In the name of the Father and of the ✞ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In this morning’s sermon I have two texts and three topics I want to talk about. The texts are our Gospel Lesson and the Twenty-Third Psalm, and my three topics are vacations, compassion, and gratitude. Let us begin by talking about rest and vacations. My opening text, then, comes from our Gospel Lesson, and it goes this way:

31And [Jesus] said to [his disciples], “Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while.” (Mark 6:31, RSV)

My theory is that if Jesus says to us “come away and rest a while,” then it is okay for us to get away and to get some rest. The disciples are also obeying their Lord when he leads them into rest. He says, “Come to a quiet place for a while,” and they go. Off they go. They obey. They do not argue. And so if we would be obedient disciples, we will follow Jesus into some rest when he leads us there.

And he does lead us there! For one thing Jesus gives us the commandment to honor the Sabbath day. That commandment speaks of rest. Let us not forget that. In our workaday world in which we are tempted to work all the time, we must not work all the time if we would obey the commandment of our Lord, who says this to us:

8Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. 9Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; 10but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates... (Exodus 20:8-10, RSV)

And why does our Maker command us to rest? Because he himself rested. It is part of the structure of the reality he gives us. We need to get some rest:

11for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it. (Exodus 20:11, RSV)
So there is that: if we would be obedient disciples of Jesus we will rest on the Sabbath day. I believe that Martin Luther is absolutely right that Sabbath rest should include going to church, so that we can hear the word of God for the coming week. But church does not take all day. We should get some rest too on the sabbath day.

So we have the commandment to get some rest. But also our Maker has given to us gifts of rationality and judgment, and we should use those gifts in taking care of our health and effectiveness. Sometimes we are absolutely right when we suspect that we need a vacation. We are listening to our bodies, we are noting our efficiency, and sometimes we are right to imagine ourselves among the disciples to whom Jesus says,

“Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while.” (Mark 6:31, RSV)

That, then, is my first topic: rest. This is the summer time. This is the time when living is supposed to be easy. Maybe this is a good time to try to get some rest for the work that lies ahead of us.

Next, let us speak of compassion. As it turns out the call of compassion is even stronger in the life of Jesus than the call of rest. Our text says that as Jesus went ashore he saw a great throng, and he had compassion on them. Our Jeremiah reading for this Sunday speaks of the bad shepherds of Israel, but Jesus is not one of them. He is a good shepherd. And so we read the reason for our Lord’s compassion:

...he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

In Jesus, we have a true shepherd — One who sympathizes with our suffering.

My dear old Webster’s Dictionary of 1828 has an interesting definition of “compassion.” It goes this way:

Compassion: a suffering with another; painful sympathy; a sensation of sorrow excited by the distress or misfortunes of another; pity; commiseration. Compassion is a mixed passion, compounded of love and sorrow...

And so it is that the one who feels compassion not only notes suffering in someone else but also somehow feels that suffering along with the other. As Webster suggests, compassion is “compounded of love and sorrow.” Compassion sees the one who suffers, loves that one, and sorrows to see the
pain. Jesus has compassion on the crowds. What he sees affects him. He does not remain calm before the suffering of others. Instead, he dives in to help. In this case, though Jesus and his disciples might have been weary and needed some rest, Jesus sets that aside and ministers to the people. He teaches them many things.

Jesus, you know, is no newcomer to compassion. He is long acquainted with compassion, even from all eternity. Indeed, that is why he came to this earth. He noted human suffering and dashed off to help, with the consent of the Father and the Holy Spirit. None of them, it seems, can stand idly by when you and I ache or grieve or stumble along in pain or disappointment. Our God feels these things, and that is something encouraging for us to think about.

My third topic is gratitude, and for this I want to shift over to this morning’s Psalm — Psalm 23. Many of us know it by heart.

Earlier this summer I mentioned a novel by Wendell Berry called *The Memory of Old Jack*. Let me tell you some more about Old Jack. He is indeed old – the last link in town with the Civil War. He stands there on the porch of the hotel like a statue of some historic personage. He stands there leaning on his cane with his mind ranging back over the course of his life. He is lost in memories.

Some farmers are readers. When I was a young man I worked on a dairy farm with a farmer who read in the evenings. When other people were watching TV, he was reading. Some farmers are like that – readers. But Old Jack was not one of them. The author puts the point this way:

> Reading books is something Old Jack has done little enough of in his day, the Lord knows. He read in his readers while he went to school and has forgotten all that, except for the mouse that gnawed the rope and turned the lion loose.¹

Old Jack admires people who can read—people who can look at those black words on a page and make sense of them. Wendell Berry tells us about Old Jack and his reading:

> Marvelous, to him, the sort of mind that could look at words and see through them to what they were about... He has read the newspaper some, but he either cannot see through those words at all, or he sees not people but little things hopping around like fleas.²

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But there is an exception for Old Jack. He could see through the Twenty-Third Psalm. He could see what that Psalm is talking about. Life has taught him to understand that Psalm.

The first time he understood the Psalm was when he was riding home from town on his horse, approaching his farm. He has just paid off his mortgage. The farm is his, free and clear. Fifteen years earlier, his barn had burned down. It is hard to express what that means to a farmer. He lost his barn, his hay, many of his animals, his tools. He had to take out a loan to keep from losing the farm. He had to have a friend co-sign the loan for him—something he had never wanted to do. He had rebuilt his barn. He had worked at saving his farm for fifteen years. For the last five years, the author says, he had lived at the limit of his strength, not looking up from the ground, collapsing into bed at night, rising again, sore in his bones, to take up the work again.3 Now, as he rides home from the bank with his mortgage folded up in his pocket, he looks at his farm with new eyes. He believes that he has been faithful to his land. He has walked through the valley of the shadow of death, but he has come through. Suddenly he understands that his life, his hopes, his strength—all of it comes from beyond him. And then he understands why the Psalmist says that his “cup runneth over.” There is something beyond him, something that is good, something that is enough, something that is worthy of doing your best for. Old Jack is grateful to the Lord. Gratitude is part of a good life. It is good for disciples of Jesus to be grateful for many blessings.

When all is said and done and I look back on my years at Immanuel, I bet that one of my favorite memories is going to be a Thanksgiving Eve service here in our church. I had asked Tiffany Rosenquist Carter to sing a song from Leonard Bernstein’s Mass. Gwen probably helped us with this. There was an oboe player to accompany Tiffany in a sad and haunting song called “Thank you.” The first verse goes this way:

There once were days so bright,
And nights when ev’ry cricket call seemed right,
And I sang Gloria,
Then I sang Gratias Deo.
I knew a glorious feeling of thank you and...
Thank you.

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But the whole theatrical drama of Bernstein’s *Mass* is that “things are so easily broken.” Throughout the liturgy, the faith of the Celebrant is under assault by skeptics who mock and question the ancient faith of the church. The music of these skeptics is fun and appealing — rock and jazz and blues. Maybe the singer of the lament has been persuaded by the modern skeptics. Anyway, her last verse goes this way:

And now, it’s strange,
Somehow, though nothing much has really changed,
I miss the Gloria,
I don’t sing Gratias Deo.
I can’t say quite when it happened,
But gone is the... thank you...

Do not let this happen to us, dear people. Let us not lose our... thank you.

Those people on the far side of the sea — the ones who looked harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd — those folks had reason for gratitude when Jesus stepped ashore. Jesus has compassion on them. Jesus has compassion, and so things are going to be okay. They are going to be enough. They are going to worthy of our best efforts.

Jesus had compassion on those folks on the other side of the sea, and you and I should believe that the risen Jesus continues to have compassion for us. Things are going to work out okay in the end, even if our own strength and merits are limited. And this is reason to be grateful to Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.