

(pious instrumental music)

- This is the day which the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. (congregation singing) (gentle orchestral music) If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Let us therefore join our hearts and our minds in a unison prayer of confession. Forgive us most gracious Lord, what we have done to increase the pain of the world. Pardon the unkind word, the impatient gesture, the hard and selfish deed, the failure to show sympathy and kindly help where we had the opportunity or fail to seek it. We beseech you to enable us so to live the rest of our lives, that we may daily endeavor to lessen the flood of human sorrow and add to the sum of blessedness, both in our own lives and those who come in contact with us. Amen. Let us continue to personally confess our sins. We have these words of Jesus Christ to rely on. Come to me all who labor and are heavy Laden and I will give you rest. Amen. (gentle instrumental music) (choir singing)

- The first reading from the scripture is from the book of Jonah, chapter three verses one through five. Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord. Now, Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days journey in breadth. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey, And he cried, "Yet 40 days and Nineveh shall be overthrown." And the people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest of them to the least of them. The congregation will stand for the reading of the gospel. The gospel is from John 12, verses 12 through 36. Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. So these came to Philip who was from Bethsaida in Galilee and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew. Andrew went with Phillip and they told Jesus, and Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the son of man to be glorified. Truly, truly I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life, loses it. And he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me, and where I am, there shall my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the father will honor him. Now is my soul troubled, and what shall I say, father save me from this hour. No, for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father glorify thy name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing by heard it and said that it had thundered. Others said an angel has spoken to him. Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world. Now shall the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth will draw all men unto myself." He said this to show by what death he was to die. The crowd answered him. "We have heard from the law that the Christ remains forever. How can you say that the son of man must be lifted up? Who is this son of man?" Jesus said to them, "The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, lest the darkness overtake you. He who walks in the darkness does not know where he goes. While you have the light, believe in the light that you may become sons of light." May the Lord give his blessing upon this reading of his word. (lively instrumental music) (congregation singing harmoniously)

- Let us corporately 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 true man Jesus to reconcile and make new, who works in us and others by his spirit. We trust him. He calls us to be his church, to celebrate his presence, 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.

- And with your spirit.

- Let us pray. All mighty and most merciful God, we give thanks to you for the light of another day, for the work we have to do, for the opportunity to serve you in the various ways we can, and for the strength and health you give us that enables us to do the things you desire of us. We thank you for this beautiful house of worship, for the choir that sings your praises, for the preacher who proclaims your gospel, and for all those who make it possible for us to renew our spirits and our dedication to your service here each week. Guide us we pray by your truth, uphold us by your power, and purify us by the continual indwelling of your spirit. Grant that in every circumstance we may grow in wisdom, and knowing that you are with us, obtain strength to persevere in all our endeavors. Oh Lord who feels the pain of the world, look down upon all sick and suffering persons. Have compassion on all those whose hearts are touched with sorrow and whose bodies are beset with illness, and fill them with your love, that in the midst of their pain they may find your presence and comfort. To doctors and nurses, grant healing hands and tender hearts that they may treat the whole person, and give health again in body and in soul to all of us, your children. Almighty God the source of all wisdom, who knows our needs before we ask and our ignorance in asking for the wrong things, we beseech you to have compassion on our weaknesses and those things which for our unworthiness we dare not ask, and for our blindness we cannot ask, see fit to grant us for the sake of your son, Jesus Christ. Oh God who has made us messengers of peace in a world of strife, and messengers of strife in a world of false peace, grant us the grace to be the instruments of your love and its work of healing and judgment, and enable us to carry out your commission to us, to proclaim forgiveness and condemnation, deliverance to the captive and captivity to the proud. Give us the patience of those who understand and the impatience of those who love, that the might of your gentleness may work through us and the mercy of your wrath may speak through us. Make our hands strong, make our voices clear. Give us humility with firmness and insight with passion that we may fight not to conquer but to redeem as did your son and our Lord 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 thy is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen. I would like to call your attention to one change in our order of worship. After the recessional hymn, as is our practice here, the congregation will be seated. There will then be a few moments for personal meditation. During this period, you may reflect upon the message that has been proclaimed, you may continue your own personal prayers to God, you may use these few moments in

whatever way you wish. However you choose to use them, we hope that these few moments before leaving the chapel will become a meaningful part of the worship experience for you. The preacher who is scheduled to deliver the sermon today is the Rev. Robert Young, minister to the university. Unfortunately, Mr. Young is fighting the last rounds of a successful battle against the flu, and we wish to him a speedy and complete recovery. We are indeed fortunate to have for the preacher today, a man that many of you have had in the chapel before, a well-known scholar, an excellent teacher, an able administrator, and to many of us, a good friend, the Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of Religion, and Professor of New Testament interpretation in The Divinity School. We are very happy to welcome to our pulpit today, the Reverend Dr. D. Moody Smith Jr. preaching on the wisdom of God.

- Thank you friend. Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, Oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen. The epistle lesson for this fourth Sunday in epiphany is taken from 1st Corinthians. We shall read that lesson in due course, but before we do, we might remind ourselves that when Paul wrote the words of this text, indeed when he wrote 1st Corinthians, he didn't realize that he was writing for the New Testament. Otherwise, he might've said to his friend Sosthenes, "Fetch the stylists and preparers oh boy, I feel another divine inspiration coming on." Or "Go to Sosthenes, I need to dictate some holy scripture before coffee this morning." No, Paul wrote instead, to straighten out a very messy situation at the church in Corinth, which he himself had founded. Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus three of his friends, had brought word from Corinth of chaos at love feasts, sexual promiscuity, personality quarrels, and rival claims of superior knowledge or wisdom among different groups in the Corinthian church. Cliques were apparently forming around the names or under the banners of such well-known people as Peter, the prince of the apostle, Apollos, the silver tongued biblical scholar from Alexandria and even Paul himself. While this was going on, some probably the more obnoxious, rose above the strife claiming, "We belong only to Christ." In astonishment that such partisanship, Paul asks, "Was I crucified for you. Were you baptized in the name of Paul?" And then he reflects, I thank God that I baptized only a few of you. And he goes on, "God did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel. And not in sophisticated talk, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power." And so we get to our text, Paul meditates on what God has commissioned him to do. And as he does so, he brings forth once again, the burden or central message of his preaching. If Paul did not actually preach in the way he writes, this is clearly what he thought his preaching was all about. And it is entirely fitting that this lesson should be appointed for the fourth Sunday of epiphany, the time when we celebrate the revealing, the manifestation of Christ, for this small specimen of Paul's preaching speaks directly to the question of how Christ makes himself manifest. Paul writes, "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart." Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Greeks and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man, and the weakness of God is stronger than man. For consider your call brethren, not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth, but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the

wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness, and sanctification and redemption. Therefore, as it is written, let him who boasts boast of the Lord. Now there are a couple, several easy ways to explain this text and in doing so really discount what Paul writes. One can observe that Paul was only so right in pointing to the lowly state of the Corinthian Christians in order to claim that God, as he says, chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, what is weak in the world to shame the strong. As a group, the earliest Christians did not represent the highest levels of cultural or political achievement in the ancient world. Paul knew their weaknesses, their inadequacies, and their moral laxity only too well as this very letter reveals. What is more of the Christ he proclaimed fits rather well into this picture. Since he was crucified as a criminal, a subversive, a potential menace. It took a colossal faith or a colossal effrontery to believe that through the death of a young Jewish rabbi and prophet, and for the sake of the likes of the Corinthian Christians, God was making salvation known. One could say cynically that in order to make such claims, Paul found it expedient to imply that all ordinary human standards of judgment had been stood on their head. They would have to be. And yet another level, one might raillery agree that Paul's preaching, if not itself folly, has certainly resulted in a good bit of foolishness. If you read the church page on Saturdays or watch television on Sunday morning, you may find some good reason to believe that the preaching of Jesus Christ was and is foolishness. In fact, Paul's characterization of his preaching as foolishness has been taken to justify sheer fatuousness and crudity in the proclamation of the gospel, and to such an extent that the word gospel itself jars the sensibilities of many people. Paul's flat assertion that the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing has led some Christians to take the cheap route of denouncing as lost anyone who criticizes them for just being plain silly. Paul does not however, think that his preaching really is sheer nonsense. It is foolishness only by the standards of this world's wisdom. To the man who is proud of his religion or his intelligence, that is to the Jew and to the Greek, to you and me in our everyday pursuits, the preaching of the cross is a stumbling block and folly. To the church as a well-established religious organization of respectable morally self-sufficient people, the cross is a scandal. To the intellectual communities of men and women who know, and in their knowledge and wisdom possess power to determine their own destinies and the destinies of others, the cross is folly. It seems to be the negation or denial of the power that this world's wisdom brings. To the world, that is to the totality of human enterprises and ambitions organized as ends in themselves, the cross of Christ is judgment. It is the foolishness and weakness of God, but it is stronger than men. It overcomes the world, or so the New Testament claims. If Nietzsche resented and rejected Christianity, he perhaps understood it better than many who give it nominal allegiance. He saw that the faith Paul preached represents a radical overturning of values and ambitions which we so naturally embrace. Christ the crucified is according to the Christian faith, the judgment of this world. And as the church year moves from epiphany to land, we take note of the fact that the Christ who is revealed is the Christ who suffered and died. His death at the hands of those who dominated and ruled the world he knew, was the judgment of that world. But it was not the outright denial or rejection of the world. Paul balances his message of judgment with one of hope. He that is God, writes Paul, is the source of your life in Christ Jesus whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness, and sanctification and redemption. The cross of Jesus is judgment but at the same time salvation, that is the source of life which God gives. Christ died not merely to show the foolishness of presumption, pride, and self-centered ambition, he did that, but his cross

of pain and suffering is not the condemnation of the world, which is God's creation. His end and our end is resurrection, the opening of new life, unanticipated God given possibilities. But these new things do not arise out of the old and tiresome world of selfish ambition, fear, pain, and death, but rather out of the new day, the new day that Springs from God given life. Whether we know it or not, we are judged by the cross of Christ. Our pretensions, prerogatives, and claims for ourselves are brought to nothing. But we are invited to see in this judgment, the end of a way of life that was bounded by death anyhow. We are invited to enter into the possibility of new and boundless life. But this may happen only when we acknowledge that our lives, that is our lives in so far as we have created them for ourselves and intend to manage them for ourselves and for our own good, embrace and manifest the human wisdom of which Paul speaks. The opposite of that wisdom, or the wisdom of the world for which the gospel is folly, the opposite of that wisdom is not human foolishness, but the foolishness of God. That is, the giving up of the kind of claim on life which will ultimately prove false anyhow. It is the giving up of a faith and trust which in the long run is much less promising than it appears to be. Of giving it up for a faith and trust which from that old perspective, looks like foolishness. To those of us who are religious, Christian, it is the giving up even of the expectation that God ought to reward and protect us for our piety and good works. Many years ago, I saw an early production of Arthur Miller's, *After the Fall*. I still remember it quite vividly, although perhaps not accurately and I must ask your pardon, but I remember quite vividly, or as I remember quite vividly, there was a scene where Miller describes a dream in which life is viewed as a long upward slope with a bench for the judge at the top. And after that slope is climbed with much effort, the bench is found to be empty. That is, the whole view of life in which everything depends on earning or gaining a definitive positive approval of what we have accomplished is called into question, and this is a devastating experience. You may experience it or you may have experienced it when a parent, one who always granted approval or judgment died. It may even happen after years of school when one gets out and discovers there's then no longer a sure source of possible approval. When for one reason or another, the sense of being approved, the possibility of it disappears, life's very meaning and purpose may be endangered. It so happens that I saw this performance of *After the Fall* with two friends. One is now dead, suicide. I don't really know why, but I've always imagined that it might have had something to do with the shattering of that morally sensitive view of life. But I don't really want to speculate about that or invite you to, the point is that we, most of us, have grown up with certain assumptions or belief about the value of our own achievements and potentialities which are to a greater or lesser degree, determined by what Paul calls, the wisdom of the world. Our lives are judged, and we judge ourselves by that wisdom. We tend to value our lives, plus or minus, according to how well we measure up to the standards set by the wisdom of the world, Functionally, that wisdom becomes God and Paul can even speak of it elsewhere as the God of this world. Those of us who style ourselves Christians may think that we can see such worldly standards, such manifestations of the wisdom of the world when they appear in inconspicuous forms, when people are gluttonous or indulge in outlandish or conspicuous consumption. We can see it for example, in summer homes, swimming pools, expensive new automobiles, trips to Las Vegas or other well-known centers of iniquity and bad taste. We are less likely however, to acknowledge the existence of the wisdom of that world when it appears in our own drive for professional or academic success. Still less when it appears in our ambition for the success of our children. But high grades, big books, professional esteem, sabbaticals in far away places, sons or daughters at Yale or Stanford or Duke. these too maybe for us, tokens of the wisdom of this world. Not that such things are bad. In fact, I'm persuaded that they're better than summer houses and social status, although they may

not be unrelated to them. And if we pursue the one, we may even have our eye on the other as well. But, even in our better and more worthwhile accomplishments and the noble goals we strive to attain, even in those things, we may also stand under the aegis of what Paul calls the wisdom of the world. Now, this is a hard word indeed, but it is the gospel. And this is why the gospel looks like foolishness, as Paul rightly perceived. For the gospel is not grounded upon what we can attain for ourselves or what we make for ourselves. Its certainty and assurance are not based upon success and the stability and the approval of society. We must also be wary about any easy identification of institutional Christianity, even this chapel and service, this university, generally approved social institutions, with the gospel. In their time and place, they are good things. We need them. We could do much worse than cast our lot with them. But even they are not the good news of God, and our participation in them is not necessarily faith in the gospel. To hear and to take to ourselves that good news, we must apply Paul's words to ourselves. Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth, but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised, even the things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. Do these words apply? Can they apply to us? Paul wrote to people whose lowly status in life was obvious enough. He wrote descriptively about how they actually had been, but not only descriptively, for what he says of the Corinthians is not just a bit of extraneous historical information, his assessment of their lot in life enables him to make clear their stake in the gospel, in the good news. It is all they have, and they must not make it subject to the wisdom of the world. But at the same time, the gospel is mediated to and through those whom the world despises. Now in conclusion, I do not suggest that Paul or God wants us to make ourselves self-consciously despised before the world. We have to live in the world, and that fact is to be taken seriously. Paul takes it seriously. It's taken seriously throughout the New Testament and the church historically has attempted to do so as well. But the word of the cross invites us to put our faith and hope in another reality, a reality that lies beyond the world, but a reality that impinges itself upon this world in such a way that it always stands in judgment upon those hopes and aspirations and goals which we project for ourselves, or which we allow society to project for us. If we accept the message of the cross as judgment upon ourselves, we do indeed have to face up to the hard and practical question of how to live in this world, which for the moment at least, is the only world we have. This is an important question, an unavoidable question, but the question which Paul puts to us in this text is of another order although fundamentally related. It is the same question he put to the Corinthian Christians. It is the prior question. For he asks, "On what basis will you order your life? Will God's grace and judgment be your new life continually, ever anew, or will you again fall prey to the wisdom of the world?" Against such a danger, whether in current or here, Paul has written, "For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe." For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. Amen. (harmonious instrumental music) (graceful orchestral music) (soft instrumental music) (choir singing harmoniously) (lively orchestral music)

- If anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Let us not love in word or speech, but in deed and in truth. Accept our Lord, these humble tokens of our effort truly to love as you love, giving freely and willingly of ourselves. Amen. (lively instrumental music) (enthusiastic orchestral music) Go forth in peace and be of good courage. Hold fast that

which is good, rejoicing in the wisdom of God and the power of the Holy Spirit. And the blessing of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be with you now and remain with you forever. ♪ Amen ♪ ♪ Amen ♪ ♪ Amen ♪ ♪ Amen ♪ ♪ Amen ♪ ♪ Amen ♪ ♪ Amen ♪ (bell chiming) (gentle instrumental music)