

(joyful brass band music) Like to welcome you to Duke Chapel on this first Sunday of Advent. Lemme call a couple of announcements to your attention. This coming weekend will be a big weekend for us here at Duke Chapel with our annual performances of "The Messiah" on December the fourth at 7:30, December the fifth at two p.m., and December the sixth at three p.m.. Tickets are on sale at Page Auditorium Box Office for those performances. We'd also like to call to your attention an opportunity to be involved in service during this time of the year. Project Share provides opportunities for you to share your Christmas with those who are less fortunate. Let me also call to your attention the Advent calendar listed on the back of your bulletin. It lists the full series of activities that will be happening at Duke Chapel during this busy and joyful season of the year. Please stand now as we continue our worship with the greeting. Now is the time of watching and waiting. (audience murmuring) Now is the season of hope unfolding. (audience murmuring) Let us come before God with receptive and willing spirits. (audience murmuring) Rejoice, God comes to bring the birthday of life and hope. (organ music)

- May we remain standing for our opening prayer. In the Advent season, when the past has fled unasked away, and there is nothing left to do but wait, God shelter us. Be our surrounding darkness. Be the fertile soil out of which hope springs in due time and uncertain times. Help us to greet the dawn and labor on, love on in faith, awaiting your purpose hid in you. Waiting to be born in due time. Amen. Please be seated.

- Let us pray the prayer for illumination. Open our hearts and minds, oh God, by the power of your Holy Spirit so that as the word is read and proclaimed, we might be prepared for your advent among us. Amen. The first reading is taken from the words of the prophet Isaiah, the second chapter, starting with the first verse. The word that Isaiah son of Amos saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In the days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be raised above the hills. All the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, "to the house of the God of Jacob, "that he may teach us his ways, "and that we may walk in his path." For out of Zion should go forth instruction in the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations and shall arbitrate for many peoples. They shall beat their swords into plow shares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nations shall not lift up sword against nation. Neither shall they learn war anymore. Oh house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord. This is the word of the lord. (audience murmuring)

- Please stand for the reading of the psalter. Our psalter this morning is Psalm 122 which is on page 845, 845 in your hymnal. Praise to the Lord's anointed. Great David's greater son. I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord." (audience murmuring) Jerusalem is built as a city and is firmly bound together, to which the tribes go up. The tribes of the Lord, to give thanks to the name of the Lord, as was decreed for Israel. (audience murmuring) Pray for the peace of Jerusalem. (audience murmuring) For the sake of my relatives and friends, I will say peace be within you. (audience murmuring) (organ music)

- This reading is taken from the 13th chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans. Starting with the 11th verse. Besides this, you know what time it is. How it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers. The night is far gone and the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us live honorably as in the day. Not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires. This is the word of the Lord.
(audience murmuring) (joyful brass band music)

- Our gospel text is from the book of Matthew chapter 24 beginning with verse 36. But about that day and hour no one knows. Neither the angels of heaven, nor the son, but only the father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the son of man. For as in those days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage. Until the day Noah entered the ark and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away. So too will be the coming of the son of man. Then two will be in the field, one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together. One will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this, if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and he would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready. For the son of man is coming at an unexpected hour. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Today is the first Sunday of Advent. That annual time of the Christian year that marks both an ending and the beginning. The ending of the calendar year, the beginning of the church year. A time of looking back over the year's accomplishments and failures, successes and disappointments. A time of looking forward to the future, a time of anxiety and anticipation. A time of fear and hope. It's appropriate that Advent comes in winter for winter reflects the ambiguities of this season of the church year. The increasing darkness that makes us long for the light. The barrenness of the land that yet carries within it the seeds of new life. The cold that threatens us with death, but encourages us to huddle closer for warmth. It is a season pregnant with unspoken expectations and yearnings, uneasy yet hopeful. During Advent the Christian community resembles the Greek mythological god Janus who simultaneously looks backward and forward. As a faith community we look back to remember past Advents, the times throughout human history when God has come among us. And we look forward with anticipation and hope to that day when God will come again. Our scriptures tell us of a God who's continually reached toward us to bridge the gap between the divine and the human. Ours is not an indifferent god, holy and distant. But a God who desires to be in relationship with us even as a father with his children. We remember with gratitude many signs of God's self revelation and love that have nourished our faith. God's covenant promise to Abraham to build a nation from Sarah's barrenness. God's gift of the law to Moses on the mountain top to teach the proper orderings of human existence. God's deliverance of Israel from bondage in Egypt. And God's ultimate act of self giving love through the birth, death and resurrection of his only son, Jesus Christ, who became fully human that we might be fully redeemed. We look back and remember these faith stories that have shaped our identity and self understanding as a Christian community and they give us hope to face an unknown future. We can face the future with confidence because of what God has already done for us. Advent is the time when we as a people of faith look at our church and our world and our history and say yes, no matter what else has happened, God has been with us. Even though millions have died of starvation this year in Somalia and countless Muslims have been driven from their homes in Bosnia, God has been with us. Even though

millions are homeless on the streets of the United States, and winter's cold and darkness is descending upon them, God has been with us. Even though ours is the most violent industrial country in the world, God has been with us. During Advent the Christian church looks squarely at the growing darkness and proclaims with confidence that the light of Christ has come into the world and that the darkness has not and shall not overcome the light. The season of Advent also invites us to look back and reflect upon our own lives, our hopes and disappointments, successes and failures, our faithfulness and sinfulness. It's a time to look back and listen. Where has God been present in your life in the past year? How have you responded to God's presence? Are you prepared for God to come into your life once again? Most of you have known times when you've felt especially close to God. Perhaps it was during a lonely night when you felt empty and lost and God's love found you, and filled you. Perhaps you discovered the love of Christ through a friend who reached out to you in just the way that you needed to be loved. Or maybe you experienced God's love reaching for you in the same moment that you reached out in compassion to someone else. Mother Theresa says that she never hurries as she goes among the dying children in Calcutta. She says I don't want to hastily pass by even one person. That the eyes of these children I'm looking at might be the eyes of Jesus Christ. Sometimes as we reach out in love to someone who's hurting we're startled to find God's love reaching for us through them. God's Advent usually takes us by surprise. We may be preoccupied with our own lives or pain and suddenly experience the in-breaking of that holy other seeking us. In that moment we know with certainty that whatever else may be happening, God is with us. The experience of God's holiness is awe-filled, unexpected and decisive. We can't encounter God and walk away unaffected by the experience of God's unconditional love. When we experience God's love reaching out toward us it always demands a response of obedient love from us. Perhaps it means forgiving someone we've harbored resentment toward for a past hurt. Perhaps it means making some sacrifice that we've been resisting. Perhaps it means reordering our priorities. It might even mean a total change of life direction. One night when I felt especially down about my work, I prayed for a sense of guidance. For greater motivation, to be better at my job, for better use of my time. Suddenly I felt a powerful sense of God's presence with me. I knew that Christ was with me and I felt that my prayer, my whole being was accepted by God in that moment. I can't describe the sense of joy and peace that that gave me. But the outcome of this encounter wasn't exactly what I had planned. Within six months I had left a lucrative sales position to respond to God's call to attend seminary and prepare for the ministry. God's Advent can definitely be life changing. Whenever we unexpectedly encounter the holy in our lives, it is always an experience of both judgment and grace. Judgment because we suddenly see ourselves as God sees us, selfish, manipulative, prideful, greedy, judgmental, whatever our sin may be, it becomes clear in the presence of God's light. But the encounter with God is never an experience of judgment alone. God came to us through Jesus Christ in order to free us from the power of sin, exposure to the light of Christ reveals our sin, but also God's profound love for us. Like parents who discipline their children because they love them and want the best for them, the encounter with God's love in Jesus Christ both disciplines us and transforms us through the power of God's spirit at work in our lives. God loves us just as we are, but God doesn't leave us as we are. For most of us there are also times when we feel distant from God. During these times it's hard to trust our past experiences of God's presence and grace. We begin to doubt ourselves and God. It may seem that we are regressing in our faith and that nothing is happening. But like the seeds that are dormant in winter, these are often the times when God is working within us, preparing us for some new advent, some new work that God wants to accomplish through us. The times of drought make us appreciative of the rain when it finally comes. The dry barren times are crucial to

our spiritual renewal, for these are the times when we must wait to see what God wants to do with us. God often chooses the times when we have no confidence in our own ability and our own power and creativity to do something much bigger, much greater in our lives than we could ever have imagined. God's power is made perfect in our weakness. The son of God was born of a virgin. Death was conquered on the cross. As we enter this season of Advent, let us watch and wait attentively for God's coming. We may discover our lives transformed in wholly new ways by God's ever-seeking love. But as Christians we also look forward during Advent to God's final coming and triumph through Jesus Christ. Both the Romans and the Matthew passages in today's scripture readings point to the eschaton, the end time when Jesus Christ will come again in glory and all of creation will be judged and redeemed through him. We're not especially comfortable with apocalyptic scriptures, we much prefer to reflect upon the babe in the manger, or even the adult Jesus on the cross. But to acknowledge that everything we know will cease to exist in the way that it does now, that history, the Earth, the galaxy, everything that exists will come to its final end in Jesus Christ, is difficult for us to imagine, much less affirm. Yet as Christians we do proclaim that there will be an end to the world as we know it and that that end belongs ultimately to God. Many people throughout the centuries have gotten sidetracked by predictions of the date of the apocalypse. Even Paul expected it to come soon. But as the years passed, the Christian understanding of the Parousia, the second coming of Christ, changed. They began to understand that their hope in the future must be based upon their confidence in the ultimate destiny of all existence in Jesus Christ. That God determines what happens in the end in God's own time. The Matthew text leads us away from obsession with predicting when Jesus will come again. He says that even the son doesn't know, that only the father knows how or when that unexpected day will come. But in that day of ultimate destiny, when all things will meet God's end, Jesus will come again in power to judge and redeem all creation and usher in a new reign of God's kingdom of holiness and peace and justice. As frightening as images of the end may seem to us, it is not a threat, but a call to hope. Not a frivolous hope that denies the pain of human existence, but a hope that can stand in the face of all the darkness of human sinfulness. A hope big enough to confront injustice and cruelty, pain and suffering, death and destruction in all their forms. It is a hope big enough to proclaim that God's love has the final word. It is a hope that says God is ultimately in charge and that God will redeem the whole created order through Jesus Christ. Not one child of God in Somalia or Bosnia or Calcutta or Los Angeles or Durham will be lost to God's redeeming love in Christ. Yet we feel so vulnerable, so small, so afraid to stand and face such a God as this. For as all of existence will be judged, we too must accept the reality of God's judgment. Matthew tells us that one person will be left and the other taken. What we do in life matters to God. And we must ultimately give an accounting for how we've lived our lives, for what we've given our lives to. Doesn't mean we should live our life in constant fear of God's final judgment for God has already judged us through Jesus Christ in order to forgive and redeem us. What it does mean is that we must live now as a people oriented to God's future. We must live now as a people who love because we've first been loved by God. We must live now as a people who are a part of God's plan of reconciliation through Jesus Christ. We must walk in the light of Christ now, believing that the darkness will not overcome the light even in death. I had the opportunity to participate in two very different memorial services recently. The first service was for a man who had lived a long, full life. He had a wife and children. He'd been a success in his career. His friends and colleagues held him in high esteem. Can any of us hope for more than that? As we were planning the service, it very quickly became clear that he was not a believer and that any faith references at his memorial services would be inappropriate. After further discussion with those planning the service about why a Christian minister

should be involved in the memorial service at all, it was decided that I would some faith statements for the people of faith in attendance, but that no belief would be attributed to the man being memorialized. The second memorial service was for Amy Geisinger, a first year student and a member of the Duke Chapel Choir who died tragically in a bus accident on campus recently. She was at the beginning of her life. A person who had barely begun to realize her potential. Her life and death were cruel by anyone's standards. As we were planning her service it very quickly became evident that both she and her family were people of strong Christian faith. Even in the midst of their overwhelming grief, Amy's family comforted and strengthened all who met them with their unwavering faith and hope. The chapel was full for that memorial service with students and staff alike trying to make sense out of a senseless death. While the service fully embraced our sadness and grief at Amy's death, it also affirmed our confidence in her eternal life through Jesus Christ. The light of hope shined through clearly in the midst of the sadness and darkness. It was an unexpected advent. God coming among us with the death of one so young. We felt the comfort of the reality of God's presence with us and the hope of God's power to bring life from death. Amy's memorial service proclaimed that God, not death, has the final word. These two services stand in stark contrast for me. In the first, a full life, fully lived, fully over with death, with only the hope of a lingering impact upon life. In the second, a life cut short, fully embraced, fully realized in the life of God, with the hope of eternal life and unimaginable significance in Jesus Christ. The season of Advent reminds us to live now as people who are prepared to die. Whether we face our individual end, or the end of the world as we know it through the coming of Christ. It is a call to live with anticipation and receptivity to God's unexpected advents into our lives. It's an invitation to receive God's unconditional love, God's acts of self-giving and allow ourselves to be transformed by them. It's a reminder that we can face the future, whatever future is out there for us, because we have hope in the trustworthiness of God's love and power revealed in Jesus Christ. In the end, God is in charge. Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again. Are you ready to receive him? (brass band music) ("Wake, Awake, for Night is Flying" by Philipp Nicolai) ♪ The watchmen on the heights are crying ♪ ♪ Awake, Jerusalem, arise ♪ ♪ Midnight hears the welcome voices ♪ ♪ And at the thrilling cry rejoices ♪ (words drowned out by music) ♪ And all her heart with joy is springing ♪ ♪ She wakes, she rises from her gloom ♪ ♪ For her Lord comes down all-glorious ♪ ♪ The strong in grace, in truth victorious ♪ ♪ Her star is risen ♪ (words drowned out by music) ♪ Now come, thou blessed one ♪ ♪ The Lord (words drowned out by music) ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ (words drowned out by music)

- The Lord be with you.

Audience: And also with you.

- Let us pray. Please be seated. As we pray at appropriate times I will say, "Together we pray", please respond, come Lord Jesus. Most gracious God, receive these our prayers. We admit that it is difficult to be silent and to focus, especially during this season. For we want too much and we want to do so much. You already know how our expectations exceed reality and how our hopes and desires surpass possibility. Yet, even as we confess this, we celebrate this season filled with hope and expectation of that beyond our most creative imagination. Oh God, we thank you for this time. And for the gift of Advent, which stirs and excites us. Together we pray.

All: Come Lord Jesus.

- We pray for the light and the gift of more light. That we celebrate at Advent. We do need light oh God, for we are people who walk in darkness. Living by trial and error, bouncing from one obstacle to another, stumbling, groping, hoping, failing, falling. Sometimes we even walk in circles to avoid the unfamiliar which we fear as darkness. Together we pray.

All: Come Lord Jesus.

- We have tried to generate our own light using our minds and our best resources to make sense out of life. We have written laws to protect it and us. We've called councils and composed creeds to uphold it and we've lived by following our own ways. But, hard as it is to admit, our light is not enough. We still have wars and people are hungry and hurt, afraid and running alone and unhappy with the darkness closing in. Together we pray.

All: Come Lord Jesus.

- God, God forgive us. Turn us on to the light of life, the light of the world, whose coming we celebrate as the gift of Christmas. Let us receive it. Together we pray.

All: Come Lord Jesus.

- We pray also for the gift of love. Love is what we need oh God, for we are people who are starving for love. We live as if love can be made or controlled. Or as if we don't need it at all. And then we wonder why we feel so empty, so tired and so alone. Together we pray.

All: Come Lord Jesus.

- God forgive us. Help us to be open to your love, the love which we celebrate as Advent and look forward to in Christmas as that which empowers and frees, forgives and renews, heals and comes to us regardless. God, let us receive it. Together we pray.

All: Come Lord Jesus.

- Because we need to and because we trust your gifts we also lift up these our prayers not only for ourselves, but also for others in this one world. For those who are anxious and afraid. Together we pray.

All: Come Lord Jesus.

- For those who are ill, together we pray.

All: Come Lord Jesus.

- For those who are facing difficult decisions, together we pray.

All: Come Lord Jesus.

- For those who are feeling left out and are alone, together we pray.

All: Come Lord Jesus.

- For those who are mourning losses, especially those who are feeling deeply because of seasons past, together we pray.

All: Come Lord Jesus.

- And those who are feeling especially grateful and for those who are filled with joy because of new news, together we pray.

All: Come Lord Jesus.

- Gentle God you know us and all about us. Help us to know you and all about you in new ways that will assure us and free us to life gratefully and hopefully, today, tomorrow and every day and every morrow. In the name of Jesus, together we pray.

All: Come Lord Jesus.

- Amen. In response to the promise of God's coming to us, we are challenged to give both our resources and ourselves knowing that it is in our giving that we are most like Jesus Christ. (brass band music) (organ music) ♪ Praise God, from whom all blessings flow ♪ ♪ Praise Him, all creatures here below ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Praise Him above, ye heavenly host ♪ ♪ Praise father, son and holy ghost ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪

- In this season when we hear so much about giving, enable us to recognize oh God that you are the source of both our ability and our motivation to give. We are grateful for the richness with which you have blessed our lives and for the humbling privilege of being channels of your continued giving to this needy world. May we join together in the prayer that Jesus taught the first disciples. 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) ♪ O God of every nation ♪ ♪ Of every race and land ♪ ♪ Redeem the whole creation ♪ ♪ With your almighty hand ♪ ♪ Where hate and fear divide us ♪ ♪ And bitter threats are hurled ♪ ♪ In love and mercy guide us ♪ ♪ And heal our strife-torn world ♪ ♪ From search for wealth and power ♪ ♪ And scorn of truth and right, ♪ ♪ From trust in bombs that shower ♪ ♪ Destruction through the night ♪ ♪ From pride of race and

station ♪ ♪ And blindness to your way ♪ ♪ Deliver every nation ♪ ♪ Eternal God, we pray ♪ ♪ Lord, strengthen
all who labor ♪ ♪ That all may find release ♪ ♪ From fear of rattling saber ♪ ♪ From dread of war's increase ♪ ♪
When hope and courage falter ♪ ♪ Lord, let your voice be heard ♪ ♪ With faith that none can alter ♪ ♪ Your
servants undergird ♪ ♪ Keep bright in us the vision ♪ ♪ Of days when war shall cease ♪ ♪ When hatred and
division ♪ ♪ Give way to love and peace ♪ ♪ Till dawns the morning glorious ♪ ♪ When truth and justice reign
♪ ♪ And Christ shall rule victorious ♪ ♪ O'er all the world's domain ♪

- Bear witness to the love of God in this world so that those to whom love is a stranger will find in your
generous friends and discover the light of Christ. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God
and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all and keep you now and forever. Amen. (organ music)