

- The birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother, Mary, had been betrothed to Joseph before they came together, she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit. And her husband, Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream saying, Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet. Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and his name shall be called Emmanuel, which means God with us. When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him. He took his wife but knew her not until she had born a son. And he called his name Jesus. That is the good news. Thanks be to God. And now let us remain standing and affirm our faith together. (organ music) (congregation sings) 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 and 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. The Lord be with you. (congregation responds) Let us pray. Let our first prayer be one of thanksgiving for Advent. Oh God, for the day of whose power the world has watched and waited through the years, we thank thee for all prophetic spirits who have seen the promise of the better day and by faith have served it. We thank thee for stout-hearted men and women who in the days of discouragement have still believed in thy goodness and in thy desire to lead thy people from darkness into light. We thank thee for all who when the night was dark about them have watched for the morning and trusted in the coming dawn. We thank thee for the folk of faith who in the dim centuries dared believe in the coming of one who should bear man's burdens and redeem them from their sins and reveal to them the light of thy Spirit. For their vision of a redeemer and for thy response to their desires, we give thee thanks and we pray for like faith in this our day as we approach the anniversary of his birth. And let us offer unto God a prayer of intercession for others. Almighty God who dost expect thy children to remember one another before thy face, we present unto thee for thy blessing all kinds and conditions of folk. We remember this world with its joy and its sorrow, its humor and its bitterness, its assurance and its despair. We remember this country with its splendid heritage and its many problems. Help us to help it. Especially do we bear in our hearts before thee folk known to ourselves in our neighborhood, in our congregation, the children, the young people. And in a special way the middle-aged, pray that life may not be for them flat and unprofitable. We remember the aged, those who have reached the top of the hill and are walking a road as it descends into the valley. Be thou their strength in the latter years. And we remember one of our own faculty whose wife has been taken from him in the last day or two. Lead the dying gently and safely over Jordan and then in thy mercy, return to us who are left. And a short prayer of supplication for ourselves. Almighty God whose Son we remember specially at this season of the year, grant that we may know him more clearly, love him more dearly and follow him more nearly for thy sake and ours. And let us offer a prayer of dedication. May thy will, oh God, be done by us. May thy love, oh God, be shared by us. May thy children, oh God, be served by us. And may this be our honest prayer each

day. And now as our Savior Christ hath taught us, we pray together saying, 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. And our preacher this morning is the Reverend Robert T. Young, the minister to the University.

- I greet you in the name and in the spirit of Christ our Lord and give thanks to God for your presence in this place of worship on this holy day. The words of Malachi, behold, I send my messenger. Prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, he is coming. Return to me and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. The words of Matthew, now, the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. Mary was found to be with child. She will bear a son and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. His name shall be called Emmanuel, which means God with us. Herein, my brothers and sisters in Christ, our prayers are answered. Presently, surely, eternally, yes, personally, yes, corporately, indeed. On this first Sunday of Advent with the awesome majesty and indeed the mystery of the Advent Old Testament and New Testament lessons singing in our ears, I want us to reflect for a few minutes on how the prayers of all ages have been answered, indeed, how our prayers are answered today. What is this prayer of which I speak? The prayer that I dare to say has been uttered throughout all history. I don't think I am presuming upon our past or upon the present to say that there is one prayer that all of humanity as individuals and as communities and as one people has cried longingly and hopefully, oh God, deliver us. God, deliver us. This has been the cry, this is our prayer, this will always be the plea of sinful men and women in the eons which are to come. The Hebrew peoples for years were slaves in Egypt, were treated perhaps only as animals doing the work of their slave masters of Egypt, digging, building, hauling, moving, groveling, sweating and yearning. And they cried, oh God, deliver us. And God delivered them from slaves to nomads. After wandering for 40 years or so, they settled in the land of Palestine. They lived there for some 400 years or so. And then the historians of the Old Testament tell us the Assyrian army came toward their country. Sennacherib, the ruthless cold-blooded, power-hungry, war-mad leader of the Assyrian army brought 185,000 soldiers to gather around the walls of Jerusalem. This was in 701 B.C. when Hezekiah was king and he was ready to submit, but he prayed. And listen to the words of Hezekiah. Incline thine ear, oh Lord, and hear, open thy eyes, oh Lord, and see and hear all the words of Sennacherib which he has sent to mock the living God. Of a truth, oh Lord, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations and their land. So now, oh Lord, our God, save us from his hand. Deliver us, oh God, cried Hezekiah. And God did deliver them from the wrath which was at hand. And then in the New Testament in the gospel of Luke, we read of the faith of one who saw God's love which had come to deliver us. In Luke chapter 2, verse 25, there's an old man named Simeon. And Luke writes, and it had been revealed to him, Simeon, by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. He was an aged man near his death, one who had seen his people suffering and persecuted, had seen them searching and longing. He along with them had cried, oh God, deliver us. And now in this young man, Jesus, Simeon saw that God's deliverance was indeed at hand. Simeon could with faith and assurance say, oh Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation. Prayer is answered. Prayers are answered. Our prayers are answered. They are, aren't they? Surely, those who have eyes to see, let them see. Those who have ears to hear, let them hear. Answers to prayers may very well be compared to the kingdom of God, the kingdom of God as it has been defined by a contemporary word from

one Colin Morris. Morris writes in his book, *The Hammer of the Lord*, the kingdom, he says, is for the desperate and the expectant, for those who know that nothing short of a miracle will meet their need. For the desperate and the expectant, for those who know that nothing short of a miracle will meet their need. Desperate, expectant? Are we, are you, am I either desperate or expectant? Desperate, well, not really. Perhaps weary or tired or worn down or frustrated or worried or concerned or drained emotionally and physically and spiritually or beaten or intimidated or frightened or uneasy or anxious. Maybe some or all of these at times, but desperate? No, not just yet. Expectant, oh, maybe, but not exactly. Looking, searching, waiting, eager, yearning, wishing, dreaming, wanting. Oh, I wish it would happen. Oh, how I'd like for it to be so. Oh, how much I want it to take place. Maybe even eagerly longing and desirous, but never quite to the point of realizable anticipation or heightened expectancy. Surely, I like the analogy. The kingdom of heaven is indeed like the answers to prayers, for they may well be for those who are desperate and expectant. Desperate, expectant, Morris speaks to a desperate expectancy or to an expectant desperation when he writes, only those who know what hell is like can appreciate the wonder of our salvation. And as I wandered through some stores this week, I guess this is one reason that the plastic and the tin foil and the cardboard paper toys and bells and games and candles and balls and lights and decorations and games, all of the so-called Christmas gifts this year, this year more than ever before for me make me realize the gross incongruity that exists between our crassly commercialized Christmas and the good news event of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. What we see around us only confounds and confuses the hell that many of us know already and offers salvation to no one at all. All that lines the shelves and fills the aisles of most of our stores just now is not an answer to anybody's prayer. Oh, some of it may be the answer to some little boy's fanciful visions or to some little girl's dreams, but pray tell me what do holster sets and BB guns and dominoes and Barbie dolls with elevators that go up and down and plastic candles have to do with these words, you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins, his name shall be called Emmanuel, which means God with us or the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come? Our prayers are answered not by shelves crammed with make-believes which will get stuffed under Christmas trees, but our prayers are answered by the eternal become the present by the Alpha and the Omega which has become the now by the desperate cries of those who depend, who do not depend on their own strength but who are being transformed with expectant hopes which see God's love eternally and presently revealed in Jesus the Christ. Our prayers are answered, yes, even now. William W. Kenney tells how this is so. He writes, a Christmas card I received broke through my sense of futility and suddenly reawakened my slumbering trust that God is the Lord of this world, that God's purpose is being worked out, mysterious as that purpose may be, and that there are for me as well as for all the world simple gifts from God that promise to make life human, sane and joyful if we would only receive them. The card had portrayed on it the rustic stable scene with the Christ child in the center. And all around the cradle, there were gathered children representing races and cultures from every corner of the world. And inside, he writes, the message read, Christmas, God still loves the world. Or as John Powell puts it in *A Reason to Live! A Reason to Die!* the challenge of the word of God is that it not only looks beyond this world, but looks deeply into this world. Oh God, deliver us. Deliver us, we cry as God looks deeply into this world. Oh God, deliver us. Our prayers are answered. And at this point, about halfway through the preparation of this sermon, one of our daughters comes in and asks, "What are you preaching about this Sunday, Dad?" And I said, our prayers are answered. And she stood there for a moment and she said, "That's not so. "Our prayers are not answered, at least mine are not. "And I know a lot of others "whose prayers are not answered too." Well, how's that for a stopper? You talk about football players being

clotheslined or basketball players getting a jump shot crammed down their throat. "Our prayers are not answered," she said very firmly but honestly. I send my messenger, the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come, you shall call his name Jesus, his name shall be called Emmanuel, which is God with us. "Our prayers are not answered," she said. And I sat there, for I knew exactly what she meant. I heard her, I felt the truth of the words which she spoke. I could sense what was going on inside her mind and inside my own mind. If our prayers are answered, then our Jewish friends would not be condemned by the United Nations. If our prayers are answered, then our young 25-year-old friend would not have died with leukemia last summer. If our prayers are answered, then the starving millions for whom we have prayed over and over and over again would not be dying this morning. If our prayers are answered, then a very dear friend of ours would be being healed from her siege of leukemia right now. If our prayers were answered, then the mother of one of our own children's friends would not have died suddenly at a young and crucial age this week. If our prayers are answered, sure, I knew what was going on in her mind and what was going on in my mind. If our prayers were answered, then the sick and the lonely and the oppressed of the world would not be forgotten. Have we not prayed for them many, many times? If our prayers were answered, then some friends of ours where the husband has been unfaithful would know peace and reconciliation in their family. Our prayers are answered, you say? And so I've had to rethink this to try to rethink how this is so. And I offer you this at least as a tentative and perhaps even a partial answer. Our prayers are answered not necessarily by miracles of healing or feeding or intruding upon the experience of life and death as we know them, but our prayers are answered by a presence. A presence, the presence of God that does not leave us comfortless, that says, lo, I am with you always, that says I will be with you. It says, I come to you, that says come to me all who labor and are heavy laden. A presence come from God, seen in others, experienced by us, a presence seen uniquely in Jesus the Christ, a presence such as that described by Alan Paton, writer of Cry the Beloved Country and other meaningful works. As he looked upon his son, he wrote these words. I see my son is wearing long trousers. I tremble at this. I see he goes forward confidently. He does not know so fully his own gentleness. Go forward, my son, eager and reverent child. See, here I began to take my hands away from you. I shall see you walk careless on the edge of the precipice, but if you wish, you shall hear no word come from out of me. My whole soul shall be sick with apprehension, but I shall not disobey you. Life sees you coming. She sees you coming with assurance toward her. She lies in wait for you. She cannot but hurt you. Go forward, go forward, I hold the bandages and the ointment ready. And if you would go elsewhere and lie alone with your wounds, why, I shall not intrude upon you. If you would seek the help of some other person, I shall not come forcing myself upon you. If you should fall into sin, innocent one, that is the way of this pilgrimage, struggle against it, not for one fraction of a moment concede its dominion. It will occasion you grief and sorrow. It will torment you, but hate not God nor turn from him in shame or self-reproach. He has seen many such. His compassion is as great as his creation. Be tempted and fall and return. Return and be tempted and fall. A thousand times and a thousand, even to a thousand thousand, for out of this tribulation there comes a peace deep in the soul and surer than any dream. God's presence, the presence of someone who says I hold the bandages and the ointments ready. Our prayers are answered, yes. How can we experience this answer? Let's hear a word from a contemporary theologian of our day, namely Charles Schulz, as he writes and draws in one of his Peanuts cartoons. Charlie and Lucy are leaning against a tree and Lucy asks, what do you think security is, Chuck? Charlie Brown says, security? Security is sleeping in the backseat of the car when you're a little kid and you've been somewhere with your mom and dad and it's night. You're riding in the car and you can sleep in the backseat. You don't have to worry about anything.

Your mom and dad are in the front seat and they're doing all the worrying. They take care of everything. Lucy smiles and says, that's real neat. But then Charlie Brown begins to get a serious look on his face and he raises his finger and says, but it doesn't last. Suddenly, you're grown up and it can never be that way again. Suddenly, it's over and you'll never get to sleep in the backseat again, never. Lucy gets a sad and frightened look on her face and she says, never? And Charlie devastated with the terrible truth that he has just spoken replies, never. Lucy stricken with this new knowledge of the real world reaches over and says, hold my hand, Chuck. Oh God, deliver us. What our world needs, my friends, what I would dare to presume this morning you and I need is someone who will hold your hand or my hand in the midst of all the insecurity which surrounds us, someone who can hold our hand and give us a sense of hope and assurance. For hope, as someone has written, means to keep living amid desperation and to keep humming in the darkness. Hoping is knowing that there is love, it is trust in tomorrow, it is falling asleep and waking again when the sun rises. In the midst of a gale at sea, it is to discover land. In the eyes of another, it is to see that someone understands you. As long as there is still hope, there will also be prayer. And God will be holding you in loving hands. Sometimes, when I hurt the most and my need is the greatest, I reach out. I feel alone, alone but for the presence of God. Sometimes, there is someone else. Sometimes, there is only God and me. Sometimes, that is all there is. Sometimes, that is enough. Amen, amen. (organ music) (congregation sings) (organ music) (organ music) (soloist sings) (organ music) (congregation sings)

- Almighty God, our heavenly Father, accept these our gifts, the symbols of ourselves for the service of thy church in our University community and grant that our gratitude to thee may always be as great as our need of thy mercy through Jesus Christ our Lord, amen. (organ music) (congregation sings) Unto God's gracious mercy and protection do we commit you. May the blessing of God come upon you abundantly. May it keep you strong and tranquil in the truth of his promises through Jesus Christ our Lord, amen. (organ music)