Good morning and welcome to Virginia Seminary! We’re glad that you are here, and we look forward to getting to know you.

It’s quite fitting that your first day of seminary should fall on a day when our Church remembers and gives thanks for another seminarian. In September of 1963, Jonathan Myrick Daniels enrolled in the Episcopal Theological School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to prepare for the ordained ministry. He was twenty four years old: a native of New Hampshire, a graduate of the Virginia Military Institute who studied English literature at Harvard for a year following his graduation from VMI. During that year that he had a conversion experience while attending an Easter service at the Church of the Advent in Boston. A year later he entered ETS, anticipating a ministry in teaching.

Jon Daniels entered seminary in 1963, just as the civil rights movement was fast approaching an explosive climax in the deep South. On June 19, President John Kennedy sent a civil rights bill to Congress that offered federal protection to African Americans seeking to vote, to shop, to eat in public restaurants, and to be educated on equal terms as white Americans. During the summer more than 20,000 people were arrested as rallies, demonstrations, and other events took place in more than a hundred Southern cities. On August 28 more than 200,000 people assembled at the Lincoln Memorial for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. It was a gathering like none other seen in this city. Russell Baker, writing for the New York Times, observed that “No one can remember an invading army quite as gentle as two hundred thousand civil-rights marchers who occupied Washington today…the sweetness and patience of the crowd may have set some sort of national high water mark in mass decency.” It was
an exhilarating day as Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, lifting up his vision of freedom for all God’s children: black and white, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics.

The glorious freedom glimpsed on that day would prove elusive as summer moved into fall. On September 15, less than three weeks after the March on Washington, a bomb was thrown into the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham as the congregation celebrated Youth Day. Four little girls were killed and twenty-one children were injured. Violence was in the air, holding the nation in its grip. On November 22, President John F. Kennedy, Jr. would be killed by an assassin’s bullet.

Jon Daniel’s first year in seminary unfolded within this national tapestry of violence, yet his days were spent as your days will be spent this fall: worshiping each day in the Seminary Chapel and studying scripture, Church history, theology, and Greek. He spent twelve hours a week in field education in a parish in Providence, Rhode Island, learning the challenges and satisfactions of urban ministry. Over the summer he completed Clinical Pastoral Education at a hospital in New York.

It was during his second year at ETS that Jon Daniels heard the call to go to Selma, Alabama, to support those working for civil rights. Martin Luther King, Jr. was urging people to offer their physical presence and support to the struggle for equality and justice. Word of the call reached ETS in early March, and students began to talk about going to Selma. It was during Evening Prayer in the Seminary Chapel that Jon knew he should answer that call. Reflecting on his decision, he later wrote this:

“My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.” I had come to Evening Prayer as usual that evening and as usual I was singing the Magnificat with the special love and reverence I have always had for Mary’s glad song. “He hath showed strength with his arm” As the lovely hymn of the God-bearer continued, I found
myself peculiarly alert, suddenly straining toward the decisive, luminous, Spirit-filled ‘moment’ that would, in retrospect, remind me of others – particularly one at Easter three years ago. Then it came. “He hath put down the mighty from their seat and hath exalted the humble and meek. He hath filled the hungry with good things.” I knew then that I must go to Selma.”

So in March of 1965 Jon joined a group of students from ETS, flying to Atlanta, then taking a bus to Selma. They had hoped to be part of a march into Montgomery, the state capitol, but were turned away by armed police as they crossed the bridge. A priest from Boston was beaten and killed, causing protestors to storm the court house. At the end of the weekend, most of Jon’s friends returned to ETS, but he remained in Selma with a fellow student. He was troubled by the pattern he saw happening: hundreds of clergy swooping into town on Friday night to demonstrate, only to leave town the following day to return to the safety of their churches on Sunday. He wondered what would happen to the people in the ghettos and projects when their new friends and champions left town. After hours of conversation, Jon and his friend Judy Upham decided what they wanted to do: they would return to ETS and seek the faculty’s permission to continue their studies in Selma. The Acting Dean, who questioned them closely about their proposed plans, was impressed by their thoughtful clarity and determination to return. The faculty gave its consent and Jon and Judy returned to Selma.

They arrived in time to participate in the long-awaited march into Montgomery, which proceeded peacefully. Jon and Judy remained in Selma until May, trying to help integrate an Episcopal parish there, then returned to Cambridge for final exams. July found him back in Selma; family and friends had tried to discourage him from returning, but his sense of call compelled him to go back. Early in the summer he had written these words for the diocesan youth conference in New Hampshire: “So, we, too set our faces to go to Jerusalem, to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives. We go to make our witness to the truth that has set us free.”
On August 20, Jon Daniels was killed by a blast from a shotgun in Hayneville, Alabama. He had been arrested on August 14, along with several other people who had gone to the county to picket local businesses. After spending six hot nights crowded together in a jail cell, they were released; while some in the group went searching for a pay phone to call for help, Jon went to a local store to purchase cold soft drinks for the group. He was greeted at the door by an armed man who told him to leave immediately or he would be shot. Angry words were exchanged and a shot gun was aimed at a young girl in the group. Jon pushed her out of the way, took the blast from the gun, and died instantly.

Like Jonathan Daniels, you have entered Seminary at a time when violence is widespread, when dangers seem to be lurking around every corner. I don’t know how this first year of seminary will unfold for you: some years are reasonably uneventful, but others bring unforeseen tragedies. Last year we were still in the August term when Hurricane Katrina ravaged New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Five years ago, just one week into the new fall semester, passenger airplanes used as missiles were flown into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11. Only time will tell what this year will bring, but already the scent of violence hangs heavy in the air, both here and abroad.

There are some things I do know, however, about how this semester will unfold for you. Like Jon Daniels, you will sit in this Chapel each weekday, listening to the ancient words of scripture pour over you, day by day shaping you and forming you as if you were the rocks of the Grand Canyon being etched by the Colorado River. Some days you may not even remember what you heard, but over time these powerful narratives will become as familiar to you as the nursery rhymes of your childhood. Perhaps a day will come when you suddenly find yourself peculiarly alert, straining to the words of a canticle, hymn, or prayer, as happened to Jon Daniels as he sang the Magnificat. One day you may hear those same old familiar words in a new way, receiving them as if they were written and
spoken directly to you, for your edification in this time, in this place. Some day you may answer a call that takes you to places you never dreamed you would go.

I hope that each of you, like Jon Daniels, will work to dismantle the structures of injustice and violence, which in the words of today’s collect, you will make no peace with oppression. I pray that none of you will be called to lose your life in the struggle. I bid you all to enter this Chapel each day with a willingness to listen for the whisper or the roar of the Holy Spirit as it breathes life into the words of scripture. May God bless you on this strange and wonderful journey that you begin here today. Amen.

Source: The Jon Daniels Story, ed. William J. Schneider (Morehouse, 1992)