

**dcrmv001353001.mkv / William H. Willimon - "The Commencement of Generation X" Baccalaureate Service (May 7, 1994) / Duke Digital Repository**

---

(grandeur organ music) (choir singing in foreign language) (light organ music) ♪ Praise to the Lord, the Almighty ♪ ♪ The King of creation ♪ ♪ O my soul, praise Him ♪ ♪ For He is thy health and salvation ♪ ♪ All ye who hear ♪ ♪ Now to His temple draw near ♪ ♪ Praise me in glad adoration ♪ ♪ Praise to the Lord ♪ ♪ Who o'er all things so wondrously reigneth ♪ ♪ Bears thee on eagle's wings ♪ ♪ E'er in His keeping maintaining ♪ ♪ God's care enfolds all whose true good he upholds ♪ ♪ Hast thou not known His sustaining ♪ ♪ Praise to the Lord ♪ ♪ Who doth prosper thy work ♪ ♪ And defend thee ♪ ♪ Surely His goodness and mercy ♪ ♪ Here daily attend thee ♪ ♪ Ponder anew ♪ ♪ What the Almighty can do ♪ ♪ Who with His love doth befriend thee ♪ ♪ Praise to the Lord ♪ ♪ Who doth nourish thy life ♪ ♪ And restore thee ♪ ♪ Fitting thee well for the tasks ♪ ♪ That are ever before thee ♪ ♪ Then to thy need ♪ ♪ God as a mother doth speed ♪ ♪ Spreading the wings of grace o'er thee ♪ ♪ Praise to the Lord ♪ ♪ O let all that is in me adore Him ♪ ♪ All that hath life and breath ♪ ♪ Come now with praises before Him ♪ ♪ Let the amen ♪ ♪ Sound from his people again ♪ ♪ Gladly forever adore him ♪

- You may be seated. Let us pray. Eternal God, by whom all things are created, we give thanks for your many blessings. On this graduation weekend we are especially grateful for these graduates, their families, and all who have gathered here to celebrate this occasion. We are mindful that none of us stands alone in life. We are all indebted to those who have inspired and shaped us. We give thanks for the teachers who taught us to seek truth, liberty, and justice. For those who always believed in us. For families who supported us along the way. For the brave and courageous who'd shown us how to be patient in suffering and hopeful in adversity. And for those whose lives showed us what it means to live faithfully and well. We give thanks for all these who encouraged us to be our best. We ask for your blessing upon these graduates who now finish this course of study. Walk with them as they leave and move forward in life. Take away their anxiety for the future and confusion of purpose. Strengthen their many talents and skills, instill in them a confidence in the future you plan. And help them grow in service to others, that their energies may be gathered up and used for the good of all people. In your name we pray. Amen. (tense organ music) (choir singing in foreign language) Let us pray. Oh God, source of all illumination, by your word you give light to the soul. Pour out upon us the spirit of wisdom and understanding, that being taught by you in holy scripture our hearts and minds may be opened to know the things that pertain to life and truth. Amen. Please stand as we read the Psalter responsively printed in your bulletin. Oh sing to the Lord a new song. Sing to the Lord, all the Earth.

Congregation: Sing to the Lord, bless thy name; proclaim thy salvation from day to day.

- Declare the Lord's glory among the nations, the Lord's marvelous works among all the peoples.

Congregation: For great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods.

- For all the gods of the peoples are idols but the Lord made the heavens.

Congregation: Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and glory are in his sanctuary. (light organ music) ♪ 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, amen ♪

- You may be seated. The lesson for today is selected verses from the 65th chapter of the Book of Isaiah. "For I am about to create new heavens "and new earth, the former thing shall not be remembered "or come to mind but be glad "and rejoice forever in what I am creating. "For I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy "and its people as a delight. "I will rejoice in Jerusalem and delight in my people. "No more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it "or the cry of distress. "They shall build houses and inhabit them. "They shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. "They shall not labor in vain or bear children for calamity. "For they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord "and their descendants as well. "Before they call, I will answer. "While they are yet speaking, I will hear. "The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, "the lion shall eat straw like the ox "but the serpent, its food shall be dust. "They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain," says the Lord. This is the word of the Lord.

All: Thanks be to God.

- Class of 1994, I've learned enough about you in your years here to be reluctant to platitudinize you on this occasion. For one thing, I noticed that you're weary of advice, something between the generations I suppose. I know just a couple of weeks ago, I was encountered, two of you walking hand-in-hand in the Duke Garden and I said, "Gosh, I didn't know you two were dating." And you said, "This is Duke, we're not dating. "We're seeing each other." (congregation laughing) I said, "Seeing each other, that sounds so Victorian "like something you do in a parlor "with chaperones or something." Said, "Yes, we're seeing each other "and if this works out we'll be going out together, "but not dating." (congregation laughing) And I said to you, I said, "What is this about your generation, "you're so reluctant to make commitments, "you're so reluctant to put your money down on somebody, "and what is this about your generation?" And she said, "We were raised by your generation." (congregation laughing) So I'm a little shy about advice. One of you, your freshman year, I was leaning on you, instructing you in fundamentals of behavior in western civilization and you said to me, "Hey, if I wanted advice "I would have stayed at home with my mother. "You're not my mother." And another thing, this place has a way of just reminding faculty, we're old, we're from another planet, another world. But yet there are some things we have in common. We meet, I know this fall I made my way through a number of fraternities, as their guest, and I was in my old fraternity and I was speaking to them about the necessity for uplifting behavior and setting a tone on campus and justifying themselves in an academic setting. Person said, "Dr. Willimon, "do you remember a Rodney Stallheim? I said, "Yeah, yeah, I think I was in college with him." He said, "Yeah, he was in your fraternity wasn't he?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, he's my dad, he said he was very surprised "you were doing what you are doing now." (congregation laughing) And I said, "You know, I think this meeting "has gone as far as it can go and-- (congregation laughing) "I think this has been good, frank exchange." He said, "Well Dad told me about "like spring weekend your senior year. "I mean we've done a lot but we've never done anything" I said, "Look kid, I said the meeting is over, (congregation laughing) "that's enough!" I'm old you're young. Now I do know that your generation has been called, by the Wall Street Journal and others, Generation X. Generation X, that 20-something crowd with shrunk futures. Want

to do the numbers? One in three of you will take jobs, the Department of Labor says, that do not require a college diploma, you call it McJob. Only 20% of you, in a recent poll, say that you believe that you will achieve the good life, as defined by your parents and Ronald Reagan, down from 43% just nine years ago. New York Labor economist Audrey Freedman says, "This year's grads know that permanence "and stability are not achievable American goals anymore." Corporate America calls it, downsizing. You call it a stripped-down, two-door Toyota. Time Magazine named my college generation the Now Generation, the Now Generation, we wanted peace in Vietnam and civil rights for all and we wanted it now. Of course, we could demand a great deal in Lyndon Johnson's perking war-economy, the great society. Maybe it's little wonder that by our 20th reunion we were being referred to as the Me Generation. Those whose feeding frenzy had run up this nation's greatest deficit, at the expense of our children. Now why do they call you Generation X? Well of course, it's after Douglas Copeland's novel by the same name. And it may mean that as for life after graduation you are without a clue. I learned about February not to ask you what you were going to be doing in June. (congregation laughing) "Hey, if I wanted questions like that, "I woulda stayed home with my mother." I said, "Did we meet earlier?" (congregation laughing) Generation X, it may mean that you are tough to pigeon hole, that you're tough to label, you're diverse, an unknown quantity, Generation X. Many of you remain a mystery to your parents but I'm betting today that the X in Generation X may mean that this weekend you launch forth into as an it's yet unthought of future. Generation Unknown, like the crew of the Star Trek. You go where no one has ever been. Seismic shifts are occurring in this society, not only in California. You were the last of the Cold War generation and having lost our national enemy in the Soviet Union we now find ourselves a people in centrifuge. Having found enmity here at home among ourselves. Soviet aggression proved to be an easy foe compared to our racism and our ecological mess. When I thought of the future, I suppose a predominant image for me was this astronaut setting foot on the moon, "One giant step for humanity." But Harvard's Arthur Devine, in a recent survey of 26 campuses, when asked you what your image of the future is, it was a school teacher being blown up in Spaceship Challenger. And there you have a vast difference of perception. When I graduated from college, about 7% of us came from homes with separated or divorced parents. By this year, that number has risen to about 30%. Now there is much that we thought we knew for sure. But you now know, after your Duke education, that you can't know. You will be pioneering marriages quite different from your parents. If you're a woman, particularly a Duke woman, the chances of you pursuing the same path as your mother have got to be, what, one in 50? We are told that 70% of everything we now know will not only be dated but wrong by the year 2010. Which means that by your tenth Duke reunion about half of everything you learned here will be antiquated. See, you didn't need to write all that down in a spiral notebook. (congregation laughing) So maybe the X in Generation X is Generation Unknown. Your generation's realization of cognitive dissonance. "Conceptual dislocation, "the whole den of fracturing thought," William Carlos Williams. You're forced to make up much of the world as you go. Commencement from college feels like a bungee jump, with a cord you are the first to test. And so the Director of Duke's Career Counseling Service says that the chief motivating factor in this year's career decisions is fear of the future. But if history is a joke, the present plays upon the past then surely the future is an even greater joke played upon the present. Generation X, I know not what to tell you about tomorrow because in an odd sense, I knew more about the future 10 years ago than I do today. But perhaps this at least is the beginning of wisdom. "The ability to foresee that there are "a number of things which cannot be foreseen," says Rousseau "is a very necessary skill." Or as Pascal said, "If Cleopatra's nose had been one half-inch longer, "all of Western history would have been different." I'm saying that things are

just not that well tied down, there's a lot of space. And I wonder if that's a particular problem for you, because, look, you came here to Duke as those who had had fairly good luck in getting what you wanted. You wanted to get into a great university, you worked hard in high school, you got into a great university. Your admission to Duke is visible evidence that you were able successfully to project yourself into the future, better than eight others who tried to get your position here. But because you were right in your predictions about tomorrow four years ago, are you deluded into thinking that you'll always be right about tomorrow? 'Cause I can tell you this, that from here on there's no crutch out there called a curriculum. Which by accumulating enough credits certifies you as wise. There's nobody out those doors who will hand you a sheepskin and say, "Congratulations, you're a magnum cum laude husband." Few bets from here on are as sure as your bet that you would have a great year at Duke. Lord Keynes had it right when he said, "The inevitable never happens, the unexpected always." Generation X. And all of this just may make you smarter than my generation. My '60s Now Generation quickly found out life does not deliver as efficiently as Pizza Hut. The truest thing said I think my senior year, came from the lips, the rather large lips of the immortal Mick Jagger, "You can't always get what you want." (congregation laughing) And you see I'm saying, Generation X, that you are a step ahead in already knowing that. At times, as I said, you impress me as cynical, somewhat tentative, unsteady about tomorrow. But maybe what you're telling me is another word for that is called wisdom, precocious knowledge of our inability to know. Which may be a worthy enough return for your four years at Duke. "Quid sit futurum cras fuge quaerere," said Horace. Loosely translated, as for the question of what tomorrow may bring, drop it. A few years ago, I was lecturing a couple places in West Germany and I ran into a Duke sophomore who was spending that year in Germany studying. And we got to talking about the troubles on the East German border and the student said to me, "I was talking with this girl in a bar in Leipzig" and she told me that she thinks "the East German government will fall, maybe within the next few weeks." And I said, "Well, wait, I have been in two of "the most outstanding German universities" having conversations with distinguished faculty" and all of them assure me that there will be "no change in East Germany at least within this decade." He said, "Well this girl in Leipzig told me that she--" I said, "You know, I hope that by the time you graduate "from Duke University, "you will get your information in more accurate places "than from some random person in a bar in Leipzig." (congregation laughing) Two weeks later I was at home, I flipped on the TV, November 9th. The wall was down. I wonder, so many unexpected, un-prophesied events have hit you, dear Generation X, that maybe God has given you a finely-tuned ability to stride into the future willing, even expecting to be surprised. So here's what I pray for you, dear justifiably tentative Generation X. I would love for your generation, at this point in human history, to come to bless the indeterminacy of things. To go out of here loving life for its continuing propensity to outwit all predictions. The future frustrates the ability of graduation speakers to unravel it. As General de Gaulle said, "One should not insult tomorrow." The very inscrutability of your tomorrow may be one of tomorrow's greatest gifts. The miserable failure of prognostication is testimony that your choices and your acts do make a difference. A couple of months ago, Christians gathered here in the chapel. We celebrated something called Easter and we noted that nobody predicted Easter. We spoke of Easter as the great joke God played on human despair. We read the last words of the New Testament: behold I am making all things new. All things new is just a Bible way of saying, that if there is a God, things are not that tied down, there is space. And I have taken as my text today, words from the Prophet Isaiah, spoken 2500 years ago during some of Israel's darkest days as a people. Isaiah hears God say, "Behold, I am creating a new heaven" and a new earth." See? God is opposed to goal-setting. Poet W.H. Auden ended a long

commencement address at Harvard a number of years ago saying he had two words for Harvard graduates. One, always read the New York News and two, always take short views. Because the future belongs to almighty God, rather than to graduation prophets. Not everything is tied down, fixed, predicted, worked out, victim of long-range planning. God is leaving a lot of it up to you. There is space, there is divinely created room. Enough for you and what you mean to make out of tomorrow. God's future is not a problem to be solved, a harness to be docilely accepted, it's a mystery to be enjoyed, a surprise to be relished, it's raw material to be worked up. So you can go ahead and you can get a job, you can get out of here, you can get married or not. You can go to law school, or don't go to law school. Go to teach America, you can risk, you can follow your dream, you can go ahead, go! And God goes with you. (enlightening organ music) (choir singing in foreign language) Please join me in a responsive prayer. Almighty God, as you have given us a place in this university, hallow to us now this day. When we dedicate ourselves to the life and work to which you have called us that we may remember with gratitude the families and friends who have cared for us.

Congregation: We ask for grace from the Lord.

- That in the life ahead, we may keep faith with those who loved us and trusted us and whose hopes follow us.

Congregation: We ask for strength from God.

- That we may enter with good courage and constant purpose upon the task which await us.

Congregation: We ask for presence from God.

- From all vanity and pride as if our accomplishments were of our sole creation.

Congregation: Good Lord deliver us.

- From neglect of the opportunities which are all about us and from distrust of our ability to meet the duties of each dawning day.

Congregation: Good Lord deliver us.

- That the example of wise and generous people who have gone before us and our families and here in this university, may save us from folly and self-indulgence.

Congregation: We ask this of you, Lord.

- More especially, that you would show to us your way of love in all that we do or say. That we should come to love the Lord our God with our soul and mind and strength. And our neighbors as ourselves.

Congregation: We ask for your help, our God.

- These things and whatever else you see needful and right for us, we ask in your holy name.

All: Amen. (celebratory organ music) ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah ♪ ♪  
Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah ♪ ♪ For the Lord God omnipotent radiant ♪ ♪  
Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah ♪ ♪ For the Lord God omnipotent radiant ♪ ♪ Hallelujah,  
hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ For the  
Lord God omnipotent radiant ♪ ♪ Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah,  
hallelujah ♪ ♪ The kingdom of this world ♪ ♪ Is become the kingdom of our Lord ♪ ♪ And of his Christ, and of  
his Christ ♪ ♪ And he shall reign forever and ever ♪ ♪ And he shall reign forever and ever ♪ ♪ And he shall reign  
forever and ever ♪ ♪ And he shall reign forever and ever ♪ ♪ King of kings ♪ ♪ Forever and ever, hallelujah,  
hallelujah ♪ ♪ And lord of lords ♪ ♪ Forever and ever, hallelujah, hallelujah ♪ ♪ King of kings ♪ ♪ Forever and  
ever, hallelujah, hallelujah ♪ ♪ And lord of lords ♪ ♪ Forever and ever, hallelujah, hallelujah ♪ ♪ King of kings ♪ ♪  
Forever and ever, hallelujah, hallelujah ♪ ♪ And lord of lords ♪ ♪ King of kings and lord of lords ♪ ♪ And he  
shall reign ♪ ♪ And he shall reign ♪ ♪ And he shall reign ♪ ♪ And he shall reign ♪ ♪ The king shall reign  
forevermore ♪ ♪ King of kings ♪ ♪ Forever and ever ♪ ♪ And lord of lords ♪ ♪ Hallelujah, hallelujah ♪ ♪ And he  
shall reign forever and ever ♪ ♪ King of kings and lord of lords ♪ ♪ King of kings and lord of lords ♪ ♪ And he  
shall reign forever and ever ♪ ♪ Forever and ever ♪ ♪ Forever and ever ♪ ♪ Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah,  
hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪

- And now to God's most gracious mercy and protection I commit you, class of 1994. And the Lord bless you  
and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you. The Lord lift up his  
countenance upon you and give you peace. Amen. (light organ music) ♪ Sing praise to God who reigns above  
♪ ♪ The God of all creation ♪ ♪ The God of power, the God of love ♪ ♪ The God of our salvation ♪ ♪ With  
healing balm my soul is filled ♪ ♪ And every faithless murmur stilled ♪ ♪ To God all praise and glory ♪ ♪ What  
God's almighty power hath made ♪ ♪ His gracious mercy keepeth ♪ ♪ By morning dawn or evening shade ♪ ♪  
His watchful eye ne'er sleepeth ♪ ♪ Within the kingdom of God's might ♪ ♪ Lo, all is just and all is right ♪ ♪ To  
God all praise and glory ♪ ♪ The Lord forsaketh not His flock ♪ ♪ His chosen generation ♪ ♪ He is their Refuge  
and their Rock ♪ ♪ Their Peace and their Salvation ♪ ♪ As with a mother's tender hand He leads His own ♪ ♪  
His chosen band ♪ ♪ To God all praise and glory ♪ ♪ Let all who name Christ's holy name ♪ ♪ Give God all  
praise and glory ♪ ♪ Let all who own his power proclaim ♪ ♪ Aloud the wondrous story ♪ ♪ Cast each false idol  
from its throne ♪ ♪ For Christ is Lord, and Christ alone ♪ ♪ To God all praise and glory ♪ (energetic organ  
music)