

(man singing) (organ playing) (man singing) (organ playing)

- Welcome to Duke University Chapel on this, the second Sunday in the season of Advent. This weekend our chapel choir has three performances of Messiah to over 5,000 people who've attended these performances. They have one more performance this afternoon. And tickets are still available one hour before the performance here at the chapel. We welcome this morning, leading us in our music, the Southern Piedmont Children's Choir from Asheboro, North Carolina, under the direction of Mr. John Simons and we welcome them for their first visit to Duke Chapel. And now let us stand for the greeting. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Congregation: And also with you.

- Our redemption is drawing nigh.

Congregation: Praise to the Lord. (organ playing) ♪ Oh come oh come ♪ Emmanuel ♪ And ransom ♪ Captive Israel ♪ That mourns ♪ In lonely exile here ♪ Until the Son of God ♪ Appear ♪ Rejoice ♪ Rejoice ♪ Emmanuel ♪ Shall come to thee ♪ Oh Israel ♪ Oh come, oh wisdom ♪ From on high ♪ That ordered all things ♪ Mightily ♪ To us the path ♪ Of knowledge show ♪ And bless us in our ♪ Ways to go ♪ Rejoice ♪ Rejoice ♪ Emmanuel ♪ Shall come to thee ♪ Oh Israel ♪ Oh come, oh come ♪ Great Lord of might ♪ Who to thy tribes ♪ On Sinai's height ♪ In ancient times ♪ Didst give the law ♪ In cloud and majesty ♪ And awe ♪ Rejoice ♪ Rejoice ♪ Emmanuel ♪ Shall come to thee ♪ Oh Israel ♪ Oh, come ♪ Thou Root of Jesse's tree ♪ And ensign ♪ Of thy people be ♪ Before thee ♪ Rulers silent fall ♪ All peoples ♪ On thy mercy call ♪ Rejoice ♪ Rejoice ♪ Emmanuel ♪ Shall come to thee ♪ Oh Israel ♪ Oh come ♪ Thou key of David ♪ Come ♪ And open wide ♪ Our heavenly home ♪ Make safe the way ♪ That leads on high ♪ And close the path ♪ To misery ♪ Rejoice ♪ Rejoice ♪ Emmanuel ♪ Shall come to thee ♪ Oh Israel ♪ Oh come ♪ Thou dayspring ♪ Come and cheer ♪ Our spirits ♪ By thine Advent here ♪ Disperse the gloomy ♪ Clouds of night ♪ And death's dark shadows ♪ Put to flight ♪ Rejoice ♪ Rejoice ♪ Emmanuel ♪ Shall come to thee ♪ Oh Israel ♪ Oh come ♪ Desire of nations ♪ Bind ♪ Every heart sing ♪ Of all mankind ♪ Bid though our sad ♪ Divisions cease ♪ Deliver us from ♪ Way to go ♪ Rejoice ♪ Rejoice ♪ Emmanuel ♪ Shall come to thee ♪ Oh Israel ♪

- Let us pray. Come, Christ Jesus, be our guest and may our lives by you be blessed. Come, God, with us, and free us from the false claims of the empires of this world. We are lonely for you and your peace. Come, Emmanuel, and dwell with us. Make us your people, indeed. The people through whom you bring love and justice to the world. Come, Jesus, and reign. Claim your rightful place in our hearts and in the midst of our community. Plant the seeds of hope among us. Establish God's reign on Earth for we pray as you taught us that God's reign might come in fullness on Earth. Amen. You may be seated.

- Please join me in the Prayer for Illumination.

Everyone: Open our hearts and minds God, by the power of your Holy Spirit so that the word is read and proclaimed. We might be prepared for your Advent among us. Amen.

- The Old Testament lesson is from Isaiah, chapter 40, starting with verse one. Comfort, oh comfort, my people, says the Lord. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her as she has served her term. Tell her that her penalty is paid. That she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries out in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up. Every mountain and hill be made low. The uneven ground shall become level and the rough places a plain." Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all people shall see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken. A voice says, "Cry out," and I said, what shall I cry? All people are grass. Their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows upon it. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God will stand forever. Get you up to a high mountain, oh Zion, herald of good tidings. Lift up your voice with strength, oh Jerusalem, herald of good tidings. Lift it up, do not fear. Say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God." See the Lord God comes with might and his arm rules for him. His reward is with him and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepard. He will gather the lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom and gently lead those that are with young. This is the Word of the Lord.

Congregation: Thanks be to God.

- The Gospel lesson comes from the Gospel of Mark, chapter one, starting with verse one. In the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God, as it is written in the Prophet Isaiah, see I am sending my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord. "Make his path straight." John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him and were baptized by him in the River Jordan confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful "than I is coming after me. "I am not worthy to stoop down "and untie the thong of his sandals. "I have baptized you with water, "but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." This is the Word of the Lord.

Congregation: Thanks be to God.

- The Psalter is found on page 806. We will do verses one through two and eight through 13. Please stand and read responsively. Lord, you showed favor to your land, you restored the fortunes of Jacob.

Congregation: You forgave their iniquity. You pardoned their sin.

- Let me hear what God will speak, for the Lord will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to the Lord in their hearts.

Congregation: Surely salvation is at hand for those who fear the Lord, that his glory may dwell in our land.

- Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet, righteousness and peace will kiss each other.

Congregation: Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky.

- The Lord will give what is good and our land will yield its increase.

Congregation: Righteousness will go before the Lord, and will make a path for his steps. (organ playing) ♪

Glory be ♪ ♪ To all who came ♪ ♪ Praise to all ♪ ♪ Who heed that call ♪ ♪ Glory be ♪ ♪ To us the same ♪ ♪

Forever be ♪ ♪ And ever ♪ ♪ As the ocean ♪ ♪ Love believe ♪ ♪ Now let ♪ ♪ Every voice shall heed ♪

- You may be seated. (organ music) (gentle piano music) (choir singing) (slow organ music)

- That was wonderful music from young voices and this chapel has been a place for wonderful music this entire weekend with the choirs' performances of Messiah. Messiah begins on a somber chord. And then the oratorio climbs until a clear, tenor voice pierces the gloom with these words from Isaiah. "Comfort ye, "comfort ye my people. "The voice of him who cries in the wilderness, "prepare ye the way of the Lord, "make straight in the desert "a highway for our God." Last Sunday in the first lesson and in Debra's sermon, we heard Isaiah speak to people in wilderness, in Babylonian exile, a people lost, orphaned. Isaiah the prophet told those exiles, "We have sinned, "we have become like one who is unclean "like a filthy rag, we fade like a leaf. "In our iniquities, like the wind, they take us away." And it is into this forlorn, self-deprecating exilic gloom that Isaiah at last speaks these words. "Comfort, comfort ye my people," "says your God. "In the wilderness, prepare ye the way of the Lord, "make straight in the desert a highway for our God. "Every valley shall be lifted up. "Every mountain and hill shall be made low." It is a prophetic announcement of a divine highway construction program through the wilderness, through the lostness, from Babylonian exile back home. Would you please note that the prophet says that God's highway is a straight road? Ordinarily the way back from Babylonia was a circuitous path around the fertile crescent, around the desert back to Israel. But this road is straight through the desert, right through the wilderness. And note that it is the Lord who will be traveling that road, leading these forlorn exiles homeward. We're hearing an announcement of homecoming. Israel is coming home. My last church was next to the synagogue in Greenville. And the Rabbi and I used to get together for coffee on Mondays and I was noting to the Rabbi one Monday morning that we were being surprised by an influx of young adults coming back to church, young adults, always the hardest group in the church to reach. They're always off on the weekends skiing or something. But they were coming back to church, single, young adults. "What was this?" I asked the Rabbi. "Is this like the Reagan years or our growing conservatism "or what is this? "So do you have this over at the synagogue?" And he said, "Sure, there's hardly a week goes by "I don't have some young person show up and say "I want to be a Jew again. "My parents attended synagogue a couple of times a year "but I want more, I want to be a Jew again." And I said to the Rabbi, "Now, what, what is this? "What do you think this is?" And he said to me, "I think they're looking for their parents." You got a generation that's been raised by another generation so uncertain of its own values it didn't dare try to pass it on to the young. They're

looking for roots, looking for an identity. They're looking for their parents. They're looking for home. In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for God. And surely with these words, Isaiah means for us to think of an earlier exodus through the wilderness. If you remember that story, you remember that getting rid of Pharaoh was not the toughest task in the exodus. Because once getting rid of Pharaoh's slavery we had to make the way through the wilderness and that took 40 years of wandering through the wilderness waste to get to the promised land. And by the way, when you hear this word wilderness, you're not to think back to nature freaks living in their pre-fab cabin in the woods. You're not to think about granola visions of a week in the Adirondacks hiking on your vacation. No, you're to think with Biblical wilderness, the place where Israel almost lost it. The wilderness for Israel is a place where wild beasts and apostasy and temptation and sin and a bewildered 40-year wandering with no star to guide. It took Israel 40 years of wandering in the wilderness to get home. I know a man that it took 40 years of wandering in the wilderness to get home. The writer Dan Wakefield in a popular book, "Returning" tells in that book of how he left the church, he left religion, how his life as an adult became unglued, chaotic, confused. And then at midlife, here's how he tells it. "I cannot pinpoint any particular time "when suddenly I believed in God again. "I only know that such belief came to seem as natural "as all but a few stray moments of 25 or more years before "it had been inconceivable. "I realized this while looking at fish. "I'd gone with my girlfriend to the New England Aquarium, "and as we gazed at the astonishingly brilliant colors "of some of the small tropical fish, "reds and yellows, oranges. "As I watch the amazing lights "of the flashlight fish that blinked on "like beacons of some creature in a sci-fi epic. "Suddenly, I wondered how anyone could think "that all of this was the result of some chain "of accidental explosions. "And yet to try to convince me otherwise "five years before would have been hopeless. "Was this what they call conversion? "The term bothered me because it suggested being born again "and like many of my contemporaries, "I had been put off by the melodramatic "nature of that label, "as well as the current political beliefs "that seem to go along with it. "Besides, I didn't feel reborn. "No voice came out of the sky, "no thunderclap struck me. "I was relieved when later "in conversation with our minister, "he explained that the literal translation of conversion "is not rebirth or born again, "but it is turning. "And that's what my own experience with God felt like. "Turning, as if I've been walking in one direction "and then in response to some inner pull, "I turn. "I returned." Get you up to a high mountain oh Zion herald of good tidings. Lift up your voice, say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God." Wilderness here, is a metaphor for exile homelessness. It was from the wilderness I remind you that John the baptist appeared. And when John Baptist intrudes on the scene here earlier in the Gospel of Mark, he is quoting Isaiah, "Prepare the way of the Lord make his paths straight." Mark says in the first chapter, the first verse of this probably the first Gospel. This is the beginning of the Good News of Jesus. And the beginning of the Good News of Jesus is an announcement, a voice, a voice crying in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his highway straight. "Come home." Note that the Good News is that this is God's highway. God brings homeless people back home. This is all from the initiative of God. I teach a first year student seminar here with Marv Hague, called "The search for meaning in life." And I talked to the students about, humanity's search for meaning, and they talked to me about, "The Freshman search for an easy A, and" that's how we enjoy thinking of ourselves as people on a search. We're all searching for meaning and we're searching for God and we're busy searching to answers for life's tough questions. But please note here, that nobody has been searching for God. The text tells us that it is God who is began searching for Israel. This is what God is doing, where God is going, God dragging Israel along behind him down the straight road back home. Nobody asked for John the baptist, John the baptist

just intruded among us and this began the Good News. This is why we think the Philosopher Fowler Bach was wrong. Religion is not our projection out there toward God, we need God, so we just dream up some God that we need, no, the story says, God has projected himself towards us. It is God who's made this highway toward us. The way out of the wilderness is a way initiated by God. So the question is not what am I looking for? Or what would it take for me to grope my way back home? The question is, what road is God constructing towards me? What road do you think God might be building towards you this day? Christmas is a time for home coming. You look out on any mid to late December congregation and you will see a lot of exiles come back. You see kids home from the college or for the holidays. Why is relatives from the east bearing gifts? And you always see exiles, come back to church. And you know that sometimes we preachers make wisecracks about these lost sheep who always wander in from the cold every year, about late December around Christmas time. "Where have you been all year?" We ask, or "See you next year on Easter." Wisecracks like that. But why not? Why not homecoming? And why not now? Have you been on exile? What voice has beckoned you back? How was your way been smoothed back? What road is God building back towards you today? Maybe their words, words, spoken by somebody else to somebody else but you heard them as if they were words spoken only to you. Or that face from the past or that vaguely felt, but nevertheless, real annoying sense of yearning, that echo, that echo deep within the soul's memory upon hearing again, a Christmas Carol not really heard since childhood. That coincidence, which may not have been merely coincidental. In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert, a highway for our God. One of the things used to annoy me as a pastor was these people who would show up at church with little Janie in tow, usually about the fall and they would say, "Do you have a Sunday school class "for six year olds?" And I would say, yes, we do. And they said, "Well, good. "Little Janie is starting school "and she's starting brownies and ballet lessons. "And we thought it would be good if little Janie "would come here about Jesus." And I would think to myself, look, don't do us any favors. This isn't a free babysitting service. I would say to them now, would you be interested in a church school class for adults? And they would say "Oh, no, no, no, we've we've, we..." "but little Janie is the brownies in the ballet and Jesus. "And we if we have time, we may come occasionally." It might really tick me off. (congregation laughing) But I was saying this to a psychiatry friend of mine, and my psychiatry, his friend said, "You know, I'm always as a psychiatrist, "kind of skeptical about the reasons "people give for their actions." What happens to people when their oldest child reaches school age? The child is leaving the safe womb of the home, new things are assaulting the family from the outside, parents report they have increasing arguments about values and behavior and many marriages are going through a difficult time of transition and so maybe people unable to come forward and say, "Look, we're scared. "We need help, support." It's easier to come and say, "Look, little Jennie needs help and support "and she needs Sunday school." In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert, a highway for our God. Wilderness whenever it occurs in Scripture, is a name for that place, that place which is no place, where you lose your way, and you wander from the path and you get lost, and it's dark. Exile is that name for that time when we become enslaved to false gods and we bowed down to the wrong alters and we serve an alien Empire, we sell out, we forget. And here's a voice that calls people home, down a high way God has prepared. Fred Craddick remembers a little girl from one of his early churches. Her parents sent her to church and Fred said he could see the parents that would pull in every Sunday, just before 10:00 o'clock, and they would stop that car in the circular driveway and the little girl would jump out and come to Sunday school. And then they would go on to breakfast or read the paper or whatever they were gonna do. He said it was so convenient.

The church had sort of a circular driveway, where they could just pull in, and they just stopped for a moment and they could pull right out. And her father was an executive for the local chemical plant in town and he was upwardly mobile, and he was on his way up, he was ambitious. And the whole town told stories about the parties that they threw at their house every Saturday night. Parties not throwing entertainment value, but rather, as part of the whole upwardly mobile program. And people were invited and there were stories about the wild, vulgar things that took place at those Saturday night parties. But every Sunday, like clockwork, there was the big car pulling in and the door open the little girl jumping out. One Sunday, Craddick says he was preaching, he looked at over the congregation and he noticed that there were two adults sitting with a little girl at her place in the pew, and he thought to himself must be a couple of adult friends that have come with her this morning. But at the end of the service when the final hymn was sung and as was the custom the invitation given. He was shocked to see these two adults coming down the aisle with their little girl. And he realized this was mom and dad. And they came forward and they said they wanted to join the church. And after service, Craddick asked them, "What's going on here? "What does this mean? How did you get down that aisle? How did you get here? And the man said, "Do you know about our parties?" "Yeah, I heard of your parties." said the pastor. "Well, we had one last night again, "and it got a little loud, there was a good bit of drinking, "and it got a little rough "and all the noise downstairs woke up our daughter. "And in the middle of this party, "we looked up and here was our daughter "coming down the stairs. "And she stopped at about the fourth step "and she looked out over the throng, "and she could see that we were eating "and she could see that we were drinking and she said, "Oh, can I have the blessing? "And she just stood there, "and she said, Let us pray. "God is great, God is good, "Let us thank him for our food. "Good night, everybody." And she went back upstairs. And people just stood there and then somebody said, "Well, it's getting late, we better be going." And someone else said, "You know, this has been wonderful but we've got to." And then in 10 minutes, the place was empty. And we gathered up the glasses, picked up the peanuts off the floor, the half sandwiches took them back into the kitchen. And we stood there for a moment in the kitchen and I looked over the tray and I said to my wife, "Where do we think we're going?" God had come out for them. Remembrance. Homecoming. In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord make straight in the desert a highway for God. Every valley should be lifted up, every mountain will be made low. Here is your God. (organ music) (choir singing)

- The Lord be with you. (congregation speaking) Let us pray. O God of the straight way we give you thanks for coming to us again and again, through all the desert places of our lives. We are grateful that when we find ourselves lost in the wilderness, with no idea how we wound up so confused, so turned around, you break through making a path through the trackless sands. You find us and you make a way for us out of no way. How awesome is your love for us? Blessing and honor and glory and power be unto the God who has made a straight path to us through the desert. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer. Lord, we give thanks that no matter what desert we have existed in, you meet us there and lead us home. Whether we have been dried out by the demands of work, or school, or family, or whether we have saw the dry wells of success, popularity, or escape, or whether we have simply lost our way through conflicting values, narrow visions, and selfish pursuits. Whatever has dried us out, you come to us like a cool shower to parched land, renewing us, making us a new, for the new possibilities you create, and the comfort you give, we give you thanks, Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer. As you have cared for us, so you have also called us to care for one another. Therefore, we offer these prayers not only for ourselves, but for the whole world. For those who are anxious,

and afraid. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer. For those who are ill, Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer. For those who are facing difficult decisions, Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer. For those who are feeling left out, and are alone, especially during the holidays, Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer. For those who are mourning losses, and for those who are feeling deep sadness, because of seasons past, Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. And for those who are feeling especially grateful, and are filled with joy because of some new and wonderful thing in their lives. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer. We ask all these things through the one who's coming is certain, who draws near to us in straight paths. Your son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever, Amen. Let us offer ourselves and our gifts with thanksgiving. (soft organ music) (gentle piano music) (choir singing) (gentle piano music) (choir singing) (organ music) (church singing) Let us pray. O God, most merciful and gracious of whose bounty we have all received, accept this offering of your people. Remember in your love those who have brought it, and those for whom it is given. And so follow it with your blessing that it may promote love and peace among all peoples, and advance the kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray together always saying,

Everyone: "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." (organ music) (choir singing)

- The grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all now and always, Amen. (organ music)