

("We Three Kings" by the First Baptist Church Bell Ringers)

- Good morning and welcome to this service of worship here on the second Sunday after Christmas in Duke University Chapel. We have been led to worship by our guest musicians. They are The Bell Ringers of the First Baptist Church of Henderson, North Carolina and are always welcomed guests here in the chapel under the direction of Mr. Philip Young. Our guest preacher today, it's his first visit here to the chapel, is Dr. Joseph Jeter from Texas Christian University Brite Divinity School. A distinguished homiletician, we're glad to have him with us this morning. And now let us stand for the greeting. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Congregation: And also with you.

- The splendor of Christ shines upon us.

Congregation: Praise the Lord. ("We Three Kings" by pipe organist) ♪ We three kings of Orient are ♪ ♪ Bearing gifts we traverse afar ♪ ♪ Field and fountain, moor and mountain ♪ ♪ Following yonder star ♪ ♪ O star of wonder, star of night ♪ ♪ Star with royal beauty bright ♪ ♪ Westward leading, still proceeding ♪ ♪ Guide us to thy perfect Light ♪ ♪ Born a king on Bethlehem's plain ♪ ♪ Gold I bring to crown Him again ♪ ♪ King forever, ceasing never ♪ ♪ Over us all to reign ♪ ♪ O star of wonder, star of night ♪ ♪ Star with royal beauty bright ♪ ♪ Westward leading, still proceeding ♪ ♪ Guide us to thy perfect Light ♪ ♪ Frankincense to offer have I ♪ ♪ Incense owns a Deity nigh ♪ ♪ Prayer and praising all men raising ♪ ♪ Worship Him, God on high ♪ ♪ O star of wonder, star of night ♪ ♪ Star with royal beauty bright ♪ ♪ Westward leading, still proceeding ♪ ♪ Guide us to thy perfect Light ♪ ♪ Myrrh is mine: Its bitter perfume ♪ ♪ Breaths a life of gathering gloom ♪ ♪ Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding dying ♪ ♪ Sealed in the stone-cold tomb ♪ ♪ O star of wonder, star of night ♪ ♪ Star with royal beauty bright ♪ ♪ Westward leading, still proceeding ♪ ♪ Guide us to thy perfect Light ♪ ♪ Glorious now behold Him arise ♪ ♪ King and God and Sacrifice ♪ ♪ Alleluia, alleluia ♪ ♪ Sounds through the earth and skies ♪ ♪ O star of wonder, star of night ♪ ♪ Star with royal beauty bright ♪ ♪ Westward leading, still proceeding ♪ ♪ Guide us to thy perfect Light ♪

- Everlasting God. The radiance of faithful souls. You brought all the nations to your light and kings to the brightness of your rising. Filled the world with your glory. Showed yourself to all the nations. Through Him who is true light and bright and morning star Jesus Christ your son our Lord. Amen. Seated.

- Let us pray together the Prayer for illumination. (congregation in unison)

Open our hearts and minds of God. By the power of your Holy Spirit. So that as the word is read and proclaimed. we may hear with joy what you say to us this day. Amen. This reading is taken from the prophecy of Isaiah the first six verses of chapter 60. Arise, shine, for your light has come. And the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the Earth and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will

arise upon you and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around. They all gather together. They come to you your sons shall come from far away and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. Then you shall see and be radiant. Your heart shall thrill and rejoice. Because of the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you. The young camels of Midian and Ephah. All those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord. This is the word of the Lord. (in unison with congregation)
Thanks be to God.

- Today's psalm is psalm 72 the first 14 verses. Let us stand and read responsively. Give the king your justice oh God.

Congregation: And your righteousness to the royal son.

- May he judge your people with righteousness

Congregation: And your poor with justice

- Let the mountains bear prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness.

Congregation: May he defend the cause of the poor of the people. give deliverance to the needy, and to crush their oppressor.

- May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations.

Congregation: May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass like showers that water the earth.

- In his days may righteousness flourish, peace abound, till the moon be no more.

Congregation: May he have dominion from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.

- May his foes bow down before him, and his enemies lick the dust. May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute. May the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts.

Congregation: May all kings fall down before him all nations serve him.

- For he delivers the needy when they call the poor and those who has no helper.

Congregation: He has pity on the weak and the needy,

- and saves the lives of the needy.

Congregation: From oppression and violence he redeems their life and precious is their blood in his sight.
(congregation singing)

- This reading is taken from the second chapter of the gospel according to Saint Matthew beginning with the first verse. In the time of King Herod after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea wise men from the east came to Jerusalem asking: Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage. When King Herod heard this he was frightened and all Jerusalem with him. And calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel. Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying: Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage. When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. This was the word of the Lord.

- [Minister And Congregation] Thank you God. (unknown song by the Bell Ringers)

- The epistle lesson this morning is from the letter to the Ephesians in the third chapter verses one through 12. This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you gentiles. For surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you. And how the mystery was made known to me by revelation as I wrote above in a few words. A reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the spirit. That is the gentiles have become fellow heirs. Members of the same body. And sharers in the promise of Christ Jesus through the gospel. Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. Although I am the very least of the saints this grace was given to me to bring to the gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ. And to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages. Hidden in God who created all things. So that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might be made known to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord. In whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in Him. This is the word of the Lord.

Congregation: Thanks be to God.

- Sisters and brothers I greet you in the name of Christ. And I give thanks for the opportunity to be in worship with you today. It is a long way from Texas to Duke Chapel. The speaker of the Texas House of Representatives was invited to speak at a major university last year. And he began his remarks by saying,

"The invitation to speak here "fills me with a great deal of humidity." (congregation laughing) Fills me too. And I'm grateful for the privilege of this pulpit this morning. This is not my first trip to North Carolina. My first trip came in 1964. And that's 30 years ago. I was at a college church conference at a beautiful place called Montreat. One day at lunch I was eating with a young man who was a stranger to me. When suddenly he said to me, "Would you like to see God?" I thought about that a minute and, "Yeah. "Yeah I would." And he said, "Good. "Come by my room tonight after the session. "I have this stuff that will do it for us." (congregation laughing) Would you have gone? I didn't go that night. Not because I was afraid of frying my brains. I didn't know any better. I had never heard of LSD in 1964. And I didn't go not because I was afraid that we were not meant to see God and live. That in the presence of God we would melt like those people in Raiders of the Lost Ark. And I didn't go for the other side of that reason; because I was afraid maybe the experience wouldn't measure up. What if you saw God and it was no big deal? No I didn't go because I was 21 years old and I thought to myself, "If I see God tonight "what's the point in tomorrow? "Why go on? "Why go to school? "Why try to learn anything? "Why try to make a difference?" I didn't go. Did I miss my chance? So you see the theological enterprise simply tries to put a frame around the ineffable mystery and silence of God. And I had someone tell me they could take me right to the heart of the mystery. Would you have gone? What I learned from this is that the mystery of God is a very scary thing. And our text, our epistle text for this morning, as strange as it is speaks to us about that very thing. The letter to the Ephesians is unlike any other letter attributed to Paul in the New Testament. There's none of the intimacy none of the passion of the other letters. "You are my light in my life. "I thank God so every time I think about you." No, none of that. None of that here. This letter whether it was written by Paul or for the love of Paul by a follower comes to us in Barth's words as a letter from a stranger. A letter from a stranger. Not just a stranger but a stranger whose veiled in mystery. And here we sit this morning at the very threshold of a new year that is veiled in mystery to us. Granted we're a little dulled and slowed by too much food and football. But still anxious about the possibilities that are up ahead and to top it all off we're gathered this morning as virtual strangers. I know very few of you and most of you do not know me. And I understand we have many holiday visitors among us. And so here we are sharing for these few minutes and possibly never again. And what we share is that we have chosen to come to church this morning to look for word from the Lord. So what word does the apostle bring? The mystery of God's salvation hidden for ages has been revealed to me so that I can preach it to you. Now that's where this text gets interesting. God's plan of salvation was a mystery. A mystery for thousands of years and then finally at the perfect time it was revealed in Jesus Christ and God's plan, God's secret then became an open book. Do you see how troublesome that is? Having a secret is a two-headed problem. It's a problem in front and a problem in back. It's awful to have a secret that you can't tell. What's the point in having a secret if you can't say to someone, "Now don't tell this to anyone but..." It's awful to have a secret you can't tell. It's like the preacher who couldn't get up a sermon for Sunday morning and so he called in sick and went out to play golf. And hit a hole in one. (congregation laughing) Is this text the first century equivalent to that? Does the apostle say, "I have a secret "I can't stand it "it's a secret I have to tell you." The other side's a problem too. Because once a secret is out it loses, like salt, it's savor. Once the secret has been told and everybody knows it it becomes flat and lifeless. "Have you heard about--" "Oh, I've heard, I've heard." The early Christians knew that. And so some of them decided well, we'll keep this secret about Jesus Christ and we'll just dole it out to a few people at a time. We'll just give it to a few folk who can learn the secret passport, the secret password. We called them gnostics. They weren't bad people. They just wanted to keep the secret fresh and vital and alive but the letter to the Ephesians and our history, our tradition, says

that they were wrong. I once heard Fred Craddock preach a sermon in which he reminded us that when the disciples went out as sort of an advance party for Jesus and they went out saying, "The messiah is coming! "The messiah is coming!" And the people began running and they got all excited. "The messiah is coming!" And then one day a group was walking down the road and the disciples were saying, "Come come, the messiah is here. "And it's Jesus." And they could hardly get a crowd. The messiah is here? And it's he? (chuckling) What time's the Cowboy game start anyway? Lots of things are more interesting in anticipation than they are in reality. And here the apostle throws modesty to the wind and he says, "The secret's been revealed to me "and I tell it to you." But the one thing about that is; how about us Paul? It's been 2000 years man. Sure it was an exciting secret when you first preached it. But how about us Paul? We have at TCU a little in-house bulletin that's creatively titled The TCU Bulletin. {congregation chuckling} And not long ago there was a notice that said: Geology graduate student Debra Malek has just received notice that her paper, her geology paper entitled Hypabyssal Alkalic Intrusions in Terlingua, Texas has been accepted for publication. Now that caught my attention because of the Terlingua, Texas. You see I've been to Terlingua. It's a ghost town down in the Big Bend country best known for occasional chili cook offs where they whip up a concoction that's said to make a Louisiana man cry. (congregation laughing) Of hypabyssal alkalic intrusions I knew nothing. But Ms. Malek knows. She has a precise understanding of what she means. I remember some interesting rock formations. But here's the difference between her language world and mine. She knows precisely what she means when she makes a statement. And I almost never do. Her language is what we call steno language, reporter language, the language of the stop sign. When you see a stop sign on the street what did it mean yesterday? It meant stop. What does it mean today? It means stop. What will it mean tomorrow? It will mean stop. The language I work with most of the time is tensive language, confessional language, the language of the Cross. I see a Cross and it means... it means more than I can say. Ms. Malek has no doubts. She knows what hypabyssal alkalic intrusions are. But when I look at the words I see hyp meaning under like hypodermic. I see abyss meaning bottomless. And I see some soda ash, a layer of soda ash underneath that which is bottomless. And I'm still working on that. It's still a mystery to me. Here we stand with one foot in the new year and the word comes to us from Paul; God's plan for salvation has been revealed and it's Jesus. And I suspect that most of us have at one time or another made that confession and if pressed we would say that we believe in it. But it's still a mystery. How God saves us through Jesus is still a mystery. Paul's experience is not enough. 1993's experience is not enough. We have to confront again and again the language of our faith. We have to ask questions. We have to listen. We have to analyze our own experience and feelings. We have to share our joys and concerns in the faith community because this is a mystery. This is not a secret that's interesting only the first time. You see Ms. Malek has figured out hypabyssal alkalic intrusions and that's done and if she's to keep her edge she must move on to other secrets because that secret was only interesting for her the first time. But God's secret has to be uncovered anew within every person who hears it. And this leads me to the second factor that makes the text compelling. The apostle writes: The mystery was made known to me by revelation which was not made known in other generations. That is how the gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of Jesus Christ through the gospel. And while at first reading we might think that what Paul is doing here is bragging about the secret that was given to him. In reality he's talking about the secret that's given to us. Gentiles. Foreigners. Outlanders. Fellow heirs of the gospel. Interpreted and entrusted with the secret of God in Jesus Christ. A secret that is so great that every time it comes out the world becomes new. It was the fourth Sunday in Advent in Hispaniola in the year 1511. Less than 20 years after the arrival of

Columbus and already some 90% of the indigenous population had perished at the hands of the Spaniards. A little priest named Antonio de Montesinos stood up on that fourth Sunday in Advent and preached a sermon entitled: The Rock Hard Wilderness of the Spanish Heart. And he said to the people, "The voice of Christ declares that you are in mortal sin. "And will live and die by it "because of the cruelty and tyranny "that you practice upon these innocent people." As you can imagine the Spaniards were outraged. Montesinos was hauled before the governor and the Father Superior of the Dominicans and told that he would preach again the next Sunday and would retract everything that he had said. Well it was Christmas Sunday. And everybody who was anybody in New Spain was in church. Father Montesinos mounted the pulpit and he began his sermon. "What I said before "I say again." And he gave it to them with the other barrel. He told them the secret once again just to make sure that they got it. Well this is the last that we ever hear of father Antonio de Montesinos. But it's not the last of the secret. Because there was a young man in church on that Christmas Sunday in 1511 named Bartolomé de las Casas. He heard Montesino's sermon and was so moved that he became a priest. The first bishop of the Americas and became known as the defender of the Indians. And thus from the very beginning of European colonization oppression has been there but so has God's secret. Jesus came for all people. The Spaniards of 1511 knew that. But it had been so encrusted with the greed of their own hearts that they couldn't hear it. Until a little priest and one young man voiced the secret in their midst and they were greatly disturbed as if they had never heard it before and the world became new in 15 and 12. My mother died last month after a long and difficult battle with Alzheimer's and assorted other infirmities. If you've been there you know how difficult it is to watch the mind of someone you love retreat from you day by day. Last year after five years of caring for mother at home Dad could no longer maintain the constant care that she required and mother moved to live in a nursing home. Thanksgiving was coming and Dad asked me apologetically, "Do you think Mama could come home for Thanksgiving?" I was skeptical about it. I talked to the doctor. The doctor told me that Alzheimer's patients frequently do not do well outside their familiar environment. But I decided, let's do it. Dad took over her best dress and with the help of the staff got her dressed and her hair fixed. Before she came over to our house they walked around the nursing home and everybody said to her how pretty she looked. While Dad was bringing Mom I went toward Dallas to pick up my Uncle Jack, Mother's older brother, who also suffers from Alzheimer's. I brought them in. I knew that it was the last time that they would see each other in this world. But I was very afraid that they would not recognize each other. When I walked in with Jack and they saw each other they began walking toward each other and fell into each other's arms. And after a long while Jack looked down at her and said, "Oh we had some times didn't we kid?" And my mother looked up and in a moment of perfect clarity she said, "We sure did." They had some times. And I, who have made my life telling that secret which has so often become tattered and worn in my own poor understanding saw it afresh in that moment of incredible grace in front of the fireplace. The world became new. You see God's plan of salvation is found for us in Jesus. And that is good news of love and justice and mercy and peace. And this good news is for all people. Not just the powerful. Not just the mentally sharp. But all people. For as the curse is found. The curse of heretical exclusiveness in first century Ephesus. The curse of systemic oppression in Hispaniola in 1511. The curse of Alzheimer's in Fort Worth in 1993. May the secret of God's love for us be heard this year. In Bosnia. In Palestine. In South Africa, in Sri Lanka, in Ireland, in Durham. Wherever, whenever, however this message comes to us in 1994 my prayer is that we will be open to it that we will open our eyes and our hearts to the secret and watch the years and miles between Paul and Antonio and Helen melt away. That we and all those who have come before and all who will come after may be

strangers no longer. But fellow heirs, members of the same body and sharers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. All power and honor and glory be to God forever. Amen. (pipe organ music)
(congregation singing)

- The Lord be with you.

Congregation: And also with you.

- Let us pray, be seated. Gracious God. How full are our hearts now that the gracious mystery kept secret for the ages has dawned upon us. In the Babe of Bethlehem the hopes and fears of all the years are called up into your loving purposes and made manifest for us. The brightness of your star enlightens our darkness. We pray for the press of darkness. We pray for victims of war and civil strife. The peoples of Angola and Somalia, Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka, Bosnia, Herzegovina. We pray for those who have suffered due to the criminal acts of others. We pray for victims of crime. We pray for those who have spent the holidays alone. We pray for those for whom the holidays have been a painful reminder of the death of somebody that they love. O Lord we pray for all those who during this time of year are cold or homeless, unemployed or just lonely. We pray for all those who are sick or infirm particularly those in Duke Hospital. And we pray for all youth faced with challenges and temptations. We pray for our young people. O light to our darkness send your light to all in darkness. Send your light to all who walk in the valley of the shadow of death. Be for us that mystery which is at the very heart of everything. A mystery deeper than our puny explanations. A mystery more wonderful than our flat understanding. The great glorious joyful mystery of God with us. Amen. Let us now offer ourselves and our gifts to God. ("O Come, All Ye Faithful" by The Bell Ringers) ("The First Noel" by The Bell Ringers) ("Away in a Manger" by The Bell Ringers) ("Joy to the World" by The Bell Ringers) ("Silent Night" by The Bell Ringers) (pipe organ music) (congregation singing)

- Gracious God. We thank you for all of your gifts. Especially do we thank you for the gift of your son Jesus Our savior, our way, our light. The gift of your son reminds us how dependent on our lives upon your beneficence for all the things that make our lives rich and good and worth living. For all these gifts we give thanks returning but a portion of your generosity back to you for your work in the world. And now we pray as our Lord and Savior has taught us. (reciting with congregation)

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. ("The First Noel" by the pipe organist) ♪ The First Noel, the Angels did say ♪ ♪ Was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay ♪ ♪ In fields where they lay keeping their sheep ♪ ♪ On a cold winter's night that was so deep ♪ ♪ Noel, Noel, ♪ ♪ Noel, Noel ♪ ♪ Born is the King of Israel ♪ ♪ They looked up and saw a star ♪ ♪ Shining in the East beyond them far ♪ ♪ And to the earth it gave great light ♪ ♪ And so it continued both day and night ♪ ♪ Noel, Noel ♪ ♪ Noel, Noel ♪ ♪ Born is the King of Israel ♪ ♪ And by the light of that same star ♪ ♪ Three wise men came from country far ♪ ♪ To seek for a king was their intent ♪ ♪ And to follow the star wherever it went ♪ ♪ Noel, Noel ♪ ♪ Noel, Noel ♪ ♪ Born is the King of Israel ♪ ♪ This star drew nigh to the northwest ♪ ♪ O'er Bethlehem it took its rest ♪ ♪ And there it did both stop and stay ♪ ♪ Right over the place where Jesus lay ♪ ♪ Noel, Noel ♪ ♪ Noel, Noel ♪ ♪ Born is the King of Israel ♪ ♪ Then

entered in those wise men three ♪ ♪ Full reverently upon their knee ♪ ♪ And offered there in his presence ♪ ♪
Their gold, and myrrh, and frankincense. ♪ ♪ Noel, Noel ♪ ♪ Noel, Noel ♪ ♪ Born is the King of Israel ♪

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