
**Charge to Graduates
Winter Commencement
December 16, 2011**



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One of the challenges of life in school is that our academic calendar sometimes doesn't match up with one or more of the other calendars we follow in our daily lives.

December offers a good example. The school calendar is all about completing the semester, and for graduates it also involves completing all degree requirements. Papers need to be written, projects must be finished, and exams must be passed. All of this takes time and extraordinary effort. On top of this our co-curricular life also intensifies. Music concerts required extended rehearsals. A deadline looms for the semester's final edition of the North Park Press. The basketball teams open their seasons and we all want to cheer our Vikings on to victory. The theater production, for which students rehearsed most of the semester, comes and goes and it's time to strike the set. And then in the last week of the semester someone (we'll identify her here, University pastor Judy Peterson!) gets the crazy idea of having students bake and decorate 900 cookies for the last chapel of the semester. In school, December is a crazy month.

But December also introduces the season of Advent and then Advent introduces Christmas. It's supposed to be a quiet, reflective season, yet it turns out to be a season of joy and celebration, a time of parties and shopping, weeks of extra-long work hours for college students in the retail business, days of too much eating and too much spending.

Every student asks: How do you get serious about studying for final exams when Christmas carols are being sung all around us?

Somehow we accommodate this tension; we make sense of our world with its mix of calendars, school requirements, and social mandates. And on rare occasions we allow the message of one calendar to speak to a part of our life guided by another calendar. I wonder if tonight might be such a time. Might the message of Advent speak to this moment of graduation?

Advent is a special season, a quiet time of hope, a time to bring the light of Christ into the world.

In Advent we yearn for God to do something – to tear open the heavens and come down – to prove once and for all his omnipotence, to show for all to see his power beyond all power.

God does open the heavens, and God does come down. But there is no tearing open of the heavens, no grandiose or gratuitous demonstration of omnipotence.

Here is how God works, how God breaks into our waiting, how God fulfills our hope. God breaks into our silence not coercively, but gently, through that very mystery which is the birth of children.

Advent draws us in a special way to the stories of children told in the opening chapters of the gospels.

- To a young boy who will grow up in the desert and will teach strange things.
- To a second young boy who as a young man will wander an uncertain path to his death on a cross.
- And to another young boy, then another, still another, and many more, each killed before the age of two as a result of Herod's furious rage.

Each of these young lives in its particular way points to Emmanuel: God among us.

In one of these narratives—the one read just moments ago from the Gospel of Luke—there is a priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. Both were righteous in the eyes of God, living purely, blamelessly according to all God had commanded. Yet, they had no children, and both were getting on in years.

Suddenly, unexpectedly Elizabeth became pregnant. Stunned at this miracle she was afraid to show herself in public. Skeptical of this gift from God which his wife bore, Zechariah was struck mute, silenced in his skepticism. Their son John was born an infant with a mission – “to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

This mandate on John's life sounds suspiciously close to the mission of North Park University – to prepare people, students, for the day of the Lord, for lives of significance and service.

John grew up, graduated from college, and took a job in the desert. He was not socially sensitive for he called those around him a “brood of vipers.” Yet John commissioned these same people, these vipers, to make ready the way of the Lord.

“What then shall we do,” the people asked, “to make ready the way of the Lord?” His answer stunned these people even as it surprises us to this day. Repent? No. Live peaceably? No. Fast? No. Live a holy life? No.

The people asked, “What shall we do to make ready the way of the Lord?” And John answered, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” How do we make ready the way of the Lord? By being generous through sharing all we have. This is significance; this is service.

I know on graduation day it is hard for you to imagine yourself as giving anything away. After all, you're poor—you've just finished paying for college, and some of you have done so by taking loans which will be your responsibility for years to come. Nonetheless, on graduation day you're privileged.

You're privileged because you're among those who have had the opportunity to attend college. And as a college graduate, with either a bachelor's or master's degree, you have much which many others do not have. Such privilege carries responsibility—even as the opportunity to attend college has enriched your life so now you have an obligation to use your enriched life as a means to enrich the lives of others; to give to others, even as you have been given; to live with significance, to live in service; to take one of your two coats and give it to another, and to set an extra place at your table as you share with those who have less.

Prepare the way of the Lord. Be generous. Live with significance and in service. This now is your holy obligation.

May God bless you this night, and each night of this holy Advent season, and each night of each day which follows. Amen.