

- Who is assistant professor of liturgics at Duke Divinity School as our guest preacher today. We also express our gratitude to The Raleigh Ringers and their director doctor David Harris for their musical leadership in the service of worship. Let us continue our worship together as you 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.

Congregation: And my mouth shall bring forth praise. (organ playing) (congregation in unison singing) ♪
When I survey the wondrous cross ♪ ♪ On which the Prince of glory died ♪ ♪ My richest gain I count but loss ♪
♪ And pour contempt on all my pride ♪ ♪ Forbid it Lord that I should boast ♪ ♪ Save in the death of Christ my
God ♪ ♪ All the vain things that charm me most ♪ ♪ I sacrifice them to his blood ♪ ♪ See from his head, his
hands, his feet ♪ ♪ Sorrow and love flow mingled down ♪ ♪ Did ever such love and sorrow meet ♪ ♪ Or thorns
compose so rich a crown ♪ ♪ His dying crimson like a robe ♪ ♪ Spreads over his body on the tree ♪ ♪ And all
the globe is dead to me ♪ ♪ Were the whole realm of nature mine ♪ ♪ That were a present far too small ♪ ♪
Love so amazing so divine ♪ ♪ Demands my soul, my life, my all ♪

- Let us pray. God of all glory on this first day you began creation bringing light out of darkness. On this first day you began your new creation raising Jesus Christ out of the darkness of death. On this Lord's day grant that we the people you create by water and the spirit maybe joined with all your works and praising you for your great glory. Through Jesus Christ in union with the Holy Spirit we praise you now and forever, Amen. You may be seated.

- Let us join together in the Prayer for Illumination.

Everybody: 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. Our Old Testament lesson and the text for the sermon this morning is from Isaiah chapter 55 verses 1-13. Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters and you that have no money come buy and eat. Come buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me and eat what is good and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear and come to me, listen so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant my steadfast sure love for David, see I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. See, you shall call nations that you do not know and nations that do not know you shall run to you because of the Lord your God, the Holy one of Israel, for he has glorified you. Seek the Lord while he maybe found call upon him while he is near, let the wicked forsake their way and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them return to the Lord that he may have mercy upon them and to our God for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts nor are my ways your ways, says the Lord. For as the Heavens are higher than the Earth so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the

snow come down from Heaven and do not return there until they have watered the Earth making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth. It shall not return to me empty but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. For you shall go out in joy and be lead back in peace the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off. This is the word of the Lord.

Congregation: (unison) Thanks be to God. Will you please rise as we join together in Psalm number 63 which is found on page 788 of the hymnal. Let us read responsively. Oh God you are my God I seek you my soul thirst for you, my flesh faints for you as in a dry and weary land where no water is.

Congregation: So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary beholding your power and glory.

- Because your steadfast love is better than life my lips will praise you.

Congregation: So I will bless you as long as I live in your name I will lift up my hands.

- My soul is feasted as with marrow and fat and my mouth praises you with joyful lips when I think of you upon my bed and meditate on you in the watches of the night.

Congregation: For you have been my help and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy, my soul clings to you, your right hand upholds me.

- But those who seek to destroy my life shall go down into the depths of the earth.

Congregation: They shall be given over to the power of swords, they shall be a portion for jackals.

- But the king shall rejoice in God.

Congregation: All who swear by him shall exalt for the mouths of liars will be stopped. (organ music playing)
♪ Glory be to our Creator ♪ ♪ Praise to our Redeemer, Lord ♪ ♪ Glory be to our Sustainer ♪ ♪ Ever three and ever one ♪ ♪ As it was in the beginning ♪ ♪ Ever shall be ♪

- Please be seated.

- Our epistle lesson this morning is from First Corinthians chapter 10 verses 1-13. I do not want you to be unaware brothers and sisters that our ancestors were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. And all ate the same spiritual food and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them and the rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them and they were struck down in the wilderness. Now these things occurred as examples for us so that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not become

idolaters as some of them did. As it is written the people sat down to eat and drink and they rose up to play. We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did and 23,000 fell in a day. We must not put Christ to the test as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents. And do not complain as some of them did and were destroyed by the destroyer. These things happened to serve as an example and they were written down to instruct us on whom the ends of the ages have come. So if you think you are standing watch out that you do not fall, no testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength but with the testing he will also provide the way out, so that you may be able to endure it. This is the word of the Lord.

Congregation: (unison) Thanks be to God. (angelic bell playing)

- Our gospel lesson is from Luke chapter 13 verses 1-9. At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you, but unless you repent you will all perish as they did. Or those 18 who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them. Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you, but unless you repent you will all perish just as they did. Then he told this parable, a man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. He said to the gardener, see here for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree and still I find none, cut it down. Why should it be wasting the soil? He replied, sir let it alone for one more year until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year well and good but if not you can cut it down. This is the word of the Lord.

Congregation: (unison) Thanks be to God.

- Come to the waters, buy without money and without price, hearken diligently, incline your ear and come. Seek the Lord, call upon the Lord, return to the Lord, go out in joy, be led forth in peace. These words of the prophet Isaiah in chapter 55 practically shout themselves off the page. They demand that we stop and listen that we harken and incline our ears. These words come from no mealy-mouthed preacher, no conformer to the status quo but from a man of fire and conviction. This is a prophet who is compelled to speak about a God who acts, about a God who still moves among his people though often unrecognized. This prophet commanded the attention of the people of Israel around 550 B.C., who awaited return from exile in Babylon and he demands our attention today. Isaiah calls to a complacent people many of whom have turned from the God of their ancestors and accepted the persuasive gods of the popular culture. He compels those whose faith has dimmed or is dimming to reconsider the true source and fountainhead of all of life. He challenges his hearers to avoid the assumption that God's work is only something of the past and that God is unlikely to do something new in the future. Do not rest on your laurels he says. Do not dwell solely on the past for the day of return is coming and now is the time for you to act. The urgency of Isaiah's message has not faded over time, these words spoken to a people whose bones have long since turned to dust are also words spoken directly to us in our time and in our circumstances. And it is appropriate that we hear again these words during the season of Lent. A time when we who are Christians recall how often we have strayed from obedience to God's will and from affirming God's active presence in our world. The content of Isaiah chapter 55 focuses upon the change of heart God requires for persons who wish to be faithful. And the

structure of the chapter itself forms a model for the message. There is a clear movement in this chapter, a movement in which we can divide into three parts and label thematically. These parts can be identified as invitation, exhortation and blessing. Invitation, exhortation and blessing. The first part is the invitation. The prophet issues imperative verbs in rapid fire inviting the listeners to hear his case and to consider the poverty of their lives compared to the richness of God's grace. Ho, everyone who thirst come to the waters! Though this is not a call to spend spring break at Myrtle or Daytona rather this is an invitation to seek life. The prophet's commands to come to the waters, come buy and eat, evoke images of a market where stalls line a narrow street. Shrill voices pierce the den of the crowd as vendors cajole passersby into examining goods for sale with promises of fine quality or for you a special price. And is it not a myriad of voices that call to us today in our global marketplace with promises of material success, fulfillment, contentment, we are constantly bombarded with ways to improve ourselves. Whether it be self help groups, dietary and exercise plans, the latest computer software and electronic gadgetry or even dialing 1-900 to receive a personal horoscope. These tempt and tease. How is a person to choose? Above all of this commotion and uncertainty is heard the stern voice of the prophet, listen attentively says the prophet. Listen attentively and learn incline your ear and hear that your soul may live. Why spend your hard earned wages for that which ultimately does no good for your body or souls, says he? Why should one be satisfied with the stagnant or stale, the transient or ephemeral? That which is essential to life you can not purchase only God can provide water that truly slakes that deep down body thirst. Only God can bring forth food that nourishes the soul and here the prophet essentially paraphrases the sentiment of the psalmist who prayed as a heart longs for the flowing streams so longs my soul for thee of Lord. My soul thirsts for God for the living God. How then does one receive that which can truly satisfy? How can one respond to the prophets invitation? By seeking and returning, says the prophet. And he exhorts those who would hear to repent this is the second part of the three fold movement, exhortation. Seek the Lord while he may be found call upon him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake their way and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them return to the Lord that he may have mercy on them and to our God for he will abundantly pardon. Lest the question should be raised why one should repent the prophet continues, for my thoughts are not your thoughts nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. Seeking and returning, making an about-face back to God. A person repents in recognition that we are but creatures fashioned by the hand of, yet in the likeness of a sovereign creator. Repentance results from a realization that in our desire to live we often rely on our own devices, on our own best efforts and on the seductive offers for fulfillment that others extend to us. The graciousness of God is often usurped by the notion that we can do it all ourselves, that we can pull ourselves up by our own boot straps. Isaiah warns us that we must never be so self assured so as to leave no room for the work or the mercy of God. This call to repentance exhorted by the prophet is echoed in the two New Testament lessons read this morning. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians warns against spiritual complacency and self assurance. So if you think you are standing, he says, watch out that you do not fall. The words of Jesus reported in the Gospel according to Luke are much more incriminating and demanding, unless you repent you will all perish. Just as a fig tree that bears no fruit is cut down lest it waste the good nutrients of the soil so too, says Jesus, persons who do not bear the fruits of repentance ultimately perish. These are harsh words. Words our 20th Century postmodern, post-enlightenment ears simply do not want to hear but yet they are basic to the life promised by God. For those who repent and seek the Lord comes the recognition that what the Lord promises will be fulfilled. Blessing comes to those who hear who acknowledge the

sovereignty of God and who humble themselves before him. And this is the third part of the structure, blessing. The prophet says, that what goes forth from the mouth of the Lord does not come back empty but grows, flourishes to accomplish that which the Lord intends. And what does the Lord intend? What are the blessings the Lord desires that the penitent receive? At least three blessings are indicated, pardon, fruitfulness and joy. Abundant pardon, abundant pardon comes as a gift from God. Though we are undeserving the richness of God's mercy creates in us clean hearts and renews a right spirit within us. We are made right with God not through any of our own doing but because of the depth of God's love. Fruitfulness, fruitfulness of for the penitent is akin to the fruitfulness of God's word. The prophet compares the sustaining power of God's word to the productive germination and growth of seeds following the rain and yet the fruitfulness of the penitent is not identified simply by growth but by good and beneficial growth. The prophet says, instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress, instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle, the blessing of fruitfulness is the blessing of faithfulness. Joy, joy issues forth from the acknowledgment of God's love and from thankfulness for the blessings of God but this joy is not simply or solely an individual or personal joy it is a joy that shakes the foundation of the earth and causes all of creation to shout and sing. It is a joy that leads to a peace that passes all understanding. For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Invitation, exhortation, blessing. These are the ways God has acted and continues to act toward us. And this promise of action has been claimed and continues to be claimed by the church. As the last stanza of the hymn we will sing shortly states in Isaiah's inspiration it is Jesus we have heard. Indeed the church throughout the ages has heard Isaiah's words as Jesus's words and hence they have become the words of the church. From the time of the early church Isaiah 55 has been used as a reading during Lent or on Holy Saturday. Lent you may recall was the season when baptismal candidates made their final preparations before taking the plunge. The three fold movement marked by Isaiah was imitated in the ritual passage expected of persons who anticipated taking upon themselves the name and responsibility of Christian. And this movement marks also the three fold discipline of a fruitful Christian life. First of all, God's word must be heard as an invitation that word, the word that goes forth and does not return empty is the dynamic and powerful message of the Gospel. And just as the word of God is active and dynamic, so too our hearing is to be active and dynamic. This is certainly clear by the word choice found in Isaiah 55, harken, incline, behold, see, such active hearing is not found in the casual listening to a preacher on Sunday morning or in the bedtime reading of the Bible. Rather it is found in the inward digestion and appropriation of the good news that God so loved the world that the only begotten Son was given for our redemption. Hearing is followed by a second action, exhortation to repentance. From the work of the Herald of Christ, John the Baptist to the ministry of the disciples in Acts we hear again and again and again the charge to repent and believe in the good news. Repentance is not just a spiritual discipline of Lent it is a characteristic of the entire Christian life. Repentance leads us and leads us back to the baptismal waters the waters pre-figured in the invitation of Isaiah. Repentance is more than a one time act it is required through out our Christian journey. During special seasons like Lent, during the baptisms of other persons and when we renew our own baptisms. And it is necessary everyday as we face up to the fact that our lives are not truly lived in imitation of Jesus Christ. The blessing, the third action, comes through God's own bountiful sustenance which is first given after baptism and then continued throughout the Christian journey. We partake of the bread which can satisfy like no other which is the Body of Christ. We take into ourselves the wine which no money can buy which is the Blood of Christ. These are gifts that equip us so

that we like Gods word may accomplish that which God purposes and prosper in the things for which God sends us. Come to the waters, incline your ear and come Seek the Lord, bring forth and sprout new life, go out in joy and be led forth in peace. This is the invitation we have been offered. This is the exhortation we must heed. This is the blessing we have been promised. Thanks be to God.

Congregation: (unison) Thanks be to God. (organ music playing) (congregation singing) ♪ Seek the Lord who now is present ♪ ♪ Pray to One who is at hand ♪ ♪ Let the wicked cease from sinning ♪ ♪ Evildoers change their mind ♪ ♪ On the sinful God has pity ♪ ♪ Those returning God forgives ♪ ♪ This is what the Lord is saying ♪ ♪ To a world that disbelieves ♪ ♪ Judge me not by human standards ♪ ♪ As the vault of heaven soars ♪ ♪ High above the earth so higher ♪ ♪ Are my thoughts and ways than yours ♪ ♪ See how rain and snow from heaven ♪ ♪ Make earth blossom and bare fruit ♪ ♪ Giving you before returning ♪ ♪ Seed for sowing, bread to eat ♪ ♪ So My word returns not fruitless ♪ ♪ Does not from its labors cease ♪ ♪ Til it has achieved My purpose ♪ ♪ In a world of joy and peace ♪ ♪ God is love, how close the prophet ♪ ♪ To that vital gospel word ♪ ♪ In Isaiah's inspiration ♪ ♪ It is Jesus we have heard ♪

- The Lord be with you.

Congregation: (unison) And also with you.

- Let us pray you may be seated. Oh Lord our God, the author and giver of all good things we thank you for all your mercies and for your loving care over all your creatures we bless you for the gift of life and the renewal of life. We are especially grateful for those times and places when your spirit has been like a long drink of cool water for our parched unquenchable thirst. We give thanks for spiritual food that satisfies when nothing else can touch our need. We pray that your spirit might touch us once again this morning, wash over all of the dried out places of our lives that we might be refreshed by your love. Prune us of all that is dead that new life you would give us might grow. And feed us with your word that we might flourish and be made strong in you. Lord in your mercy

Everybody: (unison) hear our prayer. Almighty God, through your spirit you pray for us and you teach us to pray for others, show us your will for our lives and give us the courage to obey with confidence that in all things you desire our good. Lord in your mercy

Everybody: (unison) hear our prayer.

- Reveal to us those in our lives who need our prayers. We pray that your will may be accomplished for them and that we might faithfully respond to their need in the ways that you show us. Lord in your mercy

Everybody: (unison) hear our prayer.

- We pray especially for those who suffer trauma in body or mind that they may be healed. Lord in your mercy

Everybody: (unison) hear our prayer.

- For those whose livelihood is insecure the over worked, the hungry, the homeless and the destitute that they may know security of body and mind. Lord in your mercy

Everybody: (unison) hear our prayer.

- For children whose surroundings hide them from your love and beauty that they may be valued as your own beloved children. Lord in your mercy

Everybody: (unison) hear our prayer.

- For those who have to bare their burdens alone that they may know Christian fellowship and the communion of your spirit. Lord in your mercy

Everybody: (unison) hear our prayer.

- For those who have lost loved ones that they may be comforted and know the hope of eternal life. Lord in your mercy

Everybody: (unison) hear our prayer.

- For those who are in doubt and anguish of soul that they may find peace. Lord in your mercy

Everybody: (unison) hear our prayer.

- Come among us Lord, come that we might be filled with your spirit and bound with your love make our thoughts your thoughts and our ways your ways change us from barren people to people that bare fruit as your blessed children in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen. Let us offer ourselves and our gifts (unison) in thanksgiving to the Lord. (organ playing) (angelic bell playing) (organ playing) ♪ 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 ♪

- Let us pray. Almighty God giver of every good and perfect gift teach us to render to you all that we have and all that we are that we may praise you not with our lips only but with our whole lives. Turning the duties, the sorrows and the joys of all our days into a living sacrifice to you through our savior Jesus Christ who taught us to prayer together saying,

Everybody: (unison) 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 playing) ♪ Jesus keep me near the cross ♪ ♪

There's a precious fountain ♪ ♪ Free to all a healing stream ♪ ♪ Flows from Calvary's mountain ♪ ♪ In the cross ♪ ♪ In the cross ♪ ♪ Be my glory ever ♪ ♪ Till my raptured soul shall find ♪ ♪ Rest beyond the river ♪ ♪ Near the cross a trembling soul ♪ ♪ Love and mercy found me ♪ ♪ There the bright and morning star ♪ ♪ Sheds its beams around me ♪ ♪ In the cross ♪ ♪ In the cross ♪ ♪ Be my glory ever ♪ ♪ Till my raptured soul shall find ♪ ♪ Rest beyond the river ♪ ♪ Near the cross Oh lamb of God ♪ ♪ Bring its scenes before me ♪ ♪ Help me walk from day to day ♪ ♪ With its shadow on me ♪ ♪ In the cross ♪ ♪ In the cross ♪ ♪ Be my glory ever ♪ ♪ Till my raptured soul shall find ♪ ♪ Rest beyond the river ♪ ♪ Near the cross I'll watch and wait ♪ ♪ Hoping, trusting ever ♪ ♪ Til I reach the golden strand ♪ ♪ Just beyond the river ♪ ♪ In the cross ♪ ♪ In the cross ♪ ♪ Be my glory ever ♪ ♪ Till my raptured soul shall find ♪ ♪ Rest beyond the river ♪

- Go forth in peace to serve God and your neighbor in all that you do may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you and keep you. Amen. (organ playing)