

Man: Let us pray the prayer for illumination. Open our hearts and minds, O God, by the power of your Holy Spirit, so that as the word is read and proclaimed, we may hear your message with joy this day. Amen. The first reading is from the book of Isaiah, chapter five. "Let me sing for my beloved, "my love song concerning his vineyard. "My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. "He dug it and cleared it of stones, "and planted it with choice vines. "He built a watchtower in the midst of it, "and hewed out a wine vat in it. "He expected it to yield grapes, "but it yielded wild grapes. "And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people "of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. "What more was there to do for my vineyard "that I have not done in it? "When I expected it to yield grapes, "why did it yield wild grapes? "And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. "I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured. "I will break down its wall and it shall be trampled down. "I will make it a waste. "It shall not be pruned or hoed. "And it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns. "I will also command the clouds that they rain "no rain upon it. "For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts "is the house of Israel. "And the people of Judah are his pleasant planting. "He expected justice but saw bloodshed, "righteousness, but heard a cry." This is the word of the Lord. (audience responds)

Man: Before I read the second lesson, I would like to take just a moment of personal privilege to thank Dr. Willimon for the introduction and for the opportunity to share in this worship service with you this morning. When I accepted this invitation about a year ago, I knew that in coming I would be sharing this service with one minister who is a member of the South Carolina Annual Conference. I didn't know at that time that when I got here they would be the beginnings of a South Carolina mafia at Duke. (laughs) But how pleased I am that that is the case. And I am very thankful to be here with both Will Willimon and Ken Nelson. And it's a special privilege to share this service as well with Dr. Robert Durden, who was one of my history professors when I was an undergraduate here. I told him as we were going down the stairs a moment ago I still have those papers I wrote. And I read them every now and then to help keep me humble. (laughs) But it is good to be here and share this service with you. The second lesson comes from the 11th chapter of the letter to the Hebrews. Verses 29 through verse two of the 12th chapter. "By faith the people passed through the Red Sea "as if it were dry land. "But when the Egyptians attempted to do so, "they were drowned. "By faith the walls of Jericho fell "after they had been encircled for seven days. "By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish "with those who were disobedient because she had "received the spies in peace. "And what more should I say? "For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, "Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel "and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, "administered justice, obtained promises, "shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, "escaped the edge of the sword, "won strength out of weakness, "became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. "Women received their dead by resurrection. "Others were tortured, refusing to accept release "in order to obtain a better resurrection. "Others suffered mocking and flogging "and even chains and imprisonment. "They were stoned to death. "They were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword. "They went about in skins of sheep and goats, "destitute, persecuted, tormented, "of whom the world was not worthy. "They wandered in deserts and mountains "and in caves and holes in the ground. "Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, "did not receive what

was promised "since God had provided something better, "so that they would not apart from us, "be made perfect. "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great "a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside "every weight and the sin that clings so closely, "and let us run with perseverance the race "that is set before us, looking to Jesus, "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, "who for the sake of the joy that was set before him, "endured the cross, disregarding its shame, "and has taken his seat at the right hand "of the throne of God." This is the word of the Lord. We generally hear this section of the letter to the Hebrews called the roll call of the faithful. And I suppose it is that, the roll call of the faithful. After all, if you begin with the first verse of the 11th chapter and read all the way through to that second verse of chapter 12, as we just did, you find that at least 16 persons are mentioned by name. And you find that innumerable persons are mentioned at least by implication. We began the passage we read with that sentence, the people passed through the Red Sea. By faith, the people. All those who were on their way from Egypt towards the promised land. It's a roll call of people who, as it says, lived and died by faith. And it does what we are told by commentators that this book of Hebrews is intended to do. It recalls in this particular passage, the mighty acts of God in the history of the Jewish people, as a way of setting the stage for the writer's claim that Jesus is the fulfillment of that earlier revelation. This 11th chapter, part of the stage setting, which it does by examples. Examples of faithfulness are remembered. Examples of persons who trusted God, who put their lives into alignment with what they understood God to be doing and calling them to do. And thus they were judged faithful. It's a text about faithfulness. And as I pondered it, the question that arose in my mind was, whose faithfulness? Whose faithfulness is this text about? If it is a testimony to faithfulness, whose faithfulness is being recalled? Whose faithfulness is being held up for us to remember and for us to see and for us to celebrate? Well that's an easy one. That's an easy one. As I said at least 16 people mentioned by name, and it's obvious. So many whose faithfulness is being recalled are named. And if you begin at the beginning of the chapter, you read of Abel and Enoch and Noah and Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Jacob and Joseph and of Moses and Rahab and Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah and David and Samuel. That's easy. The faithful are named. Whose faithfulness, their faithfulness. Not to mention the ones whom the writer doesn't mention, and simply refers to as prophets, or as women, or as others, or as in that wonderful phrase, the cloud of witnesses. Whose faithfulness? It's clear, whose faithfulness is being celebrated here. These named and unnamed heroes and heroines of the people of God, who over the centuries, have aligned themselves with what they understood to be the purposes of God. And in doing so, were faithful to their callings, and thus are remembered for that faithfulness. Yet, underneath these references to the stories of these faithful, I sense another message. I get the idea that these accounts of human faithfulness are recorded in order to tell us about a faithfulness of a different sort. I get the idea that the real faithfulness that's being celebrated in this passage is not human faithfulness, but is divine faithfulness. The faithfulness of God. And as I reflected further on this passage, the message that kept coming to me was a message that this particular text above all else is a text about the faithfulness of God. Now you could make a case that the Bible as a whole is a book that tells the ongoing story of how a people whom we know as people of God, of how that people has tried to live faithfully. The Bible is a story of the attempted faithfulness of those who have wanted to align their lives with the purposes of God. From Genesis to Revelation, you could make a case for the Bible as a testimony to the faithfulness of those persons who have seen themselves as followers of this God who is revealed in its pages. But you could make a case for another perspective as well. You could make a case for the Bible as a testimony to divine faithfulness. Particularly to divine faithfulness as it was ultimately revealed in the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. At the heart of it, at the heart of it,

scripture in general and this passage from Hebrews in particular remind us that God keeps God's promises. That God is faithful to God's intentions. It reminds us over and over and over again, that God can be trusted. God's, after all, about the business of making promises and keeping promises. To Abraham. A promise of hope, a promise of identity. To Moses, a promise of freedom. Freedom from slavery and freedom from captivity. To God's people through the centuries, the promise of sustenance in the midst of difficulty, of strength in the face of weakness, of comfort in the pangs of grief, of life in the very jaws of death. Over and over, the Bible tells us of those promises that God has made and kept. If you look at the witness of the past in this text, you see that witness to God's faithfulness. Abraham, one of those mentioned in this chapter. Left with his father, their home, in Ur of the Chaldees. Traveled 600 miles or so, north and west from over near what we know as the Persian Gulf to up into what we know today as the land of Syria and stopped for a while. And then headed a little further west and then south through what we know today as the land of Israel on the way to a promise. On the way to a promised land. And found again and again that God was faithful. Many of you, I imagine, could tell your own stories of how you have found God to be faithful. When you have in your personal lives or in some corporate activity, given yourself in some way to what you understood to be the call and the will of God for you. You found that God sustained and kept you in your answering that call. God was faithful. We look at the past. The past of the church, our own past and we see the faithfulness of God. We look at the present and we see in a fascinating way the faithfulness of God. In this passage from Hebrews which we read there's a very interesting statement about the relationship of our lives to the lives of those who have preceded us in faith. The relationship of our present to our predecessors and their lives. The writer is thinking about all those who had preceded him in faith, and he says this. It's one of the most interesting parts of this text. He says of them, "All these, though they were commended "for their faith, did not receive what was promised, "since God had provided something better "so that they would not apart from us be made perfect." Now the word perfect here means complete. It means whole, it means mature, it means finished. And when you think about what he's saying here, it's utterly fascinating that we, you and I, as part of God's plan in creation, complete, make whole, finish the witness of our predecessors. And they never quite complete that task to which they're called, and we take it up and finish it. And after we have gone, others will take up the task that we have not quite completed and finish it. And so the life of the people of God goes on, and in each present we see that God can be trusted to continue that which God has begun. The reality of each present testifies to the faithfulness of God and the promise of the future. The promise of the future testifies to the faithfulness of God. In the beginning of that 12th chapter, we read these words, "Therefore, since we are surrounded "by so great a cloud of witnesses, "let us lay aside every weight and the sin "which clings so closely and let us run "with perseverance the race that is set before us." Before us. "Looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter "of our faith, who for the sake of the joy "that was set before him, endured the cross, "disregarding its shame and has taken his seat "at the right hand of the throne of God." Now think about that for a moment in terms of the future. We are, as we gather here today, you and I, surrounded. Surrounded by those saints of the church's life across the centuries, who have aligned themselves with what they understood to be the will of God, and found that God sustained them, and so have given to those who followed them courage to do the same. When you enter this chapel, you see some of them in statue form standing round the doors. I think about this place and what it has been over the years. I first worshiped in this chapel 40 years ago next month. I got to thinking about that last night and realized that in those 40 years since then, this chapel has lived over half its life. It was built in the early '30s. When I came, it wasn't yet 30 years old. And 40 years have passed since then. How many generations of

students and faculty and visitors and families of those students have come through this chapel and within its walls, worshiped and expressed their faithfulness and yet the task remains for us to continue. The witness remains for us to make. We are surrounded by them, they are here. That's part of what we mean in our creed when we say we believe in the communion of saints. We are surrounded by this cloud of witnesses, therefore, said the writer, because we are surrounded and because we complete that which they began, we look ahead. We run with perseverance the race that is set before us, and our faith is forward looking, and the God who has sustained those before us in the past and sustains us in the present, compels us to look to the future and to those who after us continue to complete the work that we began. And so goes the life of the church from generation to generation to generation. It's a text about faithfulness. But one which tells us that our faithfulness is finally testimony. Ultimately testimony to the faithfulness of God. And so what do we do in response to that? Over in the western part of this state, there is a little narrow winding highway, North Carolina highway 209, that among other places will take you from Lake Junaluska, North Carolina to Hot Springs, North Carolina. Takes about an hour, maybe a little over to make that trip. And as you drive that windy, little mountain road, there are three little communities that you come to along the way. The name of one of them is Bluff. The name of another one is Luck. And the name of another one is Trust. Bluff, Luck and Trust. I think of that highway as kind of a parable of our lives. You think about that a little bit. Some people go through life trying to bluff their way to success and effectiveness. You know people like that. They're gonna intimidate whoever they can. And that's the way you live life. It doesn't matter what's behind the bluff, the thing is the bluff. And we go through life that way, thinking I can finally intimidate people so that I will be effective and remembered and respected. Then some people go through life hoping they're gonna be lucky enough to be successful and effective. I mean why else did all those people buy Powerball tickets. Couple of weeks in it, somebody was lucky enough. If things just work out my way. It's kind of a fatalistic approach to life, really. Kind of says I can't really do much to influence anything. But if I'm lucky, life's gonna work out good for me. Some people however go through life differently. They don't bluff their way. They don't just sit around hoping I'm gonna be luck enough to be effective and to make a contribution. Some people go through life listening for a voice from beyond. Listening for the voice of God. Trying to see and align themselves with the purposes that they believe to be the purposes of God. And through it all, trusting God. Not trusting that God will make life easy. It was not easy for any of these faithful ones listed in this letter to the Hebrews. Not trusting that God will do away with all the risk of life that certainly was not true for any of these faithful ones remembered. Not trusting that God will eliminate the cost of the trust. That certainly was not true for Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, to whom, says the writer, we look. Not trusting any of that, but trusting that God will sustain them. Trusting that God will give to them the strength and the vision which they need to fulfill the purposes to which they commit themselves when they are pursuing that will of God. Trusting that God will use them to complete the witness of their predecessors. Trusting that God will use those who come after them to complete their witness. Trusting that God will give them the wisdom and the insight and the courage and the strength to continue on their way in response to God's call. Trusting that God who saw Jesus Christ through the suffering and the agony of the cross to the joy of resurrection will see them through the steps of their life's journeys as well and lead them as God led Jesus to the joy that is set before them. That highway, 209, those communities, Bluff and Luck and Trust. If you ride that road today, you'll find that the only one of those communities that has really prospered, is Trust. In the ritual for the holy communion, with which I grew up, the invitation used to put a question to those who were asked to come. This was the question. Or actually I

suppose we could say it's an instruction. Draw near, it said, draw near with faith. And take this holy sacrament to your comfort. So when you come, do that. Draw near with faith. With trust. With the faith that this God who is revealed in the self-giving life of Jesus is indeed a God who can be trusted. Draw near with faith, with trust. That if we align our lives with the purposes of God, God will be faithful to undergird us and sustain us and see us to the fulfillment of those purposes.