

- Amen. (resonating choral music) I saw a man last October who looked like Santa Claus. He did not have on the traditional red suit. He was wearing blue jeans and a plaid shirt. He was not on a rooftop, or on a sleigh, or even in a parade. He was getting ready to sit down at a seafood dinner at a restaurant in Hazelwood, North Carolina. He had flowing white hair and a white beard, and a pleasant smile. But none of the other things that I usually associate with Santa Claus. However the reaction of two little girls in that restaurant was enough to convince me that he was Santa. They were awestruck. Their eyes were twinkling with excitement. One of them had her doll, and she was too fascinated to speak to Santa, but she held out that doll for him to see. Their mother did most of the talking. Santa grinned and shook hands with the two little girls as the hostess waited patiently to usher him to his table. The little girls backed out of the front door, their eyes staring in wonder and disbelief. That restaurant was the last place they expected to see Santa Claus. It was October, there was no snow on the ground, Christmas was two months away, there had been no parade, there was no even an available fireplace where he could descend, nor was he dressed as one usually expects Santa to be dressed. And yet, to those two little girls, he was there. Neither of them asked him: are you the real Santa Claus, or do we have to wait for Christmas Eve? Even though there were none of the usual and expected things to prove that he was real, he was. To them. They were thrilled and excited to shake his hand. One offered to show him her prized possession and backed away absolutely amazed. I can imagine they called their friends when they got home that night, to tell them about the marvelous thing that had happened to them. They were little girls, maybe four and six years of age. Their concept of Christmas is limited. At this point in their lives, Christmas and Santa Claus are synonymous, but even in their childish concepts, I relearned some lessons from those two little girls. They taught me that Christmas can happen any time, anywhere, Emmanuel, God is with us. They taught me that I should offer to Christmas and to God's presence my very best. And they helped me to learn again, that I should never cease to be amazed, awed by it. And to wonder at it. We do not have to read too far in the gospel records before we discover that John the Baptist was a preacher who did not hesitate to speak out boldly against any kind of evil or wrongdoing. He would not soften the word of God for anyone. He was a man who kept the agenda on the table. And was willing to speak out, even if it endangered his position. He had the kind of openness, honesty, candor, that the current chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors, Martin Feldstein, has, when he persists in pointing out the dangers of deficit spending. John one time spoke out fearlessly and very pointedly, almost too fearlessly and too pointedly for his own safety, King Herod of Galilee had paid a visit to his brother in Rome. During that visit, he seduced his brother's wife. He went back to Galilee, dismissed his own wife, and married this sister-in-law, whom he had lured away from her husband. John rebuked the king, publicly and sternly. It was not safe to denounce Eastern royalty. King Herod got his revenge by throwing John into the dungeons of a prison down in the mountains, near the Dead Sea. And it was there that John began to ask himself some questions about his cousin, Jesus, whom he had baptized in the Jordan. Was he the Messiah? At the beginning, he had been positive that Jesus was the one for whom the Jews had waited with such expectations. Was he right? Now he was beginning to have doubts. John was the forerunner, who recognized Jesus, baptized him, announced him to the world, but here he was, having second thoughts. John's preaching had been a message of doom to those who did not repent. The ax is ready to cut the tree

down that does not bear good fruit. The one who comes after me will separate the chaff from the wheat and throw the worthless grain into the fire. But in the dampness and darkness of his prison cell, John was wondering: when is Jesus going to do something? When is he going to blast his enemies? When is the day of God's holy destruction going to begin? Will he ever restore the glory to Israel? So he sent his disciples to Jesus with the question: are you the one who was to come? Or must we go on wearily waiting for someone else? Jesus told those disciples: go back, go back and don't tell John what I am saying. Tell him what I am doing. Don't tell John what I am claiming. Tell him what is happening. Tell him that those who were blind to the truth about themselves and about their fellow men and about God are having their eyes opened. Tell him that those whose feet were never strong enough to stay on the right course are being strengthened. Tell him that those who were deaf to the voice of conscience and of God are beginning to listen. Tell him that I may not be doing the things he expects me to do, but that the real enemies of mankind, guilt, greed, despair, are being overcome. John had doubts because Jesus was not doing the things he expected. Sometimes we have doubts because the way the faith comes to us cuts across all of our ideas of how it ought to come. And that's why I value the lesson those two little girls taught me, that evening in a restaurant in Hazelwood. They taught me that Christmas can come any time. Anywhere. Emmanuel, God is with us. Emmanuel, God is with us in the most unexpected places. And at the most unexpected times. Once at an early morning study and prayer group, I heard a man say: if God would take one of the town's reprobates and change him overnight, it would do more to convince this town of God's presence than anything else. What about Bob, I responded. He was certainly at the bottom; look at him now. Bob had been an alcoholic, hopelessly so. He had drunk himself out of a job, out of a family, out of the town's respect. A new preacher was assigned to the Methodist church in that little town. He and Bob struck up a friendship, and through that influence, Bob started going to AA meetings. Soon he was sober, after three years he was back at work, back with his family, back in church. When I knew him 10 years later, he was a leader in the community, a lay-speaker in his church, and a successful merchant. I wondered, I wondered, I wondered why that transformation had not convinced the town of God's presence. The world has always had trouble recognizing God when he comes; the Hebrews grumbled at Moses. The prophets were considered eccentric. The Bethlehem babe, the teacher on the hillside, the savior on the cross were not enough. We've always had difficulty recognizing the presence of God, because of some preconceived notions of the way God is supposed to come to us. In the city where I live and work, we have a place called The Ark. It's an urban ministry center, supported by 35 churches. In a variety of ways, The Ark seeks to minister to the needs of the poor, the lonely, the desolate, the troubled, the broken. A Roman Catholic sister directs this mission. She is assisted by over 100 volunteers. One of the churches in Raleigh decided to investigate the Ark before lending its support. Members of that church's committee on missions came one morning to spend the day with Sister Helen. They sat with her, as she listened to the visitors who came to that place seeking help. They saw food distributed after verification that there was real need. They watched her direct people to places of employment. They listened to her contact every other helping agency in our city, regarding transportation, housing, medical service. They saw a volunteer sit for hours and work with someone who wanted to learn to read. They heard another volunteer tell young mothers how to care for their babies and how to feed their families. The needs were as varied as the people who came. And every person who came that morning, every visitor, was treated with dignity and respect, valued as the human being he or she is. When the day was over, the members of that church commended Sister Helen for all that was being done. But we cannot support, either with money or volunteers, they said, because you never question anybody about their

salvation, and about eternal life. There are no pamphlets around for them to read about sin and redemption. You never offered them the gospel. And Helen's response: my heavens! What do you think we have been doing all day, if we have not been showing God's love and the spirit of Christ? Emmanuel, God is with us in the most unexpected places. At the most unexpected times. Those two little girls also taught me that I need to offer God's presence my very best. Always to offer it my very best. There was a tender moment that night when the little girl with the doll held it out for Santa to see, I wondered if she would have given it to him, had he asked. I believe she would have. Today we are celebrating the founding of this university. It's here because of the influence of the church. I've read about Mount Bethel and Mount Hebrim, and how deeply rooted the Duke family traditions and patterns of giving, go back to those two little churches. This was where a concern for the less fortunate became ingrained in a family. One of the prime factors leading to the establishment of the Duke Endowment was the low income of the people of the two Carolinas, knowing that service to mankind was the best offering they could make to God. Gifts were made by the Dukes to support educational, healthcare, and other eleemosynary institutions. Their intentions are clearly stated in the indenture. An endeavor to make provisions in some measure for the needs of mankind, along physical, mental, and spiritual lines. They were offering God their best, so that eyes would be open to truth. And ears would listen to the voice of God. This chapel stands here at the center of this campus to remind us of God's presence, and I need to offer it our best. There are two other places that remind me of the offering that the Dukes made, and I confess that I missed them both when I was a student here, 30 years ago. I stood at those two places recently. One is on East Campus. It's the statue of the sower. I looked at that statue and I reminded myself that I must be as diligent in offering my best as the sower is in sowing seed. And I must provide the kind of soil in which that seed can take root and grow. The other place is a bronze plaque in the central quadrangle. I walked by it hundreds of times in the 1950s, and I never saw it. A few weeks ago, I stopped and read it. It states the aims of this university, urging it to keep on offering the best in knowledge and faith, and service. Offering the presence of God, our best. Well, those two little girls backed out of that restaurant, absolutely amazed at what they had experienced. They taught me that Christmas, Emmanuel, God with us, should never cease to leave me amazed, and awestruck. Three years ago about this time the UPI carried a story about the Mike Goldberg family in Los Angeles, whose Hanukkah, the Jewish festival of lights, was almost ruined one year. A cleaning woman had mistakenly thrown away a priceless family treasure. A 16th century menorah. This liturgical and symbolic candlestick had belonged to Mr. Goldberg's ancestors. Desperate, he called the city refuse disposal office and asked if he could speak to anyone who was Jewish, so that they would understand. And they connected him with a Miss Ackerman, and she took the problem to the boss, and they discovered that the truck that picked up the garbage in the Goldberg neighborhood was now on the way to the city dump. Mr. Goldberg sped to the dump, intercepted the truck, found the drivers to be sympathetic but cautious. They warned him that that truck carried eight tons of garbage, trash, and then they spread it out for him, over as long a stretch as they could. And he began to dig with his hands, wishing for a shovel. Suddenly, he found one, a shovel he himself had thrown away. He regarded this as a sign from God. He dug for several hours, and finally he found the menorah, and there in the dump, he raised his voice in prayer of thanksgiving: Hear, O Israel, the Lord our god, the Lord is one. Signs of God's kingdom are all around us. There are signs of his holy presence, even in the most unlikely places. But we have to have eyes that want to see, and ears that want to hear, and a heart that desires God, one willing to wade into the waste places and common places, meeting places, and strange places. I wished I could see those two little girls again. I need to thank them for reminding me that Christmas can happen

any time, anywhere. And that I should offer it my best, and that it should always leave me awestruck, amazed. Wondering at the presence of God. Amen. (organ music) (echoing choral music)

- As the people of God, 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. (murmuring) Let us pray. Our Lord, Jesus Christ, oh son of the most high, prince of peace, be born again into our world. Wherever there is war in this world, wherever there is pain, wherever there is loneliness and devastation, wherever there is no hope, come, oh long expected one, with healing in your wings. Oh holy child, whom the shepherds and kings and beasts adored, be born again. Wherever there is boredom, wherever there is fear of failure, wherever there is temptation too strong to resist, wherever there is bitterness of heart, come, oh blessed one, with healing in your wings. Oh savior of the world, be born in each of us who raises his face to your face. Not knowing fully who we are, or who you are, knowing only that your love is beyond our knowing, and that no other has the power to make us whole. Come Lord Jesus, to each who longs for you, even though we have forgotten your name. With your love, seek us, oh Lord, and find us that we may find ourselves and our places in your kingdom. With your light awaken us, oh Lord, and give us a vision to seek out neglected tasks and the desire to accomplish them. With your truth, guide us, oh Lord, as we make our pilgrimage toward a joyous Christmas this year. And may we find that truth and that hope and that joy and find it through Jesus Christ our lord, who taught us to pray, saying: our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, they 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. (tranquil organ music) (reverent choral music) (triumphal organ music) (reverberating choral music) Oh God, merciful and gracious, accept this offering of your people; remember in your love those who have brought it and those for whom it is given. So follow it with your blessing that it may promote peace and goodwill among all people, everywhere. Through Jesus Christ, our lord, amen. (sonorous organ music) (somber choral music) The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his son, Jesus Christ, our lord, and the blessing of God almighty, creator, redeemer, sustainer, be among you, and remain with you always. (soaring choral music) (intricate organ music) (murmuring)