhaps, of all American hymns, by Julia Ward Howe, in The Beauty of the Lilies, Christ was born across the seas with a glory in his bosom that transfigures both you and me, as he died to make men holy. Let us die to make men free. Our God is marching on. But today, we Americans are not marching in the was of the Lord. But limping along in our own ways, thinking not of the public wheel, but of private interests. In universities, you know this. The all important freedom of students and faculty to think and say what they will is vastly exulted over any obligation to do any good to anyone. As if the acquisition of knowledge was not second to its use. Or in the old Calvinist phrase, truth in order to goodness. In Washington DC, tax cutting is more popular than social spending even for the poorest among us. In New York City, I can tell you, we're hemorrhaging at one

end and health clubbing it at the other. In city after city synagogues and churches are sheltering the homeless, feeding the hungry as charity today goes bail for justice. The whole world wonders why we Americans can't simply concede the existence of the Sandanista government. And because we refuse to freeze the nuclear arms race and sign a test ban treaty, measures the Soviet say they're ready to take, the whole world lives as a condemned prisoner in a cell awaiting the uncertain moment of execution. Because we have separated so cruelly, freedom from virtue, because we define freedom in a morally inferior way, our unions strong and great is stalled in a storm. In what Herman Melville called "the dark ages of democracy". A time when he predicted the new Jerusalem would turn into Babylon and Americans would feel what he called the arrest of hopes advance. America today is a cross between a war ship and a luxury liner. With all the tension concentrated on the upper decks. But below the water line, there are leaks. Our ship is beginning to sink. But now onto act two, which opens with one person preparing to abandon ship. And can't you hear the cries, there's always so many of them, and every sinking ship for God's sake, Peter, sit down, you're rocking the boat. Now let's ask why Peter and not the others. What moved him to abandon ship? Well, to most human beings, there's something fundamentally unacceptable about unpleasant truth. Most of the time, we seek to bolster our illusions, to protect ourselves against our fears. But in our more courageous and honest moments, some of us are willing to face the shallowness of our personal relations, the barbaric ladders on which we climb to success, the banality in much of our culture, the cruelty in much of our foreign policy, and when in the fourth watch of the night, that miserable two to six AM shift when we are most alone with ourselves, Jesus bids us, come. Some of us, like Peter, are ready for that leap of faith. Now, the leap of faith is not believing without proof, it's trusting without reservation. It's not a conversion from this world to some other, it's a conversion from something less than life to the possibility of full life itself. As an old church father Irenaeus said, "the glory of God is a human being fully alive." Now, Peter, you remember, immediately begins to sink. And modern scholarship may one day establish that Jesus called him the rock then, not for his foundation but for his sinking properties. (laughing) And when you start to think of it, why not? Saint Paul said, "in my weakness is my strength." Saint Paul who had the wisdom to see that God's power is made perfect in weakness. Is it not true that it is only when we realize that we can no more trust our own buoyancy than we can that of the ship we just abandoned, that we truly give ourselves to God, and then the true miracle takes place, the one that makes this story eternally true if not literally true. "Lord, save me", cries Peter. And Jesus does.