

(harpsichord music) (harpsichord music) We welcome you to Duke Chapel this morning, this Epiphany Sunday. We're glad to have you, particularly our visitors. We always appreciate our visitors on Recess Sundays, and we're glad you're here with us. We also welcome those who worship with us on the radio, on WDNC. We have, as our guest musicians this morning, the Tintinnabulators. I practiced that, trying to say that. The hand bell choir, made up of college students from around North Carolina, and their director Mrs. Corbin. And we welcome them, and we have been enjoying their music during the first part of the service. Would you stand for the greeting? The grace of the lord Jesus Christ be with you. And also with you. The risen Christ is with us. Praise the Lord. (organ music) (hymnal singing) Join me in prayer. The lord be with you. And also with you. Let us pray. God of all glory, by the guidance of a star you led the wise men to worship the Christ child. By the light of faith lead us to your glory in heaven. We ask this through Jesus Christ our lord. Amen. (organ music) (hymnal singing) Let us pray. 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 hear with joy what you said to us this day, amen. The first lesson is taken from Isaiah, chapter 60, verses one through six. Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth and thick darkness the peoples, but the lord will arise upon you and the glory of God will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and rulers to the brightness of your rising. Lift up your eyes roundabout and see. They all gather together, they come to you. Your sons shall come from far, and your daughters shall be carried in the arms. Then you shall see and be radiant, your heart shall thrill and rejoice because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you. The wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, and the young camels of Midian and Ephah, all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense and shall proclaim the praise of the lord. This ends the first lesson. Psalm. Oh God let the king be righteous, let the heir to the throne be just, let him plead the cause of your people, the poor by the letter and spirit of your own law. Let the mountains declare God's people are innocent and the hills announce, we are setting them free. May you help the oppressed find justice, deliver the poor and crush the exploiter. Let him live as long as the sun and the moon through all generations to come and let him come down like rain on the grass, like gentle showers sprinkling the earth. Throughout his reign let justice bloom in peace and plenty as long as the moon shall last. Let him be king from sea to sea, from the river Euphrates to the earth's farthest end. Let his enemies kneel before him. Let his foes all lick the dust. Let kings to the north and east bring tribute. Let kings to the south and west bring gifts. Let all the kings bow before him. Let all the nations serve him for he saves the poor when they cry for help and saves the oppressed who no one believed them. He cares for the poor and the oppressed and saves the lives of the poor. Redeeming them from oppression and violence because he values their lives. The second lesson is taken from Ephesians, chapter three, verses one through 12. For this reason, I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, on behalf of you gentiles, assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the human race in other generations as it has now been revealed to Christ's holy apostles and prophets by the spirit. That is, how the gentiles are joined heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in

Christ Jesus through the gospel. Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace which was given me by the working of God's power. To me, though I am the very least of all saints, this grace was given. To preach to the gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery, hidden for ages in God, who created all things, that through the church, the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose which God has realized in Christ Jesus our lord, in whom we have boldness and confidence of access through our faith in Christ. This ends the reading of the second lesson.

(harpsichord music) The gospel lesson is taken from Matthew, chapter two, verses one through twelve. Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem saying, where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east and have come to worship him. When Herod the king heard this he was troubled and all Jerusalem with him. And assembling all the chief priests and all the scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, in Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet, And you, oh Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah. For from you shall come a ruler who will govern my people Israel. Then Herod summoned the magi secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared and he sent them to Bethlehem saying, go and search diligently for the child and when you have found him, bring me word that I too may come and worship him. When they heard the king, they went their way, and lo, the star which they had seen in the east, went before them 'till it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy and going into the house, they saw the child with Mary, his mother and they fell down and worshiped him. Then opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh and being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. This ends the reading of the gospel. Let's stand for the singing of the hymn. (organ music) (hymnal singing)

Today, the church celebrates epiphany. The manifestation of God's word made flesh. The revelation of the light of the world as our altar so beautifully reminds us. Our prayers, our hymns, our lessons all point us toward the wise men as instrumental in that revelation. As gentiles from the east, they perhaps never would have heard of the birth of Christ had it not been for the star which rose above them and which they chose to follow. In the words of Simeon, which we heard in last Sunday's gospel lesson, Jesus was to be a light for revelation to the gentiles. Thus in the journey of the magi to the manger, this prophecy was fulfilled. Now the wise men have always been among my very favorite biblical characters. Ever since I saw my first Christmas pageant in the little church where I grew up as a small child, I've been fascinated by these exotic figures that appear so mysteriously from the darkest corners of the church. I always wanted to be one too. So that I could present one of those ornate boxes to the baby Jesus. Somehow I never seemed to fit the part. But I did get to make a pilgrimage one epiphany to the great Gothic Cathedral in Cologne where the relics of the wise men have been kept since the year 1162. In case you were wondering where they were before 1162, they were in Milan and before that, Constantinople and before that, Persia, I believe. If I didn't know it already, those enormous jewels which adorned that magnificent shrine said to me, these men are very special in the eyes of the church. Exactly what was their journey to Bethlehem all about, I wondered. T.S. Eliot spurs our imagination to picture their experiences in his poem, Journey of the Magi, where he writes, a cold coming we had of it, just the worst time of the year for a journey, and such a long journey. The ways deep and the weather sharp, the very dead of winter. And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory, lying down in the melting snow. Then the camel man, cursing and grumbling and running away and wanting their

liquor and women. And the night fires going out, and the towns, unfriendly and the villages dirty and charging high prices. A hard time we had of it. At the end we preferred to travel all night. Sleeping in snatches with the voices singing in our ears saying, that this was all folly. One can't help being impressed by the fortitude of these night travelers as they ventured into foreign territory trusting only in a star unafraid to encounter the darkness. And that in itself was enough to demonstrate the extraordinary character of these men in the opinion of many. Can you remember the last time you decided to venture into strange territory in the dark, unsure of what to expect? Patrick McManus writes in a humorous fashion, though an accurate one I think, about his first such experience and that was while he was camping in the backyard alone. Though camping in the backyard is usually an experience reserved for children, we adults, nevertheless harbor our own anxieties about darkness and things that represent the unknown. See if you can't relate to this story. As Patrick McManus explains it, the first step in camping in the backyard is selecting the right spot far enough away from the house to be respectable but not so far away from the house that the distance cannot be covered in less than two seconds starting from a prone position just in case there should be reason to make a quick dash for safety, a wise youngster will have ready a few plausible explanations such as, I thought I smelled smoke and rushed in to wake the family. Or I nearly forgot that I'm expecting an important phone call this evening. McManus says the night he first slept out alone was probably typical for such undertakings except it was a little long. Roughly equal in length to the time required for the rise and fall of the Roman Empire. The only part of him that slept that night was his right hand and that was because it was wrapped so tightly around a baseball bat. Several times, off in the distance he thought he heard an ant cough. A pack of wolves had circled his camp, an ax murderer passed through the yard on his way to work. I sniffed the air for smoke, says McManus, hoping that the house would be burning down and I could rush in and save the family but my sister, I knew, the troll, lay awake listening for the thunder of my footsteps on the porch, sorting and polishing her horde of scaredy cat phrases. I slouched back down into the saddle of myself and grimly rode against the night. Perhaps none of us could be quite so descriptive in describing our own experience of the unknown but surely we've each been terrified by it at some point in our lives. And so, the wise men, brave souls that they were fearlessly journeyed onward into the darkness not only literally but figuratively as well. For you see, before they could kneel before the Christ child, they knelt before Herod. Having seen a star in the east that simply rose above them but that did not tell them where to go, the magi had to use their gifts of discernment to inquire in Jerusalem, as to exactly where is the king of the Jews. Seems logical enough that someone in Jerusalem would've known about the king of the Jews. But herein lies the shadow of this story. Herod was troubled by their query and all of Jerusalem with him, the gospel account tells us. Assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, Herod asked them where the Christ was to be born. Turning to the prophet Micah, they quoted scripture which foretold the precise location of his birth. Herod then summoned the wise men, in secret no less and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. Useful information for calculating the age of this child. Sending them on their way to Bethlehem, he instructed them to bring back word of the child. That he too might worship him. Already the forces of darkness were gathering themselves to ensure the rejection of Christ by authorities in Jerusalem. Matthew brings this theme of rejection to the forefront of his account of the nativity where it serves as a distant forerunner of the passion narrative itself. Placed in bold relief alongside the acceptance of Christ by the magi, it becomes apparent that the holy scriptures which provided the key for the gentiles to locate the messiah were not even accepted by the Jewish authorities themselves. While the magi sought to pay homage to the infant king, Herod and his coterie of advisers conspired to kill him. While the wise men

must have been feeling more than a little vulnerable by this point, an expectation had been placed upon them by Herod himself to bring news of this child. Though no promises were made, surely the magi would've been rewarded generously for their efforts had they granted Herod his wish. Precious gifts, eloquent speeches, at least an elegant meal would've been offered on their behalf. Likewise, to fail to grant his wish, meant to incur his wrath and to trigger unspeakable tragedy. Surely they must have suspected the evil that Herod was possessed by as they faced him eyeball to eyeball but could they ever imagined, could they have ever imagined, that he was capable of the cold blooded murder of all the male children in Bethlehem in the surrounding area two years old and under. What terrible burdens, this knowledge of good and evil which was theirs to bear in the drama of the nativity and their choice for one side or the other, which was theirs to live. Eliot enlightens us to their imagined plight with these concluding words in *Journey of the Magi*. Were we led all that way for birth or death? There was a birth, certainly, we had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death, but had thought they were different. This birth was hard and bitter agony for us, like death, our death. We returned to our places, these kingdoms, but no longer at ease here in the old dispensation with an alien people clutching their gods. I should be glad of another death. To be no longer at ease with the old dispensation. A high price to pay for revelation but apparently not an uncommon one. For the wise men it meant going home another way but once they arrived, no longer feeling at home, they had encountered both a darkness and the light. Their eyes having been opened to all of reality, they would never be the same again. And when did you last experience a significant revelation that didn't bring about some disease with the old way. Often at a dear price. Like the terminally ill patient who when confronting his or her own death glimpses a whole new perspective on living that they had somehow missed before. Like the broken family, who in an outpouring of confrontation and then forgiveness to one another finally realized the sacred trust which was theirs to share all along. Flannery O'Connor writes that reality is something to which we must be returned at considerable cost. I like to put that in my own words by saying, revelations don't often come easy. She likes to drive this point home constantly in her stories and she considers it to be implicit to the Christian view of the world. In one of her most riveting short stories called, *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, the heroine experiences this sort of revelation under unlikely, not to mention extremely trying circumstances. This heroine known as the grandmother is in a very significant position for she is facing death and to all appearances, she like the rest of us, is not too well prepared for it. Having complained, connived and cajoled her way through most of life, she would like to see death postponed indefinitely. Through a series of mishaps, the grandmother and her family encounter face to face, the misfit. An escaped convict whom she was just reading about with horror in the newspaper that morning. He promptly disposes of the grandmother's son, her daughter in law and her two grandchildren until she was finally facing him alone. Understandably afraid for her life, she pleads with the misfit, pray, pray to Jesus, while she echoes the refrain, I know you're a good man. Just then as she looks into his face and notices he is about to cry, her head clears for an instant. She realizes even in her limited way, that she is responsible for the man before her. That she is somehow joined to him by deep ties of kinship rooted in the mysteries of a faith which she had been merely prattling about for her entire life. The grandmother reaches out to touch the misfit on the shoulder, calling him one of her own. But shocked by such a gesture, the misfit springs back like a snake and shoots her. The misfit takes off his glasses and begins to clean them. As he comments to his buddy, she'd a been a good--