

(instrumental music) (upbeat music) (upbeat soft music) (tranquil music) (lively music) (ceremonious music) (choir vocalizing)

- Let us confess to God almighty and to one another that we have sinned in thought, word, and deed, by our own fault. And let us ask God to give us the grace of true repentance, to have mercy upon us and to forgive us our sins. So let us pray together in unison. Oh Lord in this season of hope and expectancy, we look at our lives and confess that we are in need of the miracle of your love and peace. We who claim to have heard the good news, live our lives defensively. We are afraid to be made vulnerable by caring too deeply. We hide from pain, loneliness, and involvement. Our lives are full of disillusionment with people and politics. We have forgotten that joy and laughter are part of your gift to us. Come to us in our fear and despair, know us as we are, feel out longing and hunger to be your faith for people, let your love grow. Amen. Now let us offer unto God quietly, each one of us, her own, his own personal confession, the sin of commission in anger, dislike, malice, meanness, the sin of omission. The good we have forgotten to do, this is the sin which worry Jesus more than any other. And let us hear these words of assurance of forgiveness that Advent has found in one of the cuddles for Christmas. God, rest you Mary gentle folk. Let nothing you dismay for Jesus Christ our savior who was born on Christmas day to save us all from Satan's power when we were gone astray. O tidings of comfort and joy, O tidings of comfort and joy. So be comforted and strength. Amen. (instrumental music) (man vocalizing)

- The scripture readings for this Sunday, the fourth, Sunday in Advent, come to us from the book of Hebrews, the 10th chapter, verses five through 10. Hear now the words of God. Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings thou has not desired, but a body has thou prepared for me. In burnt offerings and sin offerings thou has taken no pleasure. Then I said, "Lo I have come to do they will of God." It is written of me in the role of the book, when he said above, "Thou has neither desired nor taken pleasure in the sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings. These are offered according to the law." Then he added, "Lo I have come to do thy will. He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. And by that will, we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. The congregation, please rise for the reading of the gospel. Gospel reading to us today comes from the gospel of St. Luke, the first chapter verses 39 through 49. In those days, "Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country to a city of Judea. And she entered the house as Zachariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the holy spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry. Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why is this granted to me that the mother of our Lord should come to me. For behold when the voice of your greeting came onto my ears, the baby in my womb, leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord. And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior, for he has regarded the lowest state of his handmaiden, for behold henceforth, all generations will call me blessed for he who is mighty has done great things for me. And holy is his name." May the Lord add his blessings to the hearing,

the reading and the understanding of his holy word. Amen. (choir vocalizing)

- Let us affirm what we believe. We believe in God, who has created and is 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.

- And be with you too.

- Let us pray. Let our first prayer be one of Thanksgiving at Advent. Great God of power and love. We thank thee for Jesus Christ, whose birth we celebrate so soon, we thank thee for the prophets hope, the angel song, the Wiseman's tribute. We thank thee that in Jesus thou has joined us, sharing human pleasures and human hurts. We thank thee that through the holy spirit, he is still with us. Glory be to thee for thy wonderful love. Glory be to thee eternal God through Jesus Christ forever and ever, amen. Let our second prayer be one of intercession at Advent. For God who through thy son has taught us to make prayer for all conditions of folk. We would remember them. We offer our prayers for the trustees and administration of our university to the joy of Christmas may be in them, for any work well done, for the faculty that learning and religion, inseparably connected, maybe recognized in Jesus of Bethlehem and Nazareth. For the students that they may reach their homes in safety find joy in their families and return to us with Christmas gladness in their hearts. For the employees who serve us with graciousness and skill, that they may know that they belong to a beloved community. For those who must spend this season in the hospital, some in gratitude that a child is born, some in pain, others in sorrow, some offering their skill and devotion as doctors and nurses, let our hospital be a thoughtful place of love at this holy time, for all men and women in all places that peace may come because of goodwill, honor. For thy creatures here and everywhere, we offer this prayer of intercession. And then prayer of supplication for ourselves at Advent. Oh God, what curious praise is ours, for Jesus Christ. I read tricycle, for small and busy feet. Skis for a boy to ride the wind, perfume for her and tobacco for him, a check or two or three or 10, for charity at Christmas. Christmas cards signed love by hand, letters to friends long lost in years ago, much weariness and ribbons and short tempers. Oh find in this dear God, our human hearts, our hope for one another. Our praise for thee and love for thy son. And now as our savior Christ taught his disciples, we pray together saying, 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. Our preacher this morning is known to you, Reverend Helen G. Crotwell, the Associate Minister to the university.

- Advent is a time of waiting, of preparation, of expectation, a time of hope, promise and joy. This is how we describe Advent when we are talking about what we'd like for this season to be for us. But when we think about some of the other dimensions of Advent, we say it is a time of a million carpools, of too many exams

to take or to grade, too many papers to write or to read, a time of frantic activity of frustration, of short tempers, of exhaustion, a time of anxiety, depression, despair, heightened loneliness, a time when there are more suicides than at any other time of the year, what a contrast between some of our expectations and some of our experiences, a time for waiting, a time for preparing for the celebration of the birth of Jesus, but a time which is so rushed and so hectic there is not even time for our cup of tea. There is not even time to hear of the hurts of another, a time of hope and promise and expectation, yet a time when many people feel the most hopeless, the most lonely, the most despair. Now I want to point up some of the dimensions of our life, which contribute to the stark contrast between our expectations and our experiences during this season. First and most important. This is a family time, more than any other of our holy days or our secular celebrations. And the other two dimensions are related to our response to God's gift to us and our giving to others, making this a season of giving and receiving. Now consider that this Christmas Advent, season is a family time. You have heard people say, it's especially said that she died at Christmas, or how much harder this pain must be for you to bare at this particular time? Or how terrible that the marriage had to break up at Christmas? Now we know that anytime a family is broken because of anger or alienation or death or divorce, it is awful and terrible and sad. And yet it does seem more difficult, even worse at this time, at this season. And this is because it is a time to be with your family, a time of memories of those you love. A time of renewed hope for this primary Christian community, the family, and when the hopes and dreams are unfulfilled or shattered, our pain and our despair is heightened. And when separation comes to our family during this season, we know that from then on, this season, our time of joy will have the shadow of this sad memory of what once was and is no more, dimming its joy. Advent Christmas is a family celebration because God chose to come to us, to bring us hope by being born as a baby in a family. And so when we recall what little we know about Jesus in relation to his family, we gain some perspective on our need for, and our search for a family, for a supportive community. Before one of the students in the Divinity School preached using the Luke scripture, which we heard today, which talks about a time of waiting, of preparation, of expectation. She talked to some women about what was it like to discover that they were pregnant? Their response was similar to Mary's, shock, unbelief, wanting to be alone, but soon wanting to talk with another woman, who could understand what she was experiencing. And so Mary visited her cousin, Elizabeth. God comes to us in the form of a baby, in the context of a family. And as we recall the gospel accounts of Jesus' life, we remember reports, very brief reports, but important ones of his relationship with his family, a place where as a baby, he was cared for by his mother and father, a place where he was nurtured and taught, a place where he was introduced to the religious community, the religious traditions, the rites and rituals which are so important for our being human, the place where he learned about God and about value in life and God's creation. And he broke away from his first dependence on his family at a very early age, becoming independent, yet always maintaining a relationship to his family. It was this child who followed the family was so important who became the adult who pushes and stretches our vision and image of the family, beyond that of the blood can to those who I need, to those who want to do the will of God. And in the final days, when he knew he was to die, we remember his concern for his mother, and his giving this responsibility to John, the beloved disciple, this responsibility to care for his mother. And so the celebration of the birthday of Jesus is primarily our family's celebration. And we all have memories of what this was and is for us, the family selecting and decorating the Christmas tree, the good smell of the food in the house, reading together the Christmas story, the Advent wreath and calendar, the visit to shut-ins and relatives, the joy of making and giving your first gift, the special church services, carol sings, and own and own, you

remember. One student was telling of a special joy in her family that they find in cherishing and using different expressions, which our grandmother creates and uses over and over at different times. One was, you always know the first time you do something, but you never know when it will be the last time. A statement, which is poignant. And with some sadness. It may be the last time a mother or a father cuddles a child before the child pushes away in the first steps of independence, you never know this until after it has happened. It may be the last time the family sits around a fire to read the Christmas stories or sing the Christmas carols because the next year the family may be separated, because a new family has come into being or because of divorce or death. You'd never know until it has happened. Now, for those are without family at this time of year because of separation by distance or death or whatever, you find hope in knowing that Jesus pushed out images and vision of the family to include more than the natural family. And Bob Young sermon entitled, "Who Are My Brothers and Sisters." he says, and I quote, "Our natural families are not always with us. We leave them or they leave us. They grow apart from us, or we grow apart from them. We become different in those ways where our differences count. But as this happens, we reach out and others reach out to us. And a new family is found" End of the quote. Any group can become your family if it can bear the marks and carry the weight of being a family, a place where you are nurtured and sustained, where your hurts are healed, where you can share your joys, where you are called into question in your selfishness, supported in your doubts, where you share a common commitment toward what is important and of value in your life. Now, such a group can only be a family when there is mutuality, where there is a sharing and the giving and the taking. A sharing and the telling and the listening, for if it is one-sided, then the relationship is one of counselor to counselee, or social worker to one in need or something else, but not a family. Now people have often asked me, "What it's like to be a single person in a community so far from any family?" And I respond with thankfulness, saying that I stay human and whole because there are several groups and families to which I feel I belong. And the sense that I have just talked about how other than the natural family can be your family. And for this I give thanks. Now we know that the family is especially important, is a place to care for those who cannot care for themselves. The very young, or the very old, or those who are incapacitated in some way. Sometimes homes for the aged or hospitals or children's homes, become family for these people. And we give thanks that so many of these institutions are responsible and are not exploitive and callous in accepting this responsibility. And yet when we have a member of our family away from us, we want it all times. And especially at Christmas to be united with them in some way, to be united with the people we love, to help relieve the loneliness which must be theirs at this very poignant and nostalgic time, Advent, Christmas, or family time, our time to share with those you love what is most important to you. What is meaning filled? What is most (indistinct). A time to express in specific ways, thanks and appreciation for the gift of love and life. And it is, as we try to express this appreciation that we discover another source of our sadness and despair and depression, and hear the word of Hebrews speaks to us. We know that we do not try to relate to God or to express our love to God, to the sacrifice as did the people in the biblical times. And yet, as we try to be obedient to God, to respond to God's love by sharing our love with those who need it. We know how we would like to do something, to fulfill our responsibility and get it over with, and get on living with our lives untroubled, by the hungry and the cold and the lonely. And so it is just here that this scripture can speak to us and our situation today. This is a season when the needs of the human community are lifted before our eyes, we are troubled and saddened, and we as a community, respond and give generously. But we are humbled by the fact that many of us spend more money on unnecessary gifts to those we love than some of these people have to eat on for the whole year. And we are

concerned that these people will be cared for at Thanksgiving and Christmas, but maybe forgotten the rest of the year. And we are concerned that our giving not be dehumanizing and demeaning. Hear this poem from the daily meditation booklet, which was prepared by some students who were planning for the world, hunger fast at Thanksgiving. "I would let you help me, but to feel obligated to one I do not respect, as I must if I accept your aid, enslaves my love and leaves me with less than I began with. It is indeed no blessing and at least easier to be able to give than to have to receive. Yet if the need is great enough to blot out my pride, I can will to beg and gladly perhaps thankfully receive, give if only because you can, perhaps because you must, but hopefully without buying your own dignity, by taking the dignity of another. Give cheerfully, because you love." End of the poem. We know we want to respond to immediate need, but we also want to commit ourselves to eliminate the need for people to have to beg for food, for love or for shelter. Now finally let us look at our giving to those whom we love. We sent some dis-ease even here, for we are afraid we will let the secular determine how we shall show our love. Try to find our joy or celebrate God's gift to us. I looked through some advertisements and found what I expected and realized a subtle influence these words can have on us, words which offer promises which cannot be fulfilled. Hear a few of these, the love you get is the love you give. Give a watch, it tells a person more than the right time. Express the value of your love to another at Christmas, by buying a valuable gift or diamond, spend a little, but give a lot. And this was an advertisement for a cheap gift, which only cost \$50. There is one joy, there is only one joy, and that is the costliest perfume in the world. A status bracelet, add to your or someone else's collection this Christmas. The nicest way you can show you care is to give and share. The best there is. And when they say you really shouldn't, don't believe them. And then this final one, this is my favorite. Give a bottle and be highly esteemed, but give a case and be revered. (crowd laughs) We are amused, but we are haunted that we may be more influenced by the secular message. The only way we can show we care to find joy, to have a happy holiday is to spend a lot of money. Advent is a time to continue our pilgrimage to the manger, to celebrate the fact that God is with us. Let this be a time of waiting, of expectation, of letting the spirit of Christ be born again in your life. A time to find the source of joy and peace and love, which will sustain you in a world distraught by war and greed and exploitation and poverty and hunger. A time to find a joy whose source begins in a manger, but ends in a crucifixion and a resurrection. We are not promised life without pain or heartache or brokenness. These are false expectations and distortions of the Christmas message, but we are promised that God will be with us and all of our joys and in all of our pains, sustaining, supporting, healing. Advent is a time to find peace and joy and hope. A time to nourish our souls as well as our bodies, a time to learn to care for those without families, and a time to learn to give the most valuable gift, the gift of ourselves to God and to those we love and to those who need us. Let us pray. We thank you oh God, for coming to us and the human and Jesus our Christ, for offering your love to us, the hope which sends us forth and enables us to continue our pilgrimage. We thank you for speaking your word, despite our deafness, for putting your word in our stubborn hearts. And because we know you and the human Jesus, we can meet you in our brothers and sisters, and a forgiving word, a reassuring smile, and friends who walk mysteriously into our lives and awakened good in us we never knew existed. Oh God, your word is hope, creativity, imagination, and new beginnings. So that somehow we can start out again from the ashes of defeat and disappointment or depression and despair. Your word, oh God is yes to who we are and all we do as we struggle to discover your presence in ourselves and our world. And for this, we give you thanks. Amen. And amen. (instrumental music) (choir vocalizing) (slow music) (man vocalizing) (soft piano music) (choir vocalizing)

- Here we offer and present unto thee O God, our gifts as at the cradle of thy son, let them symbolize gold because he reigns as our king, frankincense because he lives as our high priest, myrrh because he died for our wellbeing, accept them for we bring them in gratitude and love to his honor and glory. Amen. (bright music) (choir vocalizing) May God almighty bless you. May God himself protect and defend you in all things, who for our sakes mercifully took upon himself, our human infancy through him who is Emmanuel, even Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (playful music) (audience clapping)