

(spiritual organ music)

- We welcome you this morning to this service of worship here in the chapel. Today, we are going Dutch, our preacher today is, do you have that expression in Holland, going Dutch?

- No, we haven't.

- It's probably not one of your favorite expressions, but our preacher is from the Westerkerk, Amsterdam's historic Reformed church. He is Nico Ter Linden, a popular voice of the church in Holland, in radio and television broadcasts, and his far-flung ministry from the Westerkerk, he is a distinguished writer and pastoral theologian. He has taught in Eden Seminary in St. Louis and he is here this week lecturing at the Duke Divinity School and we are happy to welcome Pastor ter Linden, here to the chapel this morning. We also remind you, particularly the students, of our annual All Hallows Eve service, tomorrow night, 11:30, here in the chapel. And now let us continue the worship of God. (majestic choral music) ♪ I believe in one God ♪ ♪ The Father almighty ♪ ♪ Maker of Heaven and earth ♪ ♪ And of all things visible and invisible ♪ ♪ And in one Lord Jesus Christ ♪ ♪ The only-begotten Son of God ♪ ♪ Begotten of the Father before all ages ♪ ♪ God of God, Light of Light ♪ ♪ Very God of very God ♪ ♪ Begotten not made, being of one substance ♪ ♪ With the Father, through Whom all things were made ♪ ♪ Who for us men and for our salvation ♪ ♪ Came down from Heaven, was incarnate ♪ ♪ By the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary ♪ ♪ And was made man ♪ ♪ Who for us, too, was crucified under Pontius Pilate ♪ ♪ Suffered, and was buried ♪ ♪ The third day He rose according to the Scriptures ♪ ♪ Ascended into Heaven, and is seated ♪ ♪ On the right hand of the Father ♪ ♪ He shall come again with glory ♪ ♪ To judge the living and the dead ♪ ♪ And His kingdom shall have no end ♪ ♪ And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life ♪ ♪ Who proceeds from the Father and the Son ♪ ♪ Who together with the Father and the Son is worshiped ♪ ♪ And glorified ♪ ♪ Who spoke by the prophets ♪ ♪ And I believe one holy, Christian, and apostolic Church ♪ ♪ I acknowledge one baptism ♪ ♪ For the remission of sins ♪ ♪ And I look for the resurrection of the dead ♪ ♪ And life of the age to come ♪ ♪ Amen ♪ (spiritual organ music) ♪ Praise, my soul, the King of Heaven ♪ ♪ To His feet thy tribute bring ♪ ♪ Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven ♪ ♪ Evermore His praises sing ♪ ♪ Alleluia, alleluia ♪ ♪ Praise the everlasting King ♪ ♪ Praise Him for His grace and favor ♪ ♪ To our fathers in distress ♪ ♪ Praise Him still the same as ever ♪ ♪ Slow to chide, and swift to bless ♪ ♪ Alleluia, alleluia ♪ ♪ Glorious in His faithfulness ♪ ♪ Fatherlike He tends and spares us ♪ ♪ Well our feeble frame He knows ♪ ♪ In His hands He gently bears us ♪ ♪ Rescues us from all our foes ♪ ♪ Alleluia, alleluia ♪ ♪ Widely yet His mercy flows ♪ (organ music) ♪ Angels, help us to adore him ♪ ♪ You behold him face to face ♪ ♪ Sun and moon, bow down before him ♪ ♪ Dwellers all in time and space ♪ ♪ Alleluia, alleluia ♪ ♪ Praise with us the God of grace ♪

- Be seated. Let us pray together the prayer for illumination. 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 hear with joy what you say to us this day, amen. ♪ Teach me, oh Lord, the way ♪ ♪ Of thy statutes ♪ ♪ And I shall keep it unto the end ♪ ♪ Give me understanding ♪ ♪ And I shall keep thy law ♪ ♪ Yea, I shall keep it with my whole heart ♪ ♪ Make me

to go in the path of thy commandments ♪ ♪ For therein is my desire ♪ ♪ Incline my heart unto thy testimonies ♪ ♪ And not to covetousness ♪ ♪ Oh turn away mine eyes ♪ ♪ Lest they behold vanity ♪ ♪ And quicken me in thy ways ♪ ♪ Oh stablish thy word in thy servant ♪ ♪ that I may fear thee ♪ ♪ Glory be to the Father ♪ ♪ And to the Son ♪ ♪ And to the Holy Ghost ♪ ♪ As it was in the beginning ♪ ♪ And is now, and ever shall be ♪ ♪ World without end, Amen ♪ ♪ Amen ♪

- After the reading from the Book of Ecclesiastes and a short gospel reading, we will sing an old Dutch hymn from the 17th century, We Gather Together. You are familiar with that. And after the sermon, a modern Dutch hymn written by a friend of mine, Roman Catholic Priest in Amsterdam. The hymn became quite famous in my country and I'd like to share it with you today. They call him Ecclesiastes, the preacher. A funny name for him really, seeing he seems not to preach at all. One's first impression is that the dear man has little to report than that all is vanity. Everything is futile, trivial. An evaporating, transitory breath, vanity of vanities. Or to put it in Hebrew, (speaking foreign language). He's obsessed by desolation and futility. You seldom see him sighted on calendars with Bible text. He is the "enfant terrible" of the Old Testament. The ET of the OT. (attendees laughing) His questions gnaw at just about everything we consider to be of significance or value. In short, surveys have shown that nowadays, Ecclesiastes is one of the most popular Bible books. Ecclesiastes, the preacher, who smiles about the preaching of others. A teacher who doesn't teach. Who comes up with a 'but' after every amen. He was scarcely included among the Bible writings. He is a borderline case, a believer on the fringe, we would say. Way out, but that is often where the most special believers are. Ecclesiastes is the most recent writing of the Old Testament, the youngest. The author, must have lived about 250 before Christ, probably in Jerusalem. He must have been a teacher of wisdom, a sort of pedagogue, though certainly a quaint one. Bowed under the absurdity of existence, he searches for the meaning of it all. He did not find much. But he shows us what he did find. And that he wants to share, I like him. Listen. The words of the preacher, the son of David, King of Jerusalem, emptiness, emptiness. Vanity of vanities, (speaking foreign language), says the speaker. Emptiness, all is empty. What does man gain from all his labor and his toil here under the sun? Generations come and generations go, while the earth endures forever. The sun rises and the sun goes down, but it returns to its place and rises there again. The wind blows South, the wind blows North, around and round it goes and returns full circle. All streams run into the sea. Yet the sea never overflows. Back to the place from which the streams ran, they return to run again. All things are wearisome, no man can speak of them all. Is not the eye surfeited with seeing and the ear sated with hearing? What has happened will happen again and what has been done will be done again. And there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which one can say, look this is new? No, it has already existed long ago, before our time. (majestic music) For everything a season. And for every activity under the Heaven its time. A time to be born and a time to die. A time to plant and a time to uproot. A time to kill and a time to heal. A time to pull down and a time to build up. A time to weep and a time to laugh. A time for mourning and a time for dancing. A time to scatter stones and a time to gather them. A time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing. A time to seek and a time to lose. A time to keep and a time to throw away. A time to tear and a time to mend. A time for silence and a time for speech. A time to love and a time to hate. A time for war and a time for peace. What profit does one who works get from all his labor? I have seen the business that God has given man to keep them busy. He has made everything to shoot it's time, moreover, he has given man a sense of time passed and future. But no comprehension of God's work from beginning to end. I know that there is nothing good for man except to be happy and to live the best life he can while he is

alive. Moreover that the man shall eat and drink and enjoy himself, in return from all his labors, is a gift from God. (majestic flute music) Do not rush into speech. Let there be no hasty utterance in God's presence. God is in Heaven, you are on Earth. So let your words be few. Consider God's handiwork, who can straighten what he has made crooked? When things go well, be glad, but when things go ill, consider this, God has set the one alongside the other in such a way that no one can find out what is to happen next. In my empty existence, I've seen it all, from a righteous man, perishing in his righteousness, to a wicked man growing old in his wickedness. (majestic flute music) I went on to reflect. I set my mind to inquire and search for wisdom and the sum of things. Only to discover that it is folly to be wicked and madness to act like a fool. Who is wise enough for all this? Who knows the meaning of anything? Wisdom lights up a man's face. But grim looks make a man hated. I applied my mind to all this and I understood that the righteous and the wise and all their doings are under God's control. But is it love or hatred? No man knows. Everything that confronts him, everything is empty, since one and the same fate befalls everyone. (majestic music) This is what is wrong in all that is done here under the sun. That one in the same fate befalls every man. The hearts of men is full of evil. Madness fills the hearts all through their lives and after that, death awaits you. But for a man who is counted among the living there is still hope, a live dog is better than a dead lion. True the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing. There are no more rewards for them. They are utterly forgotten. For them, love, hate, ambition are, all are over now. Never again will they have any part in what is done here under the sun. Go to it then. Eat your food and enjoy it. And drink your wine with a cheerful heart. For already God has accepted what you have done. Always be dressed in white and never fail to anoint your head. Enjoy life with the one you love all the days of your allotted span here under the sun. Empty as they are, for that is your lot while you live and labor here under the sun. Whatever task lies to your hand, do it with all your might. One more thing I have observed, here under the sun, speed doesn't win the race, nor strength the battle. Bread does not belong to the wise, nor wealth to the intelligent. Nor success to the skillful. Time and chance govern all. Moreover, no man knows when his hour will come. Like fish caught in a net. Like a bird taken in a snare. So men are trapped, when their times come suddenly. (woeful flute music) Delight in your boyhood, young man. Make the most of the days of your youth. Let your hearts and your eyes show you the way, but remember that for all these things, God will call you to account. Banish discontent from your mind and shake off the troubles of the body. Boyhood and the prime of life are mere emptiness. Don't let the excitement of being young cause you to forget about your creator. Honor him in your youth before the evil years come, when you will no longer enjoy living. It will be too late then to try to remember him when the sun and light and moon and stars are dimmed to your old eyes. And there is no silver lining left among your clouds. For there will come a time when your limbs will tremble with age and your strong legs will become weak and your teeth will be too few to do their work and there will be blindness, too. Then let your lips be tightly closed while eating, when your teeth are gone. And you will awaken at dawn, with the first note of the birds but you yourself will be deaf and tuneless with quavering voice. You will be afraid of heights and of falling. A white haired, withered old man dragging himself along without sexual desire, standing at death's door, and nearing his everlasting home as the mourners go along the streets. Yes, remember your creator, now while you are young. Before the silver cord of life snaps and the golden bowl is broken, and the pitcher is broken at the fountain, and the wheel is broken at the cistern and the dust returns to the Earth as it was, and the spirit disappears in God who gave it. (woeful music) There were some present at that very time who told Jesus of the Galilean's whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans "were worse sinners than all the other Galileans,

"because they suffered thus? "I tell you, no. "But unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. "Or those 18 people upon whom the tower "in Siloam fell and killed them. "Do you think they were worse offenders than "all the others dwelled in Jerusalem? "I tell you, no. "But unless you repent, you will all likewise, perish." Here ends the lesson. (spiritual organ music) ♪ We gather together to ask the Lord's blessing ♪ ♪ He chastens and hastens His will to make known ♪ ♪ The wicked oppressing now cease from distressing ♪ ♪ Sing praises to His Name ♪ ♪ He forgets not His own ♪ ♪ Beside us to guide us ♪ ♪ Our God with us joining ♪ ♪ Ordaining, maintaining His kingdom divine ♪ ♪ So from the beginning ♪ ♪ The fight we were winning ♪ ♪ Thou, Lord, were at our side ♪ ♪ All glory be Thine ♪ ♪ We all do extol Thee ♪ ♪ Thou Leader triumphant ♪ ♪ And pray that Thou still ♪ ♪ Our Defender will be ♪ ♪ Let Thy congregation escape tribulation ♪ ♪ Thy Name be ever praised ♪ ♪ Oh Lord, make us free ♪

- Let me begin with a short poem by the Yiddish folk singer, Mordechai Gebirtig who was killed in the ghetto of Kraków in 1942. Papa, the Rabbi says that God shields and shelters us, that he knows everything. That all that happens is known to him up there. Yes, my child, that is true. Then, Papa, why, when we are battered and beaten, brutally butchered and must endure torture and torment, why is he silent up there? Hush, my child. Not a word. We who hear this, might well ask ourselves, if it is really true that God shields and shelters us, that he knows everything, that all that happens is known to him, up there. Oh sometimes you think so. There's much to enjoy here though, much to be thankful for, much to make ones till in law. Things which point beyond themselves and you stammer, God, glad to have the right address for your joy, to be able to acknowledge receipt of so many blessings. But, like my grandmother used to say, "sometimes it's different than sometimes." For sometimes you suddenly don't understand it all, anymore. You had just soared as free as a bird and suddenly a snare snaps down and you're trapped. You were, in your element, like a fish in water and then suddenly a jabbing pain in the mouth and you lie gasping on the shore, battered, beaten brutally, and you stammer something like, "God." But you're not sure you have the right address, and why is he silent up there? Well what about curses and blessings. Why does the one receive a curse and the other a blessing? Why did I stay alive when the other died? Is it true, as the Rabbi said, that God shields and shelters us? Or should we not rather say that chance is king? You search and seek to find the sum of things, but to no avail. There is no underlying system to be seen. Speed does not always win the race. How many noble people have now died before their time, while their tormentors lived on to enjoy the good things of life? The preacher searches and seeks but he does not find the sum of things. He comes away none the wiser. It is emptiness, vanity, he says. It's all able, transitory breaths evaporating into nothing. That's it. We live in an extremely dubious place in which no recognizable righteousness reigns. Where no guiding God shows his merciful face. Where not infrequently things go badly for the good and go well for the bad. Where unpredictable chance reigns at random. Life, life, life, life is air. Able ablim like a wind that passes away. Everything slips away as a breath dissolving into thin air. And in the end, death awaits you. Dust returns to what it originally was. And dissolves in the air. And life's spirit returns to where it came from and disappears in God who gave it. Take, take for example the life of the Jewish lady, Frieda Borgstein whose story has been so impressively and respectfully and carefully recorded by Marga Minco in her book, The Fall. Marga Minco is a Dutch author of Jewish background who miraculously survived the war. The only one of her family. In the story, two municipal repairmen begin fixing an overheated vault of the city's heating system. Half an hour behind schedule. In a nearby motel rest home, a visit of a delegation is at the last moment moved up half an hour ahead of schedule. And because of the nervous flurry, the staff is in, under the circumstances, one of

the residences of the rest home, the 85 year old, Mrs. Borgstein, leaves the home half an hour later than she had planned, to do some shopping for her coming birthday. It is bitter winter. And no one can say how it exactly happened, but Mrs. Borgstein falls into the momentarily unguarded heating vault and drowns in the boiling water. A gruesome death because of things happening accidentally behind time. Just as 40 years earlier, she had survived because of things happening accidentally ahead of time. In the spring of 42, the young man who was to help her and her husband and children flee to Switzerland knocked on the door six minutes earlier than planned. Was it chance that at that moment, the German security police stopped and took everyone along? Everyone, that is except for Frieda. She had just gone upstairs to get a sweater for her little daughter. She had after all still five minutes to go, didn't she? She heard voices downstairs and the outside door slammed, "wait, wait for me," she cried. And to hurry to get downstairs, she fell. She sprang up and stumbled again with the sweater clutched tightly to her, she limped to the door, looking down the wet, dimly lit key. She just saw a gray car slow down and disappear around a corner at the bastion. That evening was the first of 40 years of loneliness for Frieda. Well, how does one survive such a survival? We read that Frieda threw herself into bookkeeping, seeking security in the neutral, cool, unpretentious numbers. Passionately, she begins to calculate, multiply, figure out square roots, a forest of figures in which she could lose herself. She searched and sought, and did she find the sum of things? Could she get anywhere with them? In any case, she keeps herself from going crazy, prevents the fuses from blowing. The numbers hold off the things which she cannot bear. From time to time, she would spread out pictures of her family before her on the table as though in a game of solitaire, quietly communing with the dead. And then she would put them back in the wallet. After the fall, the fall into the heating vault, the janitor of the rest home was given the wallet, swollen with water. The photographs were glued together in a lump. The head matron asked him, "Would you, "would you please dispose of this, Abels?" That was his name, Abels, Ben Abels, son of Abel, also a survivor. Also a victim of Cain. And what is the meaning of it all? The meaning of another death, and of your life, who is to say? This world is an extremely dubious place, emptiness, air, evaporation, that's all, abel, abelim. Would you please dispose of this, Abels? The photographs, rubbed out images of the dead. He felt as though he were performing a ceremony, when he descended with the small bundle to the storage cellar. Looking around, he saw a new shiny ash can standing in the corner. He walked towards it, placed the packet on the bottom, and gently, almost solemnly, closed the lid. Ashes to ashes, dust returns to what it originally was, and returns in the earth. Well, how are we to take this? How can we fathom it? We are subjected to time and chance. The preacher says time and chance, the two notions are easily associated. "It was his time," said the widow. "I really believe it, it was his time," for she refused to believe in chance. But the preacher is really not so sure at all. He is wary of speculations, calculating systems. "That all is just a foolish chasing "of the wind, nothing more," he says. And he confronts God with his bitter complaint. Must he, like a gypsy, exist on the edge of the universe, which is deaf to his music and insensitive to his expectations, sufferings and predicaments? Skeptical is the preacher and cynical. But the desolation which he at times portrays seems also a reflection of his deep faith, for in all of his anguish and loneliness, he is not cut off from God. Sure, there is a great distance between, God is in Heaven and man is upon Earth. Man must not transgress the boundaries of his own limitations, he is finite. And after investigation, everything here on Earth, after trying hard to find the sum of things, he must admit that he cannot penetrate the secrets of life. But God is not excluded. In the end, the preacher bows before the unfathomable greatness of God, whom he cannot understand, but who, the preacher is convinced, holds the lot of each human being, time and chance, in his hand. In the end, it is not fate and chance that govern what happens, but God. But don't ask

why, and don't ask how, because an Earthly being is unable to grasp such things. The preacher, he is not a Moses, who is said to have known God face to face. The preacher knows that he himself is far from the burning bush, too far away to dare to assert hearing the voice, but he sees something burning and has taken his shoes off. He summons us to enjoy that which we have been able to salvage from the lost paradise. There is, here below, so much to enjoy, so much to be thankful for, so much to silence one, as we stand in awe of the miraculous. Things which point beyond themselves. Therefore go to it then, eat your food and enjoy it, and drink your wine with a cheerful heart, enjoy life together with the one you love, and as long as it is possible in the fleeting days of your allotted span under the sun, do whatever task lies to your hand, and do it with all your might. Later on, Jesus will speak similar words. Don't worry about things. Look at the lilies of the field, look at the birds of the air. They are God's, and so are you, and so is the one sitting next to you. Do what your hand finds to do, and don't worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow will have its own worries, each day has enough of its own worries. But when evil comes, it might easily happen that all of a sudden, you don't understand it anymore. Papa, the rabbi says... Once they came to Jesus with a similar problem. A water tower had fallen, 18 victims under the ruins. Why those and not others? You know how things go. The one man who just happened to go to fetch something and escape the disaster, while a child was bringing a loaf of bread, which his father had forgotten, and then the tower came tumbling down. Why? Pious people come up with an answer. God is behind it all, they say. They refuse to believe in chance. It must be a punishment for sin, they say. And with their solution, their system, they come to Jesus. But they are at the wrong address. Jesus does not belong to those who know it all. To this bitter, dark, riddle, he offers them no solution. He only says, it is not like you think it is, and after that, he more or less drops the subject. He doesn't know why. Later, he didn't know why in his own situation either. It is a question which never lies down. Nevertheless, Jesus lets the question rest, and he can do that, because deep inside, he trusts in God in such a way that he can leave this bitter dark mystery with God. The secrets of the enemy must be obtained at all costs. But as secrets of our Father, who is in Heaven, can be left with him, can't they? Don't worry, don't be anxious. Every hair of your head is numbered. In other words, you don't have to count them yourself. Use your time for something else. There's enough to do, the days flee by. Repent, says Jesus, meaning, turn around, stop speculating. You philosophize about life and chance, but by doing so, you place yourself outside life, you are not really living life itself. Do not say, when your finger gets trapped in the door, that it is the finger of God. That is not living, that is keeping life at a distance. Then you are dead. Arise. You better make a U-turn. In this way, Jesus will turn them around with their backs towards chance, which is left to rest un-understood, but with their faces toward God. He never attempted to reduce real life to a formula. In kingly simplicity, he lived as a child and played before the presence of the Father, among the people, while keeping a close eye on the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. His life knew both bitterness and blessing. But it was for him, a constantly repeated wonder in which things and people, sent by God, chanced upon his path. Thus he went his way. And the story goes that it was not a dead end street. When Frieda Borgstein was buried, Ben Abels stood at her grave. He saw a thrush alight in an evergreen. It was as though it wanted to drown out, with its clear voice, the thudding of the earth on the coffin. Abels kept listening until only the high whistle of the bird was to be heard. The song of the thrush in the dead of Winter is exceptional. It is ahead of time, an anticipation of Summer. In the bleak mid-Winter, a song from on high drowns out the dull thudding of futility. The sound of what seems to be an irrevocable end is drowned out, not by a deed of man, but by a bird of the air. You have to be a son of Abel, a daughter of Abel, or at least be able to understand their language in order to have a quiet but growing conviction that, in an uncertain world,

where all theories and formulas would seem to lend meaning to life are smashed out of your hands. There is yet a predominance of life over death. Nothing, nothing helps to clarify how things happen. Don't waste too much time on that. Remember the dead. Revere their names, respectfully and carefully. Don't allow barbarity to repeat itself. Do whatever task lies to your hand. All the days that God has given you under the sun, and love life passionately, amen. (inspiring organ music) (inspiring choral singing)

- The Lord be with you.

All: And also with you.

- Let us pray. Lord, our God, we have read words given to us by Israel, given to Israel by you. Oh, Lord, you know us, our misery and our grandeur, our agony, our ecstasy, our split mind, our thankfulness for people and things, and also that we sometimes quite suddenly do not understand anything anymore. The preacher said that if a man is wise, his wisdom lights up his face, the sun breaks through, the icy, tense expression disappears. He must have looked a bit that way himself, and Jesus too. In spite of all the worries, not a worried man, because he was full of trust in you. And now we ask that we also might resemble them. We pray for an open and receptive heart, for eyes that, in spite of everything we do not see, still do not miss the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, or a faith that in the dead of Winter can sing about Summer. Able to give an inspiring testimony of this for the benefit of many, who in the eyes of others, are worth no more than a passing breath, just Abels. We pray for Israel. That it might have a safe place to live in, that it might find piece and reconciliation with the people of Iran. We ask for piece and reconciliation in the places where we live. That the sun might break through a bit on our faces, that we might act with more reverence and care towards everything which we have been able to take along out of paradise. We pray for those who are sick, for the elderly who have so much to look back on, but also so much to look forward to. For those who must die, we pray that in all the unresolvable whys, they won't lose their trust in you. Oh God, so many more questions and requests rise in our hearts, so many names, so many faces. Oh God, we believe, help our unbelief. Amen. (inspiring organ music) (inspiring choral singing) (inspiring organ music) (inspiring choral singing) (inspiring choral singing) ♪ Praise God from whom all blessings flow ♪ ♪ Praise God, all creatures here below ♪ ♪ Alleluia, Alleluia ♪ ♪ Praise God above, ye heavenly host ♪ ♪ Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost ♪ ♪ Alleluia, Alleluia ♪ ♪ Alleluia, Alleluia ♪ ♪ Alleluia ♪

- Almighty God, we give you these gifts in gratitude for all of the good days and the good things of this life, and also in gratitude for your presence and all of the difficult days and even ain the midst of the bad things of life, praying as we have been taught each day to say.

All: 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. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen. (inspiring organ music) (inspiring choral singing) (Spiritual organ music) (inspiring choral music)

- Now, may the grace of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy

Spirit be with you now and always. (inspiring choral singing) (excited organ music)