

- Whom to leave the family jewels and then, there are the issues of personal morals, what to do with our sexual impulses, how do we feel about alcohol, whether we should be truthful for the forms of the IRS. I speak of the personal and the universal. Life is not clear-cut for any of us. The proper paths are rarely marked. And in the midst of ambiguity, uncertainty, and equivocation, we know confusion, anxiety, and irresolution. Surely, we find ourselves in the middle of things. Moses found himself in the middle of things. Between a stiff-necked people and the demanding God of the rigid and ancient law, between the Egypt of the pharaohs and the fierce tribes of Canaan. In his youth, Moses the Hebrew was raised in the royal Egyptian household. In his last days, Moses beheld, nearly, the Land of Promise. And in the Old Testament lesson, we learn that Moses is not the be-all and end-all prophet. Rather, he is an heir to Abraham's vision and a precursor of the Christ that is to be. Jesus also stands in the middle of things. Not merely man, not only God. But man and God, He mediates to us our redemption. He came to earth between creation and consummation, between the fall and the judgment. He was born in the midst of shepherd's adoration and politician's intrigue. In His ministry, He was ever a center of controversy. In His death, He was suspended between heaven and earth. And in His resurrection, He lives as our friend and our God. We Christians find ourselves in the middle of things. Our epistle lesson reminds us that we are poised between liberty and responsibility. Between our weaker sisters and brothers and our stronger sisters and brothers. We debate among ourselves whether to accept homosexuals in the church, whether to unite with other denominations, how to distribute aid to revolution-prone third world countries. We encounter moral issues unimagined by the church of Paul's time. Care for the environment, the allocation of limited resources, the use of sophisticated technology to prolong life, human fertilization in a test tube, surrogate motherhood, to name just a few. Surely God's people are in the middle of things. Above all this fray, however, I now hold up a shining truth. In the middle of things, where we are, God comes to us. The power and presence of God comes to us, to sustain us in our times of doubt and uncertainty, to affirm us in difficult decisions faithfully executed. To comfort us, not condemn us when we make a mess of things. To forgive us when we sin. To accept us when we fail. To strengthen us, that we may effectively serve God and man. God comes to us as our friend in Jesus Christ and stands with us, no matter our trivialness, our humanness, our imperfection, He stands with us that we may have courage for our feet, peace for our minds, and rest for our souls. I could support this affirmation of faith with Bible stories, the lives of saints or the experiences of friends. But I really believe it only because I have known it in my own life. In the summer of 1983, I was really in the middle of things. Never had I known such gloom, uncertainty and confusion. My carefully-laid plans for the future were but ashes. No, I was not to be married. No, I was not to be the beneficiary of the excitement and prestige that would be generated by having a medical doctor for my wife. In the aftermath of the dissolved engagement, some of my most cherished youthful illusions and misconceptions surrendered to the verities of life. Sunday School platitudes shattered like glass. Family maxims crumbled under the stress of weighty reality. Was there any new wisdom to replace the old? And while I was in the midst of this emotional and intellectual ferment, my social life was an utter disaster. No one, it seemed, would go out with me. (audience laughs) No one would invite me. And no wonder. Gloom is contagious. I recall lying in bed in my un-air-conditioned apartment, dimly conscious of the deepening darkness of sunset, very conscious of the

heavy, humid air of the North Carolina summer. I recall brooding in misery as the minutes slipped away. Not thinking about anything in particular, I was just hurting all over and brooding in misery as the minutes slipped away. Then the remarkable happened. Something I'd not known in years and never in God-forsaken Durham. An exquisitely glowing and cooling warmth spread from my inside out. Just for an instant, I believe, God let me feel His presence in that room with me and He let me feel His love for me. I felt, no, I knew, that all would be all right, that all manner of thing would be well. The circumstances had not changed. I still had no social life. I was still confused. And it was still steamy in Durham. But the way I felt about things and the way I thought about things had changed. For no matter what happened, God loved me and He would be with me. It is a natural human failing to try to make of God either a master magician or else an oracle. So often we would command God to heal the sick or save the lost. We would gladly hear from heaven the very will of God in very plain English. Yet even though I believe in the power of God to heal and even though I do not deny for a second that God may speak in very plain English, I still can't escape suspecting that in our unguarded moments, we would really like to sequester for ourselves the miraculous powers and communications of God and use Him to satisfy our whims and to obtain the sense of personal importance and glory that might come. But God won't do our bidding. He won't fit into our neat little boxes. He won't obey our commands and He'll speak when He's ready to whomever He wishes to speak, in whatever language He wishes to speak in. God does not permit us to take heaven by storm. What is it then that God does? He comes to us in our weakness, in our vulnerability, in our humanness. He comes to us in the expected, in the unexpected, in the good and in the evil, in the resplendent sunset, in the rainy day, in the joy of life, in the agony of death, God comes to us. On that muggy summer evening, God didn't tell me what to do. He didn't work that perfect miracle that I thought would set things just, oh, just so right. Nevertheless, God came to me. My renewed confidence in God's presence in my life has contributed to a period of great personal growth. I seem to have known more vitality and more variety in the working of God than I could have ever before imagined. And when things get difficult, as they often do, my spirits are lifted and my faith is reinvigorated by the memory of that sultry summer evening. I believe that God's powerful presence enables us to disentangle our knotted lives, to take on the difficult issues, to work out our salvation. I believe that His presence, His love, His comfort, His friendship, allow us to participate fully in life's dialectic. Sometimes painful, sometimes exciting, sometimes thought-provoking dialectic, which works for our growth toward maturity. And because God is present when we face difficult decisions, because God stands beside us when we confront life's challenges, because God is with us in the middle of things, we become different people, stronger people, wiser people, enriched people. And so it is that I hold up another shining truth. Ultimately, when sanctified by the presence of God, being in the middle of things becomes a good thing. (organ music) ♪ ♪ How firm a foundation, you saints of the Lord ♪ ♪ Is laid for your faith in His excellent Word ♪ ♪ What more can He say than to you He has said ♪ ♪ To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled ♪ ♪ Fear not, I am with you, O be not dismayed ♪ ♪ For I am your God, and will still give you aid ♪ ♪ I'll strengthen you, help you, and cause you to stand ♪ ♪ Upheld by My righteous, omnipotent hand ♪ ♪ When through the deep waters I call you to go ♪ ♪ The rivers of sorrow shall not overflow ♪ ♪ For I will be with you, your troubles to bless ♪ ♪ And sanctify to you your deepest distress ♪ ♪ When through fiery trials your pathway shall lie ♪ ♪ My grace, all-sufficient, shall be your supply ♪ ♪ The flame shall not hurt you; I only design ♪ ♪ Your dross to consume and your gold to refine ♪ ♪ The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose ♪ ♪ I will not, I will not desert to His foes ♪ ♪ That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake ♪ ♪ I'll never, no never, no never forsake ♪

- The Lord be with you.

- And also with you.

- Let us pray. Eternal God, Creator of all that was and is and is to come, Thou hast called the world and the creatures which inhabit it into being and hath pronounced it good. We acknowledge this same goodness as we approach Thee, not in fear and trembling as though before a terrible judge, but as a child to its parent, knowing Thy infinite love and care for us, accepting Thy call to be as one family with our sisters and brothers throughout the world, we offer now these prayers for others. Let us pray for all those who suffer loss or bereavement. May Thy presence among them be as though a healing ointment, that their souls may be nourished and their spirits renewed. Show them anew the sources of strength and serenity. Let us pray for those in trouble or affliction. Look with pity upon them, O God, and comfort them with a sense of Thy goodness. Let us pray for all who are poor, needy and neglected. Heal those who are broken in body or spirit that their sorrow may be turned into joy. Let us pray for those who have dedicated themselves to the service of high and worthy causes. May their labors bear fruits of compassion and bear witness to the power of Thy love. Let us pray for those who receive little recognition, yet commit themselves to attending to the everyday task of our world. May their hearts be full and their joy complete as they live lives of service. Let us pray for ourselves that young and old, we may constantly be made new people by God's grace. That we might recognize Thy sanctifying presence more clearly, even as we stand in the middle of things. That Thou mayest keep us together as parent and child, as sister and brother, as one people the world around. This we ask in the name of Christ, amen. And now let us offer our gifts and ourselves to God. (organ music) (organ music) ♪ Praise God from whom all blessings flow ♪ ♪ Praise Him, all creatures here below ♪ ♪ Alleluia ♪ ♪ Alleluia ♪ ♪ Praise Him above, ye heav'nly host ♪ ♪ Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost ♪ ♪ Alleluia ♪ ♪ Alleluia ♪ ♪ Alleluia ♪ ♪ Alleluia ♪ ♪ Amen ♪

- Eternal God, from Sheba to Thee, men came forth telling Thy praise, offering gifts most rare. So today we offer unto Thee these gifts of our time and talents, dedicating them to the work of Thy kingdom, as we offer the costliest gift of all, our hearts. 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, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever, amen. (organ music) ♪ Be still my soul ♪ ♪ The Lord is on thy side ♪ ♪ Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain ♪ ♪ Leave to thy God to order and provide ♪ ♪ In every change He faithful will remain ♪ ♪ Be still my soul ♪ ♪ Thy best, thy heavenly friend ♪ ♪ Through thorny ways leads to a joyful end ♪ ♪ Be still, my soul ♪ ♪ Thy God doth undertake ♪ ♪ To guide the future ♪ ♪ As He has the past ♪ ♪ Thy hope, thy confidence ♪ ♪ Let nothing shake ♪ ♪ All now mysterious ♪ ♪ Shall be bright at last ♪ ♪ Be still, my soul ♪ ♪ The waves and winds still know ♪ ♪ His voice who ruled them ♪ ♪ While He dwelt below ♪ ♪ Be still, my soul ♪ ♪ The hour is hastening on ♪ ♪ When we shall be ♪ ♪ Forever with the Lord ♪ ♪ When disappointment, grief, and fear are gone ♪ ♪ Sorrow forgot, love's purest joys restored ♪ ♪ Be still, my soul ♪

♪ When change and tears are past ♪ ♪ All safe and blessed ♪ ♪ When we shall meet at last ♪

- A reminder for all those interested in joining a graduate and professional students' fellowship group. There will be a reception held in the chapel basement immediately following service, and many thanks to friends of chapel for sponsoring this event. And now go in peace to love and serve God and your neighbor in all that you do and may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all now and forever. ♪ Amen ♪ ♪ Amen ♪ (organ music)