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

My opening text for this All Saints sermon is the magnificent vision granted to St. John of how our human story is going to turn out. The chief thing I want to lift up in this passage is that there is consolation ahead for us, for you and me. The text goes this way:

\[3\] and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; 4 he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.” (Revelation 21:3-4, RSV)

Our Revised Standard Version translation speaks of “men”: “Behold, the dwelling of God is with men.” But its meaning is old. It means “humanity.” The glorious claim is that the dwelling place of God is with human beings—with people like you and me. Tremendous thought! Amazing consolation! Why, this means that God above, creator of heaven and earth, the majestic One, whose power is without limit and whose wisdom is unsearchable, this One means to live in a world with you and me. He is going to come down from heaven and dwell with us. Think of it: we shall have God as our neighbor. And he shall be a good neighbor to us indeed! He shall give humanity a fresh start. This old world, which seems to grow older and more haggard with every act of violence and every deed of wickedness and unkindness... this old world is going to get a fresh start. St. John puts it this way:

\[1\] Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; (Revelation 21:1, RSV)

And this new heaven and new earth are going to be wonderful! Sin, death and the devil shall be hurled out of them, and for us there shall be consolation expressed in those most beautiful words about tears in the eyes of humanity:

God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes... (Revelation 21:3-4, RSV)
If we live long enough in our present world, we are probably going to end up grieving for others. Sometimes the sorrow is fairly light and will fade with time; sometimes the grief is very deep and we will not be done with it until our text comes true—until God himself wipes away every tear from our eyes. In my own household, for example, let me start off with something real, but fairly light: some of you will remember our old cat, Nermal. I am thinking of Nermal because of the Halloween children this past week. Nermal loved Halloween, black cat that he was. And the Halloween children liked Nermal. But Nermal died a couple months ago. He lived to be seventeen. He had diabetes and so we gave them insulin shots twice a day. He was a great cat and we miss him. It is part of life that we can love animals and miss them when they are gone. But the loss of Nermal is quite light compared to the sorrow that Carol and I feel over the death of our great teacher Robert W. Jenson. He died more than a year ago, but the world still feels emptier now that he is gone. I suspect that Carol and I are always going to miss Jenson. But even that sorrow is fairly light compared to the sorrow that some of you bear at the loss of your mother or father, husband or wife or a dear friend, or perhaps even a child. Indeed some blows are so hard it is a wonder that the one left in grief does not go mad. Sometimes they do. When God comes to dwell with us, there are going to be many tears to wipe away from the faces of humanity and much hurt to remove from our hearts.

There is a classic prayer we often pray on this Sunday, All Saints Sunday, and, indeed, it is a lovely prayer we could pray quite often. Margaret Schulze loves this prayer, as she and the rest of us remember Ray, Pastor Raymond Schulze, my great predecessor here at Immanuel Lutheran Church. The prayer goes this way:

Heavenly Father, we remember before you all those who rejoice with us, but upon another shore and in a greater light, that multitude which none can number, whose hope was in the Word made flesh. And we pray that we too will be counted among the communion of saints, receiving grace to offer unto you reasonable service, living in unity and fellowship with all your people, and giving reverence to all that you have made. Lord, in your mercy...

The logic of this prayer is perfect. We remember those who have already gone to heaven and we pray that through the grace of Jesus Christ, we will join them someday.

Note that in remembering those who have already gone to heaven, we are thinking of a lot of people. The prayer puts it this way:
...that multitude which none can number, whose hope was in the Word made flesh...

They rest upon “another shore and in a greater light,” and upon that other shore they do something: they rejoice. A few minutes from now, we too will rejoice and give thanks to our God, through the Blessed Sacrament. That sacrament is called the Eucharist—a Greek word meaning “Thanksgiving.” The Blessed Sacrament is fundamentally a happy event, an event in which grateful people give thanks to our heavenly Father for what he and Jesus and the Holy Spirit have done for us. Well, when we give thanks in the Blessed Sacrament, or whenever our hearts overflow with gratitude to God, then we are joining that heavenly chorus above—those multitudes who rest on another shore and in a greater light and join us in rejoicing. They are not sad and fretful and weary on that far shore, and why should they be down in any measure, because after all, they live in a world where there is no more death or dying or sickness or sorrow and where God himself wipes away the tears from every eye. I want to be there someday. I want us to join them. And we will! Or rather, they shall come down with God from heaven and a new and beautiful Jerusalem shall be established on earth forever. We will live with our ancestors in the faith, we shall live with all those who have hoped in the Word made flesh, and God himself shall wipe away the tears from our eyes too.

This past week I visited our member Ann Siemer. She is 103 years old and she looks great! When I arrived at the nursing home in East Islip, Long Island, she was sitting at a table in the recreation hall with other residents, batting around a balloon, having fun. I caught her attention and she turned her bright blue eyes on me and we moved to a quiet corner of the hall so that I could share the Holy Communion with her. I like to speak of Ann Siemer because she serves as such a good example of faith for many of us. She was dressed beautifully, including a lovely necklace. She felt good. She said that if she goes on feeling this good she would be glad to live to be 110. And yet if you have been able to visit with Ann Siemer in recent years you will know that her eye and her heart are fixed on that distant shore. She will be glad to see her mother and her sister again, you know that is true. But above all she will be glad to see Jesus with her own eyes and to come into his embrace and have the tears wiped away from her eyes.

Today is All Saints Sunday here at Immanuel. We think of the great saints of the church and, as the Prayer of the Day puts it, we pray for “grace to follow your blessed saints in lives of faith and commitment.” And that is most certainly true. We do desire and pray for grace that we too might live more saintly lives. But on this Sunday we also think of the multitudes of Christians who have quietly put their faith in the Word made flesh, have lived for Jesus and in Jesus, and have been a blessing for their families and neighbors. We
think of that quiet multitude of Christians, many of whom have died. We have every right to grieve for them, but also we have every right to look forward to seeing them again.

In our Gospel Lesson for today, Mary does that most natural and human of things: she grieves for her brother who has died. She weeps for her brother, and Jesus is deeply moved by her tears. You know the story. Shortly afterwards Jesus restores Lazarus to life and gives him back to his sisters. But that great miracle is but a foretaste of the feast to come. Indeed, I believe it is proper for us to imagine that as Jesus stands and regards Mary weeping for the brother she has lost, Jesus himself is renewing the solemn determination he has made to liberate us all from the sorrow of death. It will mean his own death, but his stance seems to be, let it be so.

And so it is that on All Saints Sunday we permit ourselves to remember and to grieve for our brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, children and dear friends. We sorrow for them and yet let us combine our sorrow with deep gratitude to Jesus Christ, who holds all those people in his trustworthy hands, and who will wipe the tears from every eye, and to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever, Amen.