

(gospel hymns music) (contemporary gospel music) (contemporary gospel music continues) (gospel hymns music)

- God saw fit in his infinite love and mercy, to send Jesus Christ into the world as its Redeemer, it is necessary and right then that we acknowledge our need for the redemption which God has off for us. Let together confess our sins.

- Oh God, we begin our pilgrimage toward Christmas. Our hearts rejoice in the glad tidings of Jesus, born in Bethlehem to be the savior of all the world, yet with all our joy, we know there is much in us that deafens our ears to the sound of angel anthems. Much that blinds us to the sight of guiding stars amid the darkness. Much that crowds our hearts and minds, leaving little room for the humbler benedictions of this life. If repentance can purify our hope. If for this season, we may become pure-hearted. If now in this place, we can welcome you with all our soul and all our strength. Then grace us with your most wondrous blessing through Jesus Christ, who was born in the winter's dark to be the light of the world forever. Amen.

- Let each of us now continue his or her individual confession. It will be said on that day. Lo this is our God. We have waited for Him that He might save us. This is the Lord, we have waited for Him. Let us be glad and rejoice in His salvation. (contemporary gospel music) (gospel hymns music) (contemporary gospel music) (contemporary gospel music continues) (contemporary gospel music rises)

- Let us hear the word of God. As it is written in Isaiah chapter 40:1-11. "'Comfort, comfort my people,' says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her. That her warfare is ended. That her inequity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand to double for all her sins. A voice cries in the wilderness, 'prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low. The uneven ground shall become level, and the rough place a plane. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed. And all flesh shall see it together for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.' A voice says, 'cry.' And I said, 'what shall I cry?' 'All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows upon it. Surely the people is grass. The grass withers, the flower fades. But the word of our God and forever.' Get you up to a high mountain O Zion herald of good tidings. Lift up your voice with strength of O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings. Lift it up, fear not. Say to the cities of Judah, 'behold your God' Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and His arm rules for Him. Behold, His reward is with Him, and His recompense before Him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd. He will gather the lambs in his arms. He will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young." Maybe stand for the reading of the gospel. This is Luke chapter 2:8-14. "And in that region, there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them. And they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, 'be not afraid for behold I bring you good news of a great joy, which will come to all the people. For to you as born this day in the city of David, a savior

who is Christ the Lord, and this will be a sign for you. You will find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel, a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'glory to God in the highest, and earth peace among men with whom he is pleased.'" May God bless this reading of the word. (contemporary gospel music)

- Let us affirm our faith.

- We are not alone. We live in God's world. We believe in God, who has created and is creating. Who has come in the truly human Jesus, to reconcile and make new. Who works in us and others by the spirit. We trust God who calls us to be the church, to celebrate life in its fullness. To love and serve others. To seek justice and resist evil. To proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope. In life, in death, in life beyond death. God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God.

- At this time of year, when many of us are looking forward to sharing the joys of this season with our families. We should remember that for some families, the Christmas message of hope, is especially important in helping them to deal with a crisis. In particular, the family of 17 year old Derek Devito of Fanwood, New Jersey, has just learned that Derek has leukemia. We have been asked to offer a special prayer today for Derek and his family. And as we pray now, and throughout this Christmas season. I ask that you especially remember Derek in your prayers. The Lord be with you.

- And with your spirit.

- Let us pray. Oh, God of love who sent your Son Jesus Christ to be the light of the world, that all who follow Him and might not walk in darkness, but have the light of life. We ask your mercy and blessing upon the sick, the sorrowful, the lonely, the tempted. That they may know your healing and sanctifying power, and may obtain the victory of faith. We ask especially that you grant your healing, grace, to Derek Devito. That he may know your strength, your mercy, and your restoring love. We remember also that we must include ourselves among those for whom we pray. We cannot be as the pharisee who looked upon the poor man and prayed, "God, I thank you that I am not as other men are, extortion, unjust adulterers or even as this poor man." Lord, we know when we are honest with ourselves that we are as other men and women. And what we ask of you for them, we need just as much as they do. So this morning, as we pray for others, we pray for ourselves as well. We beseech you to have compassion upon our infirmities. And to give us strength for the tasks ahead. To those giving and grading exams and term papers, grant wisdom, justice, understanding, and mercy. To those taking exams and writing papers, grant knowledge, honesty, a clear mind, a calm spirit, and the ability to keep the whole enterprise in the proper perspective, important, but not ultimate. Almighty God, we give you most humble and sincere thanks for all your goodness and loving-kindness to us, and to all people. We praise you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this season. We thank you for this beautiful campus, for the joys of advent and for the expectations of Christmas. We thank you most of all, for your infinite love in the redemption of the world, by our Lord Jesus Christ. Keep us mindful of the true reason we are celebrating this occasion. And help us to become so caught up in the tinsel and gift wrap, that we forget to be grateful for your gift to us through your son. Help us to show our gratitude and praise, not only with our lips, but with our whole lives. Indeed, dear God, let our entire existence be a celebration of the

love you have shown to us, and have commanded that we show to our fellow men and women. Lord of life we ask that you be with those of us who will be traveling, to near and distant places in the weeks to come. Bring us safely back to Duke, relaxed, refreshed, and ready once again, to perform the tasks for which you have called us to be in this place. Bring us all to the new life you have granted us in Jesus Christ. And keep us ever mindful that wherever we might be, we stand unfailingly in your presence. We ask all these things in the name of the one whose birth we are celebrating, who taught us to pray together.

- 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.

- Before beginning the sermon, may I invite your attention to the insert in the bulletin for today. And ask you to respond to either of these pleas for help, for the sharing of Christmas with others. You can read the announcements for yourself. I hope that many of you indeed will respond so that others may share the gifts from your love in this holy season. I wonder if you are aware of the very important role that darkness plays in the story of Christmas. It was a dark stable in the dead of night. Where the traditional Christmas story began. There was a darkened sky overarching the shepherds, which was shattered by the glory of the angel. A midnight sky sets off the star, which leads the wise men to the place where Jesus lay. Christmas as we have received it is indeed essentially a festival of the night. And we seem to have an instinct for this. People often crowd our churches in the darkness of Christmas Eve, where candles shine in a shadowy church, or even in this chapel. But very few of us would go to a Christmas day service, celebrated in broad daylight. And to be sure a lot of this perhaps is pure sentiment, candles do look pretty. Christmas day services do interfere with family celebrations. And it is a bit stimulating to troop off the church in the darkness of Eve. But there is more to this than tradition or sentiment. There is a real sense in which the symbolism of darkness is essential. If we are to understand and to experience what Christmas is all about. And as a matter of fact, one of our real difficulties here and now in preparing for Christmas, is that there are perhaps too many lights around us, in store windows, in decorations along the streets, in windows, in front yards, even already, on the quad. Christmas lights everywhere. Perhaps it's a little bit too gay and too well lighted all too soon. Or we all know that hope is born in the darkened corner of a dead-end street. This is authentic. This we know. And at Christmas hope is given a voice, and the voice of Christmas is heard more distinctly and more clearly in the darkest of darkness. Indeed, I'm convinced that this is the way the voice of God is always heard most distinctly and most clearly namely, in the dark. Now I'd like for just a few moments to take you back 100s of years prior to the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. Where we might hear the words of a prophet who himself heard voices in the dark. If we can indeed get back there, it may help us to prepare for this Christmas in a way that no amount of bustling about or hanging out lights or shopping for presents or mailing out Christmas cards and all of the rest can ever possibly do. So it was. For 50 years, the chosen people of God, the Jewish people, had been living in exile in Babylon. 50 years and my friends that's a long time in any person's life almost two generations. Most of the people alive in exile had never known the glories of Jerusalem, the gleaming city which God had made known to them with its temple. With its place of the holy of holies where they knew that God was truly present. There had been no voice from God in this strange and godless land for half a century now. Not even a whisperer had they heard. So they sat in

darkness, by the rivers of Babylon, and wept, longing for a voice, even a whisperer would do a voice that God was still alive, that He still cared, that He was still faithful to the covenant which He had made with the generations of their peoples before. Or had all of that been delusion, or deception, or superstition, or legend. It is in this darkness of a people forgotten bewildered and disillusioned, that a prophet heard a voice soft, and clear. With the words with which Handel's Messiah begin comfort ye, comfort ye my people, speak ye tenderly. Tell them, he said that their exile is ended that their iniquity is pardoned. The voice broke in on their despair, just as softly and gently as a child being born centuries later, in the outbuildings of a little village. Away from the noisy jokes, and the laughter of the transients that were gathered in the tavern bar nearby. How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given. Now, it's not that God isn't concerned about the noisy transient at the bar. It's just that God's voice, the first voice we ever hear from on high comes to us more clearly in the dark moments of our lives. Is this really, so you ask this morning. Where in these busy frantic weeks before Christmas? Are we apt to hear the authentic voice of God? In the hurried rush of shopping? In the crowded pushing stores? In the noisy parties and joyful family reunions? Are you in the midst of exams and writing papers, as you think, even momentarily about the legends and the stories of Christmas? Quite possibly so. But possibly not however. Or the authentic voice of God is heard most clearly in the dark. Look around us for a moment if you will with me. Soak yourself in the real darkness of life, if you or I have the stomach for it. The unemployed man or woman walking, chilled and cold down the street, staring vacantly at nothing. The hospital or sick bed for the incurably ill where the patient simply ticks off the long drawn out minutes until the end. The dirt road dwellings just off main street in our town, where the poor seem hopelessly caught, in the web of political, social or racial structures that seem to offer them no hope whatsoever. Or if you prefer, simply listen to the daily newscast almost any day, we'll do yesterday or day before, or I'm sure even tomorrow. A tornado hits, fire breaks out, families are homeless. Federal aid bills to help those who need help get locked in committees in Washington. A grand jury investigates school charges in one county, or committees on a university campus, study labor charges pro and con. 18 person die over the holiday weekend. Three persons bodies are found buried in South Carolina and more perhaps yet to be found. Then in the darkness of this day, listen to that still voice, comfort ye, comfort ye my people, speak ye tenderly saith our God. Is this really the voice of God? Does God really care? Our only assurance, is that this is the way God's voice spoke in the child Jesus. No lights in the door to welcome Him. Shut out into the darkness, hounded by Herod, finally spat upon, betrayed, denied, crucified, well. What is this? The voice of God? Or is it a fairy story for us and for our children? Phillips Brooks who has written one of the most treasured of Christmas carols knew what it was about yet in the dark streets, shineth the everlasting light. The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight. Notice if you will, that even though the prophet hears more than one voice in the darkness. The first voice that he hears, is the voice of comfort, of assurance. Oh, he heard other voices too as they in the dark. But the first voice in the dark was that of the assurance of God's love. And if I understand the Christian faith at all, and the Old Testament and the New Testament at all. This is how God always speaks to us, in assurance and in comfort first of all. Strange, isn't it? How we and the church have distorted this, and have turned it almost upside down. Nine out of 10 persons, I would predict whether in the church or out of the church will tell you that the church requires something of you. That religion is a chore or a burden that God comes with a demand in His fist. Oh, how some of us have mangled the message of the good news. Or at every step of the way. In both the Old Testament and in the New Testament, it is the voice of comfort ye, comfort ye my people, which comes first. God delivered His people from slavery before he gave the 10 commandments. The gift of the child at

Bethlehem came before the call for us to take up the cross and follow Him. God does make His demand and will come to that. But first, always first, is the assurance of God's faithful love present with us. We can receive that assurance of love. Hear the voice of comfort most clearly when we are walking in the darkness. at a time when anything that is demanded of us would bring only frustration, and perhaps even despair. Initially, God asks nothing, say that we be prepared, that we be ready to receive His love. But then there is a second voice. "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord." A voice of demand. And the whole true truth is that we are really unable to receive the love without the demand. Psychiatrist was writing just recently about a youngster, with whom he was counseling, who had a serious emotional problem. And the youngster described his problem in these words, according to the psychiatrist. "My parents never tell me what to do, or what not to do. They always let me do whatever I like. I wish I were free like other boys." Love that makes no demands is not love. Love that includes a demand, paradoxically sets us free. The only way that these folks could receive the voice of assurance was to act on the voice of demand "in the wilderness prepare." A crazy kind of demand here, they were lonely, cut off from home, surrounded by pagans, who didn't know God, didn't care about God. And yet they had found in this place among themselves and with the sense of God's presence, some sense of security. And now the voice was telling them to forgo all of this and head back to the wilderness, and back to what? To a Jerusalem that had been sacked and had been ruined. It made no sense at all. It's no wonder that most of them said, "no, thanks God, will stay right here in Babylon." It seems that this is always the way the voice of God speaks in the midst of our wilderness and confusion, and darkness. Is precisely where of God's love makes its demand. And it's not surprising that a lot of us too, would rather sit tight, in our own little comfort and security, shut our ears and eyes to the confusing and frightening wilderness around us, and cultivate a cozy kind of religion, which is content simply to show up at worship. To give a little money, and to verbalize our concern about the world beyond. In the midst of it all, we cultivate a wistful picture of God who somehow, if we play it safe, we'll see to it that the wilderness will take care of itself, and it will come through it all untouched and unharmed. But as someone has said on the back of a voice, which sets one's heart, right with God, namely comfort ye, comfort ye. Comes a voice to set the world right, "in the wilderness prepare." And no one is godly who has not heard both. And is it any wonder that for many of us who as we recall that yesterday was the anniversary? The 31st anniversary of the bombing of Pearl Harbor? Is there any need for anyone to say anymore than to be reminded of that? And to recall that surely God's call comes for us to set right the world out there. What is more, one can really know the comfort and assurance of God's love only as one has answered his demand, in the wilderness of life to prepare. For the question really is, is God's love sovereign over all of life? Or isn't it? Is there a loving purpose to be found in all of the bewildering problems of life around us in this latter part of the 20th century? Or isn't there? What is the use of a divine love? That gives me the assurance and the hope of my... in the midst to of my own personal problems and perplexities. But has nothing at all to do with feeding the hungry. Nothing to do with families crowded into huddles. Nothing to do with the dignity of a person whose skin happens to be a little bit darker or lighter than mine. If the love of God is not seen as sovereign in the wilderness of personal lives, and also in the wilderness of our communities and our nations. Then I'm convinced we are not really seeing the love of God. Well, you might say then, does this mean that we as Christians are to have all the answers to life's problems? Knotty and big as they are? No, not at all. For listen, if you will, to the prophet again. Because there's a strange and yet a powerful twist to what the prophet says in the demand to prepare. "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. And then every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain shall be brought

low. The uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plane." Now, do you see the twist? Following the demand to prepare, the demand to give ourselves to love, and justice in the wilderness, is the assurance that God is in it, solving the problems and removing the obstacles. We don't lift the valleys. We don't bring down the mountains. We don't level off the rough places. It is God who does that. We're not called to build the kingdom of God on earth. That is God's domain. We can reconcile estranged people or estranged groups in our country or community, or even on this campus. That's God's business, our part. Prophet says simply that the demand upon us is to prepare, to act, to be involved, to move out, to get with it, to get in it, to prepare right in the wilderness of life. And the rest is up to God. The rest is in the hands of Almighty God. This means that if we are to prepare, we are to respond to God's love with active involvement in the wilderness of the world around us. It certainly means that we cannot prepare by sitting tightly and lightly in the security of our comfortable pews or our pulpits, dreading and fearing the wilderness of our own lives, or fearing the wilderness that is out somewhere. No, does this seem a strange way to prepare for the coming of the Christ child at Christmas? Maybe so. Surely it seemed just as strange to those exiles in Babylon. But to those who didn't venture out on the basis of God's comfort ye, and who did move out and prepare the wilderness. They found the word of comfort from God to be quite real. God did care. God still cares. This is why as someone has said, "Christians can never be casual about Christmas. God is very present." Comfort ye, comfort ye, prepare ye the way, and I will level the hills and lift up the valleys. No matter how dark your night. No matter how black the wilderness which surrounds us. The voice that comes soft and clear. In the doom and the gloom, and the dark of the night. Is the voice, which says, "comfort ye, comfort ye my people." And as I thought about some closing words for this message today, I wondered what is it, that we as individuals and we as communities of people need. It's not to be made to feel guilty. It's not to have anger or hostility stirred up within us and among us. It's not that we should be made to be envious or jealous, or to seek more in life, materially or physically. I have a strange feeling, both from my own personal life and from the lives of others whose lives have touched mine. That the word, the message, which we stand in need of this advent 1975. Is to hear the word comfort ye, comfort ye. There is a need for peace of mind and peace of heart, and peace of body, even peace of soul, widespread among us. There are some lines in the great rich little treasure. The little prince. That I think have a Christmas advent message to them. Let me share them with you. At one point in this beautiful little narrative, the fox says to the little prince, "if you come at four o'clock, I shall begin to be happy at three o'clock." This is the message of advent. So that we can say, "oh God, if you are to come on Christmas day, or on any day on which we can rely, or at any moment which we can trust, I can begin to be happy right now." And then there's another line in the little prince, where the little prince himself says, "what makes the desert so beautiful?" Is that somewhere out there, there is a well. That's the story, the message of advent. What makes life so beautiful? What makes the world beautiful in the midst of its tragedy? Is that somewhere out there, there is a well. There is a well spring of life. There is Christ, comfort ye, comfort ye my people. And God's name be praised. Amen. (contemporary gospel music) (contemporary gospel music continues) (contemporary gospel music rises) (contemporary gospel music continues) (contemporary gospel music rises) (contemporary gospel music continues) Oh God, of all the earth, you who knew eat nothing we can give. As we present these token gifts to you this morning. And as we exchange our gifts with each other in the weeks to come. Keep us mindful of the greatest gift of all, the gift of love you have given us in Jesus Christ our savior. And grant that we may live our lives in a manner worthy of that gift. Amen. (contemporary gospel music) (contemporary gospel music continues) Now may the God of love who sent our savior Jesus Christ into the world, that we might have life

abundantly, both now and forever. Fill your hearts with peace and joy, and go with you as you strive to do that, which is right and pleasing in the side of God. (gospel hymns music) (contemporary gospel music)