

(chiming music) (pages turning) (bells ringing) (pages turning)

- Good morning and welcome to this service of worship here at Duke University Chapel on this third Sunday in Advent. We are delighted to be able to welcome back to the chapel for their annual visit the bell ringers of the First Baptist Church in Henderson, North Carolina and their director, Mr. Philip Young. We look forward each year to their musical contribution to our worship here during Advent. We also are grateful to the Reverend, Dr. Paula Gilbert, who is Assistant Director of the Office of Continuing Education for serving as our lector today. The preacher for today's service is the Reverend Dr. William H. Willimon, Dean of the Chapel. Please note the remaining announcements as they are printed in your bulletins. And now let us stand for the greeting. Show us your mercy, oh Lord. (crowd murmuring) Truth shall spring up from the earth. (crowd murmuring) (organ music) (congregation singing)

- Stir up your power, oh Lord, and with great might, come among us. And because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us through Jesus Christ our lord, to whom with you and the holy spirit be honor and glory now and forever, amen.

- 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 be prepared for your advent among us. Amen. A reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah. The spirit of the lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners. To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our god. To comfort all who mourn, to provide for those who mourn in Zion, to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord to display his glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations, they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. For I, the Lord, love justice. I hate robbery and wrongdoing. I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples. All who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed. I will greatly rejoice in the Lord. My whole being shall exalt in my god. For he has clothed me with the garments of salvation. He has covered me with the robe of righteousness as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations. This is the word of our lord, thanks be to God. (pages turning) A reading from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. Rejoice, always. Pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God and Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the spirit, do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything. Hold fast to what is good, abstain from every form of evil. May the God of Peace himself sanctify you entirely, and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our lord, Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this. This is the word of the lord, thanks be to God. A reading from the first chapter of the gospel according to St. Luke.

In those days, Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country where she entered the house of Zachariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the holy spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me that the lord and the mother of my lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believe that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the lord." And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the lord, and my spirit rejoices in God, my savior. For he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely from now on, all generations will call me blessed, for the mighty one has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered the proud and the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." This is the word of the lord, thanks be to God. (chiming music) (pages turning) (footsteps pattering)

- There is more to life than meets the eye. There is more to our past than mere history knows how to tell. There is more going on in this present moment than that of which we are aware. There is more to our relationships with one another than we can tell. And the more we explore the mystery of ourselves, the more mysterious ourselves become. Seldom have we been content with what appears on the surface of things, 'cause we know there has got to be more. Seldom have we felt fully at ease in the present moment, sensing however inchoately that beyond the now there must be more. We tend, if left to our own devices, toward reductionism. Here in the university we ought to be exploring possibilities, cultivating a sense of wonder. But alas, if left to our own devices, we reduce the great cosmos to the periodic table. History becomes the six reasons for the Civil War, the main cause of the Great Depression, 15 true/false questions about the 16th century. But even here in academia, in our better moments, when the modern analytic gives way to the eternal poetic we know, there is more. Whenever life is reduced to technique, six simple steps towards success, flattened into a series of problems to be solved, we become numbed, anesthetized against either real pain or true pleasure. The body seems to adjust to whatever cage is given it. But occasionally, occasionally someone manages to hit a nerve, and we find ourselves twitching slightly in discomfort. And we suspect that there may just be more. The audience for our advent text from Isaiah is the afflicted, the broken hearted, the captives, those who mourn. In short, your average Durham December congregation. The people to whom these words from the prophet Isaiah are addressed are people who come to church out of a sometimes barely recognized, at other times fervently burning hope for more. These words are also addressed to those, although we do not know how they shall hear them, also addressed to those who stop coming to church because they have ceased hoping for more. Here's what the prophet Isaiah says. God has intervened. God has anointed someone to take action. That action is political. Release of prisoners, reparation of ruined cities, justice. The intervention is announced by Isaiah, as is so often in the bible, through the poetical. We're just reading poetry here, poetry with dangerous implication to the establishment. Because the year of the Lord, which Isaiah so joyfully announces, is jubilee time when everything would be turned upside down and set right. When the established political, social, economic orders to which we become so easily adjusted gets flipped on its head, and devastated empty streets of

downtown Durham are transformed into place of festival. And upon hearing such poetic words, if you know the story, you're apt to remember. Yes, we remember we were slaves in Egypt, and God intervened. We had learned to be content with our lot in Egypt. At least in Egyptian slavery, we got three square meals a day. But with a mighty arm, God intervened and brought us out toward more. The prophet says that divine intervention is needed again, some dramatic intrusion into present arrangements that will enable new life, and halt our march toward death. Israel and the church have always struggled to name such intervention. We've called it by events and places like Exodus, Bethlehem, the upper room, Calvary, the empty tomb. Because without intervention there really is no hope for more. But thank God, because there is a God, and circumstances of the worst brokenness, captivity, imprisonment, mourning, we can dare to hope for more. Isaiah, through his speech, evokes a world beyond present arrangements, a world where there is good news and liberty and comfort and garlands instead of ashes. What we're reading here is biblical, apocalyptic talk. Talk about the more beyond the now. It's daring, poetic, political speech. It's speech pushed to the boundaries in an attempt to describe what God is breaking open among us, breaking open in dusty, little out of the way places like Bethlehem or Soweto. Isaiah's words refuse to abide behind the confines of the dominant, imperial rationality. Refuse to be limited by common sense and what we've already experienced, refuse to be limited behind the NAS canon of western literature. This apocalyptic speech is just breaking open. And it was Isaiah, you probably picked this up, it was Isaiah who taught Mary how to sing apocalyptically. My soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my savior, because he scattered the proud, he's put down the mighty from their thrones. He's lifted up those of low degree, he's filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he sent empty, away. And every time you come to church, and you're exposed to speech like that of Isaiah or the songs of Mary, we're beckoned out beyond the world of patterned predictability into a world of risk and gift. A world in which divine intervention enables us to break free of prosaic reductions, to subvert tamed expectations, to evoke fresh faith. Because dangerous hope leads to daring resistance, and docility is impossible for those who have heard tell of more. Being interviewed on television by a western reporter, a christian dissident in the Soviet Union who'd just been released from prison was asked, well, what do you want? Why are Christians in the Soviet Union not satisfied? Why don't you feel grateful to Mr. Gorbachev and stand behind the government? And the christian dissident responded, "We are not satisfied. We want more." The church at its best has known that anything less is trap and delusion. Sunday at its best is always a summons toward more. But not just any old more. Our vague of frequently reoccurring, nagging, gnawing sense of need which we often try to assuage with buying and getting and giving and giving, particularly at this time of year. That gnawing sense of hunger is articulated and reformed and named by the prophet as a groping after God and God's will. The more that we feel deep within our hearts is given a name, it is called the acceptable year of the Lord, the year of the Lord's favor, the year in which God finally gets what God wants, that which God had in mind when God began creating the world until this world more closely resembles that which God had in mind. When God began forming something out of nothing, and more out of the less. Poetic, apocalyptic speech like that of Isaiah or Mary, or like that that we sing in advent hymns doesn't just describe the world, it recreates the world. It is a world made open where old, comfortable certitudes are broken by the advent of a God who makes everything new. In this new world, we're allowed to roam a little bit. Here is poetic, imagination assaulting dominant ideology. New configurations of life yet unformed, unthought, undreamed, become available. Does it surprise you that the text which John Wesley selected for his first sermon to the trapped Bristol coal miners was this. "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me to preach good tidings to the afflicted, the opening of prison

to those who are bound, to give them garland instead of ashes." Here is Isaiah's prophetic protest against religion reduced to slogan, morals, five fundamentals, little bumper sticker piety that you can put out on a bulletin board out in front of a church. Thoughts for the day, religion relegated to the conventional, sermons just a boring rehash of the obvious and the already known. Here is protest against Sunday as adjustment to what is seen rather than a probing, a probing of what might be the more. Oh, but so often we just come to church to find out what we already know. We come to church just for certitude, to touch base with the known. But apocalyptic speech goes beyond the certainties. In this poetic, prophetic, spirit-anointed space, possibility overwhelms necessity and we can, for the first time, breathe. And so you go forth after church, and they're often the same quarrels in the car on the way home, the same tensions over the dinner table, the same blue Monday, but now we have become made aware, however dimly, of a new world with new hope and new possibility and new dreams, and new hunger for something else. In short, we become aware of the more. We see how greatly reduced is what we call truth. We've tasted some new wine, and we just want more. And on such Sundays, the Prince of Darkness whispers, "Adapt, adjust." 'Cause the prince wants to keep the world closed, because a closed world is much easier for the bureaucrats to administer. 'Cause people without a future are much more manageable than those who've got some imagination. And some Sundays when we gather, let's be honest, the prince rules the roost. No new thing is uttered, and no new thing is heard. The pulpit is just a place of platitude and comfortable cliché, proverbs, slogans for better living, nothing more. But there are some Sundays, sometimes on a cold December day when we peek over the horizon, we stand on tiptoes with the prophet, and there is more. Somebody goes home newly discontent with present arrangements, hungry. Somebody gets ready for more than just another Christmas. Advent becomes adventure, and we dare to wish for ourselves more, for our world, more, for others, more. And Isaiah laughs, and then Mary sings. Poetry has carried the day against official prose, and the prince knows that he's lost just a little bit of territory to its true Lord. And the Lord's newly acquired territory is you. And the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever. Did you read in the newspaper a while back about a man in a very depressed region of Appalachia, a coal miner who'd been out of work for months? And one morning he caught his children sitting on the back porch of their little house, thumbing through the pages of an old Sears catalog, wishing. And that man flew into a rage, and he switched their legs, and he took that catalog and just ripped it to bits, and then he sat down in his front yard and cried like a baby. He loved his children so much, he just couldn't bear to see them wish and then be disappointed. Did you read in the bible about a young woman in a depressed region of Judea? Poor, unmarried woman, mother-to-be, who got caught singing for more? My soul magnifies the lord, 'cause he's done great things. He scattered the proud, he's put down the mighty from their thrones, he's lifted up those of low degree and he has filled the hungry with good things. (organ music) (congregation singing)

Reverend Nancy: The lord be with you.

Congregation: And also with you.

- Let us pray. O eternal god, who brought forth all worlds from the womb of your being and nurtured creation to splendor in the cradle of your care. As we continue on our pilgrimage toward Bethlehem to greet the Christ's child, we acknowledge that we are wayfarers even as we seek to know more of your will for our

lives. We are prone to erratic changes of course, to losing sight of our goals, to becoming discouraged by the journey. Help us on our way, O God. If we change our course, let it be to share the love of Christ with another sojourner. If we grow weary and forget you are with us, let it lead to recognition of our need for you as we travel in a world that sometimes seems a hostile wilderness, enable us to go on. Lord, hear us as we pray. Come oh come, Emmanuel. O God of Peace, we lift before you a world burdened with the power to incinerate itself, prone to settle all its disputes by threats of violence. Show us the way of peace, O God. Speak to all people, but especially to us, that we may not lift up sword against any nation. Do not turn away from us when we place our trust in armaments rather than your love, but empower us to be peacemakers in your name. Lord, hear us as we pray. Come oh come, Emmanuel. O God of Justice, as an infant cradled in your mother's arms you hungered for food. Help us always to remember that it is you whom we behold in the weakened bodies and haunting faces of the hungry of the world. Grant that we may not turn away from them, but we may receive your blessing as a minister to the least of our brothers and sisters. Lord, hear us as we pray. Come oh come, Emmanuel. O God of Love, as a child born into poverty we pray, show us the poor, not just those who have been shoved aside in the wake of competition, but the ones who have no self respect, who have no one to call a friend, who do not accept your love for them. Open our eyes to see a poverty of the heart, where saving is more important than sharing. Help us to understand that in giving, we will receive. Lord, hear us as we pray. Come oh come, Emmanuel. O God of Mercy, as a messenger sent to proclaim God's love for the humble and the weak, you know the needs of the sick. Comfort and relieve those stricken with illness and disease and give your power of healing to those who would tend to their needs. May those for whom our prayers are offered be strengthened in their weakness, and comforted in your loving care. Lord, hear us as we pray. Come oh come, Emmanuel. O redeeming God, as we survey the world that awaits its savior, lift the scales from our eyes that we might behold the people for whom Christ became flesh. As the word became flesh for us, let the word become flesh through us. Amen. As a forgiven and reconciled people, let us offer our gifts and ourselves unto God with thanksgiving. (bells chiming) (organ music) (congregation singing)

- Gracious god from whom we receive the gift of life, we praise your holy name. We praise you for Jesus Christ, who embodies human life that we might embody divine life. In the spirit of joyful thanksgiving we offer these gifts, praying that we might pursue you with the devotion of the shepherds, praise you with the song of the angels, and present you with a gift even greater than those of the wise men, the gift of ourselves. This we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray with confidence. 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, the power, and the glory forever, amen. May the God of Hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the holy spirit, amen. (organ music) (congregation singing) (organ music)