

(lively organ music)

- Welcome to the Chapel on this the second Sunday in the Christian season of Lent. We're glad that you're with us. Today after service, Dr. Beverly Harrison, professor from Union Theological Seminary in New York will be leading a discussion in the Chapel basement. There are extra places for lunch available. If you have not signed up for this discussion, you're welcome to come as long as places are available. That's immediately after the service. Today we have special music written for this service by our Chapel organist, Dr. David Arcus. And we thank him for his contribution today and the choir and soloist. If you'd like to have a conversation with Dr. Arcus about his music which he's created in conjunction with the scripture and the sermon today, you're invited to join him up in the Chancel right after the service for a conversation with the composer about his work. Now let us continue our worship. (choir singing)

Minister: Please stand for the greeting. Create in me a clean heart, oh God.

Congregation: And renew a right spirit within me.

- Open my lips, oh Lord.

All: And my mouth shall proclaim your praise. (lively organ music) (congregation singing)

- You may be seated. Let us pray together the prayer for illumination.

All: Open our hearts and minds, oh God by the power of your Holy Spirit so that as the word is read and proclaimed, we may hear your message to us this Lenten season.

- Amen. The Old Testament reading is from the book of Genesis, the first three verses of the 12th chapter. "Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country "and your kindred and your father's house "to the land I will show you. "I will make of you a great nation "and I will bless you "and make your name great "so that you will be a blessing. "I will bless those who bless you "and the one who curses you, I will curse. "In you all the families of the Earth shall be blessed." This is the word of the Lord.

All: Thanks be to God.

- Today's Psalm is number 121 verses one through eight found on page 844 in the Hymnal. Please stand and sing this Psalm and Gloria responsively. (tranquil organ music) ♪ I lift my eyes to the hills ♪ ♪ From whence does my help come ♪ ♪ My help comes from the Lord ♪ ♪ Who made heaven and Earth ♪ ♪ The Lord will not let your foot be moved ♪ ♪ The Lord who keeps you will not slumber ♪ ♪ Behold the one who keeps his eye ♪ ♪ Who neither slumber or sleep ♪ ♪ The Lord is your keeper ♪ ♪ The Lord is near on your right hand ♪ ♪ The

sun shall not smite you by day ♪ ♪ Nor the moon by night ♪ ♪ The Lord will keep you from all evil ♪ ♪ And will keep your life ♪ ♪ The Lord will keep you from all harm ♪ ♪ And you coming in ♪ ♪ From this both now and forever more ♪ ♪ All glory to be you, creator ♪ ♪ And to Jesus Christ our Savior ♪ ♪ And to the Holy Spirit ♪ ♪ Blessed Trinity ♪ ♪ As it was at time began ♪ ♪ Is now and will be forever more ♪

- Please be seated. (tranquil organ music) (soloist singing) ♪ The presence of God ♪ ♪ The one, the one ♪ ♪ The one ♪ ♪ No one can see the kingdom of God ♪ ♪ Without being born of water ♪ ♪ How, how, how can anyone be born ♪ ♪ And one and one ♪ (soloist singing) ♪ A second time ♪ ♪ And what in a second time, a second time ♪ (soloist singing) ♪ And no one can enter the kingdom ♪ ♪ Without being born of water, water, water, water, water ♪ ♪ And speak ♪ ♪ How, how can anyone be born ♪ ♪ After having grown old ♪ ♪ After having grown old ♪ ♪ How can anyone ♪ ♪ If he is born of the flesh ♪ ♪ He's flesh ♪ ♪ And what he's born of the spirit ♪ ♪ Spirit ♪ ♪ Do not be astonished ♪ ♪ That I said to you ♪ ♪ You must be born ♪ ♪ How can these things be ♪ ♪ How can these things be ♪ ♪ How can they ♪ ♪ How can ♪ ♪ How ♪ ♪ Are you a teacher of Israel to you ♪ ♪ And yet you do not understand these things ♪ ♪ Understand these things ♪ ♪ Stand, stand these ♪ ♪ These ♪ ♪ These ♪ ♪ These, these ♪

- Today's gospel for this second Sunday of Lent is from John chapter three. "Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus "a ruler of the Jews. "He came to Jesus by night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you're a teacher come from God "for no one could do these signs "that you do unless God is with him. "Jesus answered Nicodemus, "truly, truly I say to you, "unless one is born from above, "he cannot see the kingdom of God. "Nicodemus said to him, "how can a man be born "when he is old? "Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb "and be born? "Jesus answered, truly, truly I say to you, "unless one is born of water "and the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. "That which is born of flesh is flesh "and that which is born of spirit is spirit. "Do not marvel that I have said to you "you must be born anew "for the wind blows where it will "and you hear the sound of it "but you do not know whence the wind comes "or whither it goes. "So it is with everyone who is born "of the spirit. "Nicodemus said to Jesus, "how can this be?" This is the word of the Lord.

Congregation: Thanks be to God.

- It's getting harder the longer I preach, it's getting more difficult to preach. And that's because do you find it odd that the longer I preach, the more years that I'm at it, the less I know about it. I knew a lot about preaching say 10 years ago. I knew what was required for a good sermon. I knew a lot more about preaching 20 years ago. But the longer I preach, the less I seem to understand about why sermons work or why sermons don't work. I've had on a number of occasions, all too many, the experience of working hard on a sermon and doing everything right, working with the Biblical text, studying the text, exegizing the text, working with it, working it up to sermon, a well-ordered sermon with appropriate illustrations. Then I'm up in the pulpit and I'm preaching and I'm preaching and I look up from my notes, and you're dying. I can see that you're dying. They're bringing in stretchers, they're taking out people on stretchers. People are faking chest pains and leaving. I can see that from where I am. And I think to myself, I look at those notes and I think why in the world did I get into this text. Why this sermon? What's wrong? But then even more confusing perhaps is the sermon that I intended to work on but there was first one thing and then another.

There was the annual mission trip to Myrtle Beach over spring break and then I got back into town late and then somebody was at the hospital and I had to be down at the hospital 'til late on Saturday night and so, then as I was watching late Saturday evening returns of Love Boat on the TV, I took out this envelope and I scribbled this sermon on the back of the envelope and then I get up in the pulpit on Sunday morning hoping no one will be there but alas people are there and I start preaching and I tell the story about the person who had journeyed away from home, he came back home after a long time, tied the yellow ribbon on the oak tree and then the other story about Ian Heavy's my brother and Christ has no has and I just pray that nobody's ever been to church before in their lives and has heard any of these stories. And then on the way out the door, as I'm prepared to say to people, "Look, "Arnold Palmer has an off day sometimes." (laughing) 52 Sundays a year. But then Mary Smith grasps my hand and she says, "Well, how did you know, "you always seem to know "me going in the hospital next week, "surgery, came here upset, "grief stricken and your word, "now I'm confident." And she is followed by John Davis and John says, "Well, I guess I don't have to tell you "that that had to be the best sermon "you've ever preached. "That was a wonderful sermon, a life-changing sermon. "I'm going to go home "and reevaluate my whole relationship with God. "Thank you for that sermon." And the preacher longs to stand there and call them back from the parking lot, Mary, John, what did you hear? You look at the notes on the back of that envelope. There's nothing there. (congregation laughing) What was it that you heard? What was there? What was it? And I can tell you as a preacher, it is tough. Week after week to give yourself to such an enterprise that you can't control. And that you can't predict and that you don't know about it. And I'm talking about experience not only in preaching but you've had in worship. The Sunday morning, maybe you're here this Sunday morning just like that, you got up this morning, you didn't feel like going to church but you told somebody you'd meet at five minutes to 11 out in front of the Chapel and you're hoping to get a date with her next weekend, so you thought, what the heck, I'll go ahead and go. And you're not feeling like worship and you don't have your mind on God or any of that but then in the service, was it the music, was it the hymns of prayer, what was it? Something got ahold of you. And you fumbled for a Kleenex and there's tears and when you leave, it's like you've been given wings and you just soar. Now what was that? What was that? It's so unpredictable. It's uncontrollable. When I was doing graduate work at Emory, a friend of mine did a study on the relationship of preaching to people's racial attitudes and he devised a questionnaire that would measure your attitudes on race. And then he administered this questionnaire to his congregation. And then he preached a series of four sermons in which he in some way Biblically subtly but pointedly would lift up the Christian response to the racial issue and then he administered the questionnaire to them at the end of the series. The results. His congregation was 3.2 points more racist after the sermons than they were before. And yet, there is this magazine in my denomination called "Engage Social Action" and a few years ago, this magazine asked leaders of my denomination, leaders in the cause of racial justice, people who'd given their lives to the fight what put you here, what brought you here in this struggle? And I was impressed, preacher that I am, I was impressed by how many of those people mentioned a sermon. I'm here because I heard something, I heard my name called in a sermon. I've sometimes called preaching an art. And yet if preaching is an art it has got to be the most fragile of the arts. My little words waft out over the congregation on a Sunday morning, they bounce off the walls, they alight here and there and then they die and all is silence. And when you hear a good sermon, you can't say to yourself at the end of the sermon, gosh, wasn't that great? Let's all get together here tomorrow, same time, same place, let's do it again. No, you just had to be there. It was a moment, it was an event. You just can't do it again. You just had to be there. And I envy my musicians. They've practiced

an art but at least they've got these notes on the page and while there're differences in various performances, nevertheless, they can do it again if they want to but not with a sermon, you can't really do it again, you can't get these people, these needs, this place all together again. It's fragile. And a few years ago I did a book on burnout among clergy and I tried to study clergy, who having once put their hand to Nepal looked back and they fell away, they dropped out of the ministry. And should I have been surprised that many clergy mentioned that one of the most debilitating, grinding task of ministry is preaching. There you are for 20 years chiseling out a sermon from the hard granite of the Biblical text with your raw hands and you preach and then it dies and then you preach again, it gets old. It is tough to give your life to an act that you can't control, you can't predict, you can't find the winning formula and repeat that Sunday after Sunday. Preaching is one of the toughest tasks of ministry. It's just, well, it's just so fragile. Late one night, a teacher, a professor, came to Jesus. And he said, "Jesus, we heard some great things about you. "We know that you must be sent from God. "Nobody can do the things that you do "unless God is with him. "Now Jesus, here is the question. "How do I get into the kingdom? "What do I have to do "to get this eternal life that you're talking about? "What do I have to do?" Jesus replied to Nicodemus, "Well, I have three points I want to say on that subject. (congregation laughing) "Point one, "you've got to be born anew." And Nicodemus said, "Again?" And Jesus said (speaking in foreign language). The Greek word (speaking in foreign language). You've got to be born from above. "Well, how?" Nicodemus persists. "How, how is it possible when you're old "and you're all grown up "and you've been around the block a couple of times, "how is it possible to go back "in your mama's womb and be born again?" And Jesus says, "Well, you've gotta have spirit." "Well, how?" And Jesus says, "Well, the wind, "the (speaking in foreign language) "blows where it will." And you find it interesting that when asked a simple, straightforward question, Jesus responds with this mysterious talk of wind and birth. That was Jesus, you ask him a simple straightforward how-to question and he gives you all the stuff about birth, about wind, about spirit. Nicodemus persists. "Jesus, what do you mean born anew?" Jesus said, "I didn't say anew, I said from above." The Greek word is (speaking in foreign language). You've got to be born (speaking in foreign language). It's the same word used in Matthew's Gospel when it says that when Jesus died, the veil of the temple was ripped from top to bottom. (speaking in foreign language) You've got to be born from top down. You've got to be born from the top. You've got to be worked over from the top down. You've got to be born (speaking in foreign language). Nicodemus persists. "Jesus, when you use the word (speaking in foreign language), "are you using it like in the ordinary sense "of wind, wind, (speaking in foreign language) "or are you using it "in a more illogically sophisticated sense of spirit?" And Jesus says, "Yes." (congregation laughing) And I tell you, God sent his only son into the world to give to the world. Jesus, are you using that Greek word (speaking in foreign language) in the kind of ordinary, everyday sense of gift? Or in the more theologically sophisticated sense of grace, Jesus says yes. Nicodemus says, "Gosh, I don't understand." Jesus says, "Now you're catching on, good." (congregation laughing) Don't you find it interesting that when asked a perfectly straightforward American utilitarian how-to question, Jesus responds by citing two of the most mysterious, uncontrollable, unpredictable experiences of life, birth, wind, what did you have to do to get born the first time? Well, getting into the kingdom is a lot like that. Call it (speaking in foreign language), call it grace, gift. The wind, the wind, Jesus says, blows where it will. You can't control it, you can't contain it, understand it. The wind blows where it will. Relax, Nicodemus, the wind blows where it will. The wind. And what I think about when I hear that passage of the wind blows where it will, I think about growing up in the deep South as a boy before the days of air conditioning and when the chores were done, everybody would sit out on the porch and you

would rock and you would talk at the end of a hot summer day. And as you were rocking and as you were talking, you would hear like the leaves of the trees rustle briefly and everybody would grow quiet and just sit back and you would savor the breeze and that cool evening breeze, it was grace. The wind blows where it will. When will we learn this difficult primal fact of our religious experience? We come here on Sunday morning and my image of us on Sunday morning is we all come here with our little notepads. All right, church, today here's your assignment, I want you to work on your sexism, your racism, be kind to sales clerks in department stores. Come back next week, I'll give you another assignment. Work on this for the week. But occasionally as we're busy posturing and wondering how if we look good and if we're doing well, and we got the program down right, occasionally, there is a disruptive breeze and somebody is refreshed and somebody is caught hold of in a new way and somebody is moving toward birth. And that's holy. I tell you, your relationship with God hangs by a slender thread of such grace, such gift. But the good news today is that that spirit, that spirit blows where it will. I remember, a few years ago, the last Sunday of the school year, last Sunday of the school year, I got a call at home on Sunday morning. Dr. Williman, are you up yet? I said yes, I'm up yet. What is it? And said just wanted you to know there's no electricity in the Chapel this morning. I said no electricity? Well, how dark is it? And the attendant said well, I had to use a flashlight to dial this number I'll tell you that. I said well, has the choir gotten there yet? And she said well, I can hear people moving down front, I don't know if they're choir or not. Well, I rushed over here, got over here and it was dark. Let me tell you, when the lights are out in the building, it is dark. So, we had to quickly rearrange the whole service. We couldn't use the organ, so we had to drag in a piano, we had to think of some hymns that you could sing without having to see the Hymnal and then I said go down to the storage room and start bringing these candles up. And we went down there and all the used candles we could carry we brought up and people started helping and we put a candle on every flat surface we could find. We had a dozen candles up around the pulpit. We had candle over on the lectern, we had candles in the windows and after illuminating about 285 candles, we brought the level of illumination in this building up to like downtown Durham at 3 a.m. It was dark. (congregation laughing) And then just as we got all the candles in place and we'd gotten the service reworked, at a quarter of 11, the lights came back on. (congregation laughing) So, this meant that as people arrived here, they were greeted to a fully illuminated building with these 285 candles everywhere. Some sophomore comes in and says, "Gosh, candles, what sort of liturgical innovation "have you got in mind for us this Sunday?" I said, "Sit down and shut up." And then the service went downhill from then on. Because the organist thought that we had changed the hymn but we didn't change the hymn since the organ was gonna be played, so we got the wrong hymn. I started down the procession, I'd forgotten to put on my robe in all of the ruckus and it was just the biggest mess and nothing went right and I said to God, if you let me out of this, I will never go back to this again, there's got to be an easier way to make money than this. There is no sense in having a church here in this place, it's crazy. But after everybody was filing out at the end of this service, there's this sophomore coming out saying, "Gosh, I liked the touch of those candles. "that was," "get out" and (congregation laughing) and I was ripping my robe off and I was ready to call it quits. And there were these three young women standing over to the side there and they came up and they said, "We wanted to wait to tell you "that this our last Sunday here in the chapel. "We're all graduating. "And as we were sitting here this morning, "as you were running about fiddling with the candles, "we were thinking to ourselves, "this Chapel, these sermons, this music "has been the best part of our whole time here. "And each one of use remembered "that at key moments in our four years here "when we were making tough decisions, "you were here and there was just the right word "and we just wanted to

say thank you. "It's made all the difference." And I didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. I mean, I mean I didn't know whether to thank God for that or to be angry, to be reminded again that it's not in my hands, it's in God's hands. I tell you, it's tough preaching, listening to sermons, worshiping, and our faith hangs by this slender thread of grace, this (speaking in foreign language). But the good news is that the spirit blows where it will and through these thick gothic walls that day, despite everything, I felt a breeze. (choir singing)

Minister: The Lord be with you.

Congregation: And also with you.

- Let us pray. Oh breath of life, come sweeping through us. Revive your church with life and power. Oh breath of life, come, cleanse, renew us that we might be born from above. Make us anew from top to bottom. Make us truly yours that we might be fit to be your people, your church in the world. Blow, wind of God. With wisdom, blow until our minds are free from mists of error, clouds of doubt which blind our eyes to you. Open our eyes that we might see and our hearts that we might understand. We try so hard to secure our own salvation but whatever we do, more is never enough. Teach us that salvation, like life, is a gift, one we can never earn but a gift you desire to give us in spite of our unworthiness. Spirit of the living God, we give thanks for your eternal love which washes over us like cool, clear water, a love that touches us so deeply that we know we have received nothing less than the gift of yourself. How can we ever thank you for your self-giving through your son Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior? We stand in awe of your graciousness but we receive your breath of love with gratitude and anticipation. With hopeful hearts, we await the blowing of your spirit among us. How will you change us? What will our world, our community, our church, our lives look like when we've been born from above? Surely the human tragedies that surround us of poverty, violence and greed will be transformed. Surely our own self-centeredness and fear will fall away as we are filled with your spirit of self-giving love. We are ready for you to make us anew, Lord. We are ready for you to do with us as you will that we might be filled with your love and joy and power, your righteousness and peace. Make us reflections of Christ that our lives might speak of your love and your grace. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen. God has given us the gift of life and love and surrounded us with abundant resources. Will we express our thanks in token offerings or in an outpouring of ourselves. (tranquil music) (choir singing) (dramatic organ music) (choir singing)

- Let us pray. Gracious God, because you gave Jesus Christ as a gift to the world, we bring our gifts to you. Because you have loved us, we renew our commitment to share love with all your people. Because you are even now renewing our spirits and bringing us rebirth from above, we pour out our thanksgiving. The gifts we dedicate here have always belonged to you, the wealth we retain for our own use is yours as well. Oh, Holy Spirit, use all that we have and all that we are to move your world from death to life. Amen. Let us pray together in the unity of the spirit, the prayer that Jesus Christ taught us.

A]: 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. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever. Amen. (lively organ music) (congregation singing)