

(faint solemn music) ("Joyful Joyful We Adore Thee") ♪ ♪ Giver of immortal gladness ♪ ♪ Fill us with the light of day ♪ ♪ All Thy works with joy surround You ♪ ♪ Earth and heav'n reflect Thy rays ♪ ♪ Stars and angels sing around Thee ♪ ♪ Center of unbroken praise ♪ ♪ Field and forest, vale and mountain ♪ ♪ Flow'ry meadow, flashing sea ♪ ♪ Chanting bird and flowing fountain ♪ ♪ Call us to rejoice in thee ♪ ♪ Thou art giving and forgiving ♪ ♪ Ever blessing, ever blest ♪ ♪ Well-spring of the joy of living ♪ ♪ Ocean depth of happy rest ♪ ♪ Thou our Father, Christ our brother ♪ ♪ All who live in love are thine ♪ ♪ Teach us how to love each other ♪ ♪ Lift us to the joy divine ♪ ♪ Mortals, join the mighty chorus ♪ ♪ Which the morning stars began ♪ ♪ Love divine is reigning o'er us ♪ ♪ Binding all within its span ♪ ♪ Ever singing, march we onward ♪ ♪ Victors in the midst of strife ♪ ♪ Joyful music leads us sunward ♪ ♪ In the triumph song of life ♪ ♪ Amen ♪

- The love of the Scriptures say to us, if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all uncleanness. Now with an inviting promise like that before us, let us turn to number 562 in this altar section of our hymnal and pray together responsively our prayer of confession. It also contains the words of assurance. Let us pray. To Thee, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in Thee I trust. Let me not be put to shame. Let not my enemies exult over me. Make me to know Thy ways, O Lord. Teach me Thy paths. Lead me in Thy truth and teach me for Thou art the God of my salvation. For Thee I wait all the day long. Be mine full of Thy mercy, O Lord, and of Thy steadfast love for they have been from above. Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions. According to Thy steadfast love, remember me for Thy goodness sake, O Lord. Good and upright is the Lord, therefore He instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble in what is right and teaches the humble his way. All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep His covenant and His testimonies. For Thy name's sake, O Lord, pardon my guilt for it is great. Who is the man that fears the Lord? Him will He instruct in the way that he should choose. The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear Him and He makes known to them His covenant. May integrity and uprightness preserve me for I wait for Thee. Amen. (faint solemn music) (faint solemn music)

- Matthew 25 1 through 13. Then shall the kingdom of heaven be like 10 bridesmaids who took their lamps and went forth to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were wise and five were foolish. They who were foolish took their lamps but took no extra oil with them, but the wise took some oil and flasks as well as in their lanterns. As the bridegroom was laid and coming, they all dozed off to sleep. At midnight there came a shout. "Behold here comes the bridegroom. "Come ye forth to meet him." With that all the girls got up and trimmed their lamps, and the foolish ones said unto the wise ones, "Share your oil with us for our lamps are going out." But the wise ones answered, "No, there will never be "enough for us both. "Go to the store and buy your own oil." And while they went to buy the bridegroom came, and they who were ready escorted him to the wedding. But presently the other girls returned saying, "Master, master, open up. "Let us in." But he replied, "Truly I say unto you I do not know you. "Watch, therefore, for ye know neither the day "nor the hour wherein the son of man cometh."

- The Lord be with you.

- And with your spirit.

- Let us pray. Heavenly Father, as we come now to offer our prayers of thanksgiving, we don't wanna be in the position of thanking You routinely over the same things over and over again. And yet it seems that this is the way joy comes to us most of the time. We're glad if we got over that last code or recovered from one more six bell, we're feeling good if we passed yet one more exam, one more important ball game. We're able to pay our bills one more month. So we do express our gratitude for just the continuation of a thousand things for which we're already thanked you 100 times. The air we breathe, the sunshine, people who still act like friends, great music, inspiring creatures, the opportunity to have fellowship with You in prayer. We're among those for whom Christ died, that's wonderful and we thank You. Heavenly Father we pray for other blessings. We pray that understanding may be given to those who are struggling and wrestling now with the choice of their life vocation, or the vocations of social change. Grant unto them the grace of patience, the grace of wisdom, and at last a firm and resolute mind. We intercede for those who are planning marriage, for those who are beginning marriage, those who have a new baby. We offer unto You our earnest petitions for those who are still sick, those who are sick again and again. We pray for the confused, for the bereaved, or the lonely. O God, we ask you to keep us in proper spiritual balance. We're inclined to get off balance, to get hipped on this or that. Give us grace not to do that. Deliver us from fanaticism. May we have the grace to discern between the practical and the spiritual. May we have such a humble acceptance of the commonplace and the routine duties of life that we may be able to glorify You through them. And as we perform our menial tasks and our routine behavior, may our friends and associates see Christ in us. Grunt unto us and to all men, O God, an attitude of true responsibility for the church, for the university, for the nation, for the world, for ourselves individually. May we have charity, that is to say real love in our hearts toward all men. Keep us from bitterness when we've been disappointed, or pride when we have been successful, and from thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought to think. Help us to put ourselves in the place of our neighbor or our roommate, to see things as he sees them before we offer harsh criticism. Most of all may we actually pray in our hearts that we may see our neighbor as Christ sees him. Give unto us the blessing of remembering that we ourselves are judged, so may we be given live to see ourselves as you see us. And today gracious God we offer our prayer of supplication for the children whose lives are touched by the Edgemont Community Center. May our love for them be as pure and strong as Your love for them. Grant a special benediction upon those who invest their time and their talents and their hearts and their money in the program of the center. Use the feeble efforts of our hands to bring about great good to these children and great glory to Thee. Heavenly Father we also pray for the children of the world. Bless the little children of Russia, of Hungary, of Israel and the Arab nations, of China, Vietnam, Japan, Cuba, Hawaii. So work through us, O God, that a peaceful world shall be provided for boys and girls of every land. Give peace in our time, O God, and break the hardness of our hearts which seems to forbid us to see the things which make for peace. Give unto all men the will to peace, we humbly pray. Give us all of those things for which your son Jesus asked us to pray when He taught his disciples to say Our Father who art in heaven hallowed by 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. In

W.H. Auden's Victor ballad, Victor is betrayed by his wife. So Victor walked out into the high street. He walked to the edge of the town. He came to the allotments and the rubbish heap and his tears came tumbling down. Victor looked up at the sunset as he stood there all alone, cried, "Are you in heaven, Father?" But the sky said, address not known. I suspect that experience is not an unfamiliar one to any one of us here. Maybe brought on by a personal crisis as with Victor, or perhaps by a kind of endless national crisis when the stalemate in our policy at Vietnam seems to have yield no end to the frustration and the agony of war. Or maybe simply as a result of the wearing down by the years. When all this talk of a good and loving father in heaven seems absurd, when there seems to be no ground of existence anywhere so far as we can see, when life seems quite literally to be no more than a tale told by an idiot, and to our attempts to find God somewhere to listen to His voice, to get some assurance that there really is a Father up in the sky somewhere or in the depths of our being or at work in the world. As the saying goes these days, the answer is the same. Address not known. Some of course will say that we're simply growing up, outgrowing the superstition of years past and that all talk of God is foolish talk. So some theologians talk of God being dead. Some scientists throw up their hands at any kind of God talk. He's obviously not to be found in measurable or verifiable terms anywhere. We now are living in a secular world and have to get along by ourselves as men without this God crutch, this pie in the sky by and by, this residue of another day when men filled the vast gaps in their knowledge of themselves, of nature, of history, with talk about God. But what is so often forgotten in all this is that way back in that never never land of the Bible, when it seems that God was apparently so obviously present, forever coming to men in dreams and visions, His voice so clear and unmistakable in the mouths of patriarchs and prophets, and supremely in the man Jesus. What is so often forgotten in all this is that the overriding and normal experience of God in those days was not of God present but of God absent. The Psalms for example, those soaring, outpouring of faith are full of it. Will the Lord spurn forever and never again be favorable? Has His steadfast love forever ceased? Are His promises at an end for all time? How long, O Lord? Wilt Thou forget me forever? How long will Thou hide Thy face from me? Over and over again the theme is God not momentarily absent, you see, like the sun disappearing for a moment behind a cloud, but a prolonged absence. To be sure there were visions and voices in men who spoke of God as the living God, but these were the occasional, the momentary experiences. The ordinary day by day, year by year experiences were of God absent or silent. How long, O Lord, wilt Thou forget me? Forever? But not only the old testament, that record of centuries of God occasionally experiences present but normally absent. In the New Testament too, the same experiences reflect it and surprisingly enough in that familiar parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids read just a few moments ago, which on the surface seems to point to the necessity of being forever on the kivi because God might arrive at any moment we might not be ready. It seems to be a story about God's coming. And the last line, watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour simply misses the point. Scholars agree that this line was added by some ancient editor to the original story. And this last line throws us off the track. All the bridesmaids fell asleep. And apparently there was nothing wrong in that. It was a long wait. And that is precisely the point. It was a long wait. The bridegroom was delayed. And the foolish bridesmaids were unprepared for that, for the delay, for absence. It was originally a word to the hipped up followers of Jesus into a hipped up early church to cool it. Be ready for God's absence. It may be a long time before you'll have unmistakable assurance that God is present. The wise bridesmaids were ready for the bridegroom when he arrived precisely because they had taken along extra oil for their lamps in the event of a long wait. So how then do we wait? In the face of delay, in the face of God's absence or silence? Well if we fail to take into account the necessity of waiting, of

long waiting, chances are we'll start looking around for God for the assurance of His presence in the wrong places. The late Samuel Miller quotes a delightful story of a former Munich comedian, Karl Valentin. The curtain goes up on a darkened stage, and in this darkness is a solitary circle of light shed by a streetlamp. Valentin with his long drawn and deeply worried face walks round and round this circle of light earnestly looking for something. A policeman wanders by. "What have you lost?" "The key to my house." Upon which the policeman joins Valentin in his search and they find nothing. And after a while he asked, "Are you sure you lost it here?" "No." And pointing to a darkened corner of the stage, "Over there." "But why in God's name are you looking for it here?" "There's no light over there." So maybe, you know, just maybe we look for God in the wrong places. Not in the dark places where we may have lost sight of Him, but in the light. Chances are we'll look for God's presence in Bible, creeds, liturgy, worship, in the places where obviously there seems to be some light in religion. But maybe He's to be found not in religion at all but in the dark places, in the gaunt body of a mutilated child in Laos, in a broken down tenement in Harlem, in the grief of the widow of some Vietcong, or in deaths of American men daily in Vietnam. Or maybe in the beard and long hair of a student rebel. As Samuel Miller says, we never see Him directly. He is always mediated by the very things that seem to deny Him. And of course that's why so many in the New Testament missed Him entirely and finally decided to rid the world of this obvious impostor. Imagine God, Yahweh, born of peasant stock walking around incognito as Mary's son, spending his time with callgirls and racketeers that was obviously too dark a spot for a lost God. If he was around at all he'd be in the temple or in the synagogue or with a learned and pious pillars of the church, in the brightly religious spots on the landscape not hiding off in the shadows. Maybe that's why so often He seems to be absent or silent for us too. Or it may be that we spend our time waiting by asking the wrong questions. And the most familiar and often agonizing question while we wait is why. Why, if there is a good and loving God, the misery in ghettos and cancer wards? Why the overwhelming misery of hungry people in the third world? Why the recurring agony of war? Why the persistent and pernicious evil in the world and in you and me? Why are we forever messing up our lives, you know, with too much alcohol, too much sex, too much drugs, too much fear of others, of ourselves, of the future, of change? Why, God, the persistence absence? It all comes to a burning point in that cry on the cross, Why, God, why have You forsaken me? Why are you silent? But God dispenses no information, no daily press releases to let us in on what's going on in the heavenly White House today. No voices in the ear, no visions, even on the cross, no answer, no angels came and ministered unto him there as in the wilderness. As someone has written, the cross was God's greatest silence. Then the demons were unleashed in the most dreadful passion since the fall of Adam were given free reign and God had nothing to say. There was simply the cry of the dying asking of the silence, why? God was silent even when dumb nature began to speak in eloquent gesture and the sun withdrew its light, the stars cried out and God was silent. Apparently God gives out no information when we demand to know why. And yet in answer to other questions, that dark spot in history, that unlikeliest of unlikely places for God to be hiding, that dying man, has told us worlds about the mystery of God. But there's another reason why God seems to be absent, why he doesn't seem to be around. And it may be the deepest reason of them all. Because in the depths of our being we couldn't really stand it if He were. To be known all through not only in the depth side, I don't think I'd mind God being privy to my depths, my unconscious, which I don't understand anyway. But in the trivial and the superficial to have the evasions, the hypocrisies, the fake in me and in every last one of us laid bare for Him for all the world to see. Oh I'm sure there's a God we wouldn't mind having around. The God who is our best instincts writ large, the kind of magnified me in my best moments. But that isn't the God that Jesus is

talking about certainly. This is the God who slams the door in the face of those not prepared to wait with the terrible words 'I do not know you'. It's the God who demands everything as well as gives everything. The kind of God who demands the crucifixion of His only obedient one. Job had his moments when he hated this God, the God who will never leave us alone. After all, who wants a companion like that for whom we can never be separated, who haunts us from morning till night and on through the long night watches like the hound of heaven that He is, who in the fury of His love terrifies as well as heals. Small wonder we find that God absent. For many of the time we want Him absent. But supposing now, just supposing we do desire this presence, this healing fire, and how should we prepare ourselves for the delay, for the times of absence? Well first of all we have to disabuse ourselves of any notions of the experience of the absence is unusual. Rid ourselves of all those sentimental notions of wanting to get back to a time when God was apparently present, and His presence was as plain as the nose on your face. You know, if only I could've been with Him then. But as someone once said, it's very hard to make out what God is doing anywhere at any time. Where would you have liked to live and when, just to be sure. In pilot's shoes for example? With Jesus in the wilderness? With Paul in prison? In shipwreck, stoned, beaten with lashes? With Peter in the courtyard taunted by a girl? With looters splitting the church into bits? My God, we can't even stand a little tension and disagreement in the typical Paris church. It's not Christian. There was no time, no time, when God's presence was as plain as the nose on your face. He delays. He refuses to answer the question why. And when you come right down to it, isn't this exactly what faith is all about? And our freedom as His creatures, if He were forever whispering in the ear, tapping us on the shoulder, tripping us up just to let us know He's around, He wouldn't be the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob or the father of our Lord Jesus Christ. So there will be the willingness not to have Him, in ear or vest pocket or Bible creed or liturgy or some specific program for social action, or to long nostalgically for a never ever time when others had Him in a way we don't. God never has been had. There have been only times when men and women very much like ourselves struggled with His absence as well as His presence, and the record of the struggle you will find in Bible and in creed and liturgy. An evidence of that struggle occasionally crops up as in the march on Selma or a quarter of a million marching on Washington for peace. But beyond that, it just may be that God speaks to us most clearly and is closest to us simply in the awareness of His absence. Paul Shera finds the answer to Paul's prayer about the thorn in his flesh. You remember how he prayed three times that he be removed, and all he got was silence for an answer until the words came "My grace is sufficient for you." And it is suggested that the answer came in the silence rather than in some mysterious voice in his ear, for isn't it so, you know? The only time we can possibly know that His grace is sufficient is precisely when He's not at our beck and call. Of course that's not all we have to say. To be sure we ought to be on the kivi, lest God's presence, like a thief in the night, catch us unawares. But we will miss any coming, any visitation, any assurance of presence if we are not first prepared for delay, for absence, for silence. The foolish ones in the parable were ready for a presence, for a coming, but not for a delay. And for those foolish ones, there was no coming at all, no visitation. The door was shut. I do not know you. I suppose it all adds up to whether in the face of the question, are You in heaven, Father? We can take the reply, address not known, and hang in there and wait. And maybe that's what this season of Lent is all about. At any rate, if you who are here this morning are here because you are more disturbed by a delay, by absence, by silence, then you're in better shape religiously than those who are not, at least so this parable reads. Let us pray. O God, our Father, keep us faithful precisely when we need most to be kept faithful, when Your face is veiled, when there is no voice, when Your presence is most deeply felt in absence. Through Christ our Lord. Amen. (solemn organ music)

(solemn music) (solemn music) Thine, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the wisdom and the majesty, for all that is in the heaven and on earth is Thine. Both richness and honor come of thee and of Thine own do we now give thee for the good of Thy church and the glory of Thy name. Now may the patience of the Lord Jesus Christ be with us all. (solemn music) (bell tolling) (discordant organ music)