

- Duke University Chapel, Service of Worship. Third Sunday in Lent, March 13th, 1977. (sacred music)

- We dedicate our worship to the Lord, God almighty, who has revealed himself in Jesus as divine love and who abides in our hearts as the Holy spirit. Therefore, let us invoke the presence of God, let us pray. Almighty, eternal, and Holy God, who need us not, but desire us the worship of man, we bow before thee, because we acknowledged thee to be our God. Send upon us thy worshiping people, the gift of thy Holy spirit that we may know that thy word here, that we may conduct ourselves becoming late in the house that we may honor thee in our corporate service of prayer and praise and the word. And as we leave this holy place, grant us the assurance of thy blessing as promised unto us by thy son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, amen. (sacred music) If we say we have not sinned, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, God can be trusted to forgive us our sins. Therefore let us offer unto God, our unison prayer of confession. Let us pray. Oh Lord, we are grateful for this place, this moment, this experience, we find it very easy to withdraw from the world and turn our backs on the needs of our neighbor. We know that you have called us to go out from this place into the world, but we lack the courage and conviction our sinfulness and shortcomings handicap our potential. Forgive us, merciful God and move us to mission. Strengthen us to reach out a helping hand, to listen with a sympathetic ear and to be the answer to someone's prayer, help us in our being or God that someone else might become in Jesus name we pray. Now let us have moments of personal confession in quietness. And now hear these words over the assurance of pardon from the 103rd Psalm, as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is God's mercy toward them that fear him. As far as the East is from the West, so far has God removed our transgressions from us. Like as a father pities his children, so the Lord pities them that worship him, therefore be of good courage. Amen. (sacred music) Let us hear the word of God as it is contained in the scriptures of the Old Testament, in the book of the prophet Isaiah the sixth chapter, the first 10 verses. "The year that king Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above him, stood the seraphim. Each had six wings, with two, he covered His face and with two, he covered His feet. And with two, he flew. And one called to another, and said, holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory. And the foundations of the threshold shook at the voice of him who called and the house was filled with smoke. And I said, woe is me for I'm lost. And a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips for my eyes have seen the king, the Lord of hosts. Then flew one of the seraphim to me having in his hand, a burning coal, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said, behold, this has touched your lips, your guilt is taken away and your sin forgiven. And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, whom shall I send and who will go for us? Then I said, here I am, send me. And he said, go and say to this people hear and hear, but do not understand. See and see, but do not perceive make the heart of this people fat and their ears heavy and shut their eyes. Less they see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their hearts and turn and be healed." The end of the morning lesson. (sacred music) Let us affirm what we believe. We believe in God who has created and his 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 applauds) Let us pray. Let our first prayer be one of Thanksgiving. Most gracious Father, who for every new generation prepare us new life blessing. We thy people offer this prayer of Thanksgiving for the assurance of sins forgiven, for the power that has given us to lay hold of things unseen. For the strong sense we have that this world is not our abiding home for our restless heart, which nothing finite can satisfy. We give thee thanks, Oh God, for the invasion of our souls, by the Holy spirit for all human love and goodness that speak to us of thee, for the fullness of thy high glory outpour in Jesus Christ. We give the thanks so God that author of every good. Let us offer a prayer of intercession for the church. Oh, God, who has built thy church upon the foundation of the prophets and apostles, Jesus Christ, himself being the chief cornerstone save the community of thy people from cowardly surrender to the world, from rendering unto Caesar, what belongs to thee. From forgetting the eternal gospel, emit the temporal pressures about trouble days. We pray for the unity of the church, for a fellowship across embittered lines of race and nation. For a growth in grace, for a building in love for her enlargement in service, for her increase in wisdom, faith, clarity, and power in the spirit of Jesus Christ, whose church it is. And then let us offer prayer supplication for ourselves, for the guidance of God. Oh, God amid the darkness of this world in the ignorance of our own minds and in the feebleness about efforts after truth. We so often lose the way even when we seek to do thy will. Thy who are the way, the truth and the life show us the way that leads to the truth. That knowing the truth, we may inherit life, life that is everlasting and to thee we shall ascribe resist most due praise and the glory through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Brethren these were the prayers as prepared for this morning. Now we should offer the Lord's prayer together. But before we do that, some of you, if not all of you, have heard of two deaths, which affect our University. One is the death of Mike Shedler, football player and basketball player who died completely unexpectedly in Florida, where he was with the team on a Southern trip. The team canceled one of its games as a knob and is on the way home. His parents have either gone down or they were there with them, I'm not sure of this. The other death was just phoned into me, that I hear it's also in the paper. It's the death of Mr. E power Biggs, the great organist, the authority on BARR, who dedicated the Haute Camp, Oregon, which is over here in the Memorial Chapel. He has given recitals here at Duke. He has been a consultant to us as we work on the question of the Oregon, so let me with you just think of these two deaths and following that, we shall say the Lord's prayer. Oh God, who constantly reveals to us that in the midst of life, we are in death help us not only to realize that, to accept it, but to know that if we are born, we must die. We commend to the this family who so unexpectedly have lost a son. And we come in to the students of this University who will find sorrow on their return to the campus. We remember with gratitude, the life E. Power Biggs, who's meant so much to us in this place, willing to give a wide wide knowledge. We know that the trumpets sounded for him on the other side, and we hope that the Oregon's sounded awesome. And now as our savior Christ has taught us, we pray together, say, 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. Now we welcome to our pulpit one who is no stranger, one whom we are always glad to hear, Dean Thomas Lankford of our Divinity School

- In the name of the Father and of the son and of the Holy spirit, amen. This morning, I want to talk about

repentance. Not because we were at the end of the spring holidays. Although the spring rights may be cause for some to repent. Rather I've chosen this topic because we are in the season of lent. In the Christian calendar, lent precedes Easter and lent is a time of penitence. I also want to speak about words of assurance, for in our service of worship, our confession of sin is followed by words of assurance, words which speak of God's forgiveness and renewal of life. And we need such words. For without such assurance, our penance would be without a context of support and without a redeeming purpose. Let us begin with Isaiah and our text. It was as Isaiah had a vision of the Lord that he also gained a vantage point from which he could rightly view himself. I saw the Lord high and lifted up and I said, woe is me. I'm a man of unclean lips and live in the midst of a people of unclean lips. We do not in the present day, carry a heavy sense of sin. If in the average American congregation, the preacher were to rail loudly that all persons are sinners. That would be a slight nod of the head, but also a shrug of the shoulders. And some puzzlement, if not indifference, as to what this means. I've attempted to understand this fact, but I'm not sure I do. It's very complicated. In some ways to have a slight sense of sin can be a sign of healthy mindedness to have a morbid sense of sin can be unhealthy. I'm reminded of Nathaniel Hawthorne's parable of the Minister's black veil in which he describes a young minister in Milford who suddenly appeared wearing a veil that covered his face about which no explanation was given and whose presence disconcerted the people. It is healthy to have a view of life, which is not oppressive, self-flagellating, trouble by every word and act and thought. It's good to throw off unnecessary shackles, but a lack of a sense of sin may reflect the shallowness of experience of God and an insensitivity to others. It may on the one hand mean that we have not rightly encountered the holy, claiming, righteous God and the poverty of our experience of God results in a poverty of our self understanding. On the other hand, the lack of awareness of sin may reflect an insensitivity to others. And in sensitivity to their welfare and to our relationship with them. One does not live in this world without directly and indirectly hurting other people. And to be insensitive to our complicity or direct action is a sad commentary upon the quality of our relationships. There can be an unwholesome sense of sin, let us admit it, but that can also be a wholesome sense of sin. A sense of ourselves as we stand in inappropriate relationship with God or with our neighbor. Part of the greatness of a man like John Bunyan, was that he knew the human condition thoroughly. I knew it from the inside, hence when he personified, sloth and pride and greed and gossip, he wasn't fleshing those forces, which are so terribly real in our actual lives. It reflects a greater sensibility to recognize these negative characteristics that it does to pretend they do not exist. Penance therefore is a recognition of the rich dimensionality of our lives and of our relation to those dimensions. In our religious sensibility and in our theology however, we have tended to interpret God as plausibly loving, as lacking distinctiveness of character, at least, and as a passive receptor, who allows us to be what we want and to do what we will, we have generally lost the sense of God's holiness and of God's demand for holiness. God is love. This is the central reality, but the love, which God is, is a love that by its nature defines evil as it's contrary, that judges evil with the intention of rehabilitation and that redeems evil by burning out the draws. In our religious sensibility and in our theology, we have tended to excuse or explain a way the personal and the corporate evil, which we represent and which we far too quickly express in our activity. We do read evil in the actions of others. We blame society and uncontrollable forces for our plight and they are not unimportant, but we once again, come to a recognition of those very real and vital negative elements of our lives and our duplicity about those elements. The light of all of this, let us look again at repentance, and it words of assurance. Penance always begins with an awareness of God. It's not self-induced, it's not a judgment by any other standard. It is the vision of God, which brings us to an

awareness of our own condition. How petty is our pride as we stand before God? How small our achievement? How inconsequential our moral development? Penance is being honest. It involves looking at ourselves straightforwardly. It is taking ourselves seriously, but not ultimately. It is a candid recognition of our person, of our place and of our purpose. A proper view of God brings a proper view of ourselves. Yet such a view is difficult to secure. In the apocrypha book of Ecclesiasticus, the wise writer says, a man's soul is sometimes want to bring him tidings more than seven Watchmen that sit high in a Watchtower. And for a moment, let us explore one of these tidings of the soul. It's native for us to pretend, to pretend that we are strong and able and good and pious it's even natural for us to attempt to deceive ourselves. We overstate our ability and our achievement. We are hypocritical about our virtue and pretentious about our spirituality. We move through life like an arm of night exalting in our appearance issuing our challenges, thinking about ourselves as superior and the seven Watchman in the watch tower announced our coming with appropriate intonations of admiration. Yet the rustle of a dry leaf under our horses hoof, causes a shiver to run down our spine. Our soul has brought its own tidings. Our pretense is shallow and vulnerable beneath the splendid armor, there's a frightful insecurity. In Shakespeare's play, "Henry the Sixth" the second part, that naively wise king comments about one of his retainers and he's but naked though locked up in steel, whose conscience with injustice is corrupted. The proper view of God brings a proper view of ourselves. I saw the Lord, Isaiah said, and I said, woe is me. Traditionally, penance has been composed of four elements, contrition, confession, satisfaction, and absolution. Contrition is a recognition of who we as unworthy persons are in the presence of all mighty, all loving God. Confession is the specifying of those things that have won our love from God and of those ways in which we have violated our relation with God and with our neighbor. Satisfaction is the effort to amend in so far as we were able those destructive things we've done, the relationships we've broken, the hurt we've caused. And absolution is the announcement of God's forgiving grace. All of these elements remain important. In the Protestant tradition, we've replaced absolution as a sacrament with words of assurance, that is the restating of God's forgiveness and gift of new life. Perhaps we can draw these all together. Penance is the offering of life to God in the act of penance, all of one's defenses are dropped. All of one's pretensions are set aside. As penitence we attempt to amend the wrong we have done. And through it all, we are renewed by God's grace. That's another rather strange angle to this, that is we often fear to be repentant. For at one level, we do not want to be found out. And yet at another level, we do want to be known. Perhaps Robert Frost knew this. He writes, "We make ourselves a place apart behind light words, which tease and flout, but all the agitated heart till someone really finds us out." There is great release in being found out by God, and in being able to relax into the relationship with God. To repent is to place God at the center of our lives. Douglas Steel once commented that, "The Saint is the one who is determined from all the things in the world, the one thing he/she really wants." And so in character Yardi Mark, that purity of heart is to will one thing, penance springs about this refocusing of life. Penance is the right ordering of life for the narrow way of which Jesus spoke is the focused way. It is the way which is focused upon God. And the results of penance is pruning the pruning of life, the disciplining of life, which cuts off that, which is excessive, unnecessary, distracting. Pruning is keeping the focus clear. Because the difficulty with pruning is that one must not only cut off dead branches. One must also sometimes cut off attractive, intriguing, new growth. Yet God mercy, also sends leanness and life becomes disciplined by the prime love out of which we live. Just one illustration, opinion analysts, Daniel Yankelovich in a recent survey found that 59% of American citizens were not only willing to attempt conservation measures, but quote, "They would actually welcome a simpler life, less dominated by material possessions." Isn't it strange that

we were reluctant to do what we want to do? Perhaps this is one of the places where a penance starts, Penance is being set in right relationship with God and with our neighbor and it is in lent that this event should take place. But now just a few words about assurance for penance as an act before God is an act of love in response to love. Our confession of sin is in the context of grace. We could not confess if there weren't no grace in truth, of course our penance begins because we know that grace already exist for one does not put one down one's armor in the face of evil. One does not drop one's weapons, fragile as they may be in the face of malevolence penance, which does not know that it's an act in the context of love is foolish. Penance which does not know that it is a confession of a violation of love, is insensitive. But we know that we can honestly reveal ourselves before God, because we know that he cares for us more than we care for ourselves. We can expose our weakness because we can count on God's strength. We can accept ourselves as soon as because we already know God's forgiveness. And this is why penance in our worship service is followed by words of assurance. Consequently, we can be utterly serious about ourselves in penance because we can utterly relax about ourselves in God's grace. To receive words of assurance is to experience a new freedom. We often simply attempt to carry too much. We take our importance too seriously. We pretend too much knowledge, too much virtue, too much spirituality. And we have a desperate sense of trying to hold our lives together to repent is to release our hold upon our lives. Words of assurance, remind us of God's hold upon us. My peace I leave with you, my grace is sufficient for you. Some years ago, an undergraduate came to my office. He sat for a little five minutes without speaking. And finally, when he was able to speak, he said, I can't do everything I'm supposed to do. He would always been responsible, suddenly found that he did not have strength to do what he thought it was his responsibility to do. And he had pushed himself to the point that he could no longer function. And it is here and I'll sense of inadequacy and weakness and our laying bare of our lives before God, that words of assurance are needed cast all your care upon him for, for he cares for you. Penance without assurance is incomplete. If one cleanses the house and simply leaves at seven devils, worse than the first can come in and take up habitation. But words of assurance bring the inrush of God's spirit. We are set free for God and free for our neighbor. And we know that by God's grace, it is well, it is well with our souls. So back to our text, Isaiah saw the Lord. He saw himself and he cried, woe is me, but he also experienced a cleansing. Then flew one of the seraphims to me, holding in his hand, a burning coal, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and he said, behold, this has touched your lips. Your guilt is taken away, your sin is forgiven. There it is the act of forgiveness, words of assurance. And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, whom shall I send and who will go for us? Then I said, here am I send me. Isaiah's vision is complete. A vision of God, a vision of himself, a vision of himself in contrition before God being raised by God and a vision of himself in the service of God. May I close with a prayer of confession and some words of assurance. Oh, all mighty God, give us grace to approach thee at this time with penitent and believing hearts, we confess that we have sinned against thee, and are not worthy to be called our children. Yet do thou in mercy, keep us as thine own. Grant us true repentance and forgive us all our sins through Jesus Christ our Lord. Let us reason together sayeth the Lord though your sins be as Scarlet, they shall be white as snow. Though they be red as crimson, they shall be as wool. For God so loved the world, that he gave His only son that who ever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. Amen. (sacred music)

- Oh, God palatable mercies. Receive this offering, which we present to thee as part of our worship. May these gifts be the symbol of our love for thee, and for that son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (sacred music)

Onto God's gracious mercy and protection. Do we commit to 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 (sacred music)