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

This dear church building of ours is old enough to have a link with colonial America. It is by way of what is called “old-growth timber.” I think we have some in our church — timber from ancient trees that had reached old, old age before they were harvested. If we were to go down to our church undercroft and shove aside the sofa from the wall at the foot of our stairs, we would find a trap door in the floor. And if we were to lift up that trapdoor and shine a flashlight down there we would see an immense beam of wood running the whole width of our church. Our church building rests on beams of wood like that, on top of the bedrock. They are squared off but still they are so big you can imagine them serving as the central mast of some colonial sailing ship. And that wood is strong! Second-growth timber and modern timber is strong too, of course, but not strong compared to first growth timber. If you look overhead at the beams in our ceiling here in the church nave, you will see beams of wood that are so strong that a structural engineer once told me that we could hang a 747 jet from the beams of our ceiling. I am tickled to think that our church has wood that might have stretched back to colonial days.

There is an elderly English popular historian named Paul Johnson who seems to love to write about early America. He wrote a lovely biography of George Washington, for example. Johnson has a wonderful ability to transport us back in time and to imagine how the New World looked to the colonists. He notes that the soil was good and all kinds of nuts and berries and vegetables easily grew here in America. He writes this, for example:

The settlers also discovered chestnuts, walnuts, butternuts, beech, hazel, and hickory nuts in abundance, and also wild plum, cherry, mulberry, and persimmon, though most fruit trees were imported. In addition to maize the colonists had pumpkins, squash, beans, rice, melons, tomatoes, huckleberries, blackberries, strawberries, black raspberries, cranberries, gooseberries, and grapes, all growing wild or easily cultivated.¹

The American forests were filled with game, both for food and fur. The waters of Northeast America were filled with fish and seafood. All of these things are great, but Johnson seems especially fascinated by the timber here in America. There were lots of forests and trees in America. By contrast, Europe was about played out when it came to timber. Johnson writes this:

What struck the first New Englanders at the time, however, was the abundance and quality of the timber, to be had for the simple effort of cutting it down. In western Europe in the early 17th century wood for any purpose, including fuel, was increasingly scarce and costly. The ordinary family, which could not afford ‘sea coal,’ could never get enough of it. So the colonists fell on the wood with delight. Francis Higginson, minister to the settlers at Cape Ann, wrote in 1629: ‘Here we have plenty of fire to warm us...All Europe is not able to make so great fires as New England. A poor servant here, that is to possess but 50 acres of land, may afford to give more wood for timber and fire as good as the world yields, than many noblemen in England can afford to do. Here is good living for those that love good fires.’

So, European carpenters and craftsmen and furniture makers and shipbuilders hastened to America where there was plenty of wood for their skills.

If you combine this abundance of wood and berries and nuts and vegetables and wild game and space! – cheap and good and abundant land for sale – when you combine all of that together you can understand why there was joy in the heart of many settlers here in America. And we can understand why William Bradford, Governor of Plymouth Colony, would summon his people to gather together in thanksgiving. And so we have his proclamation:

I, your magistrate, do proclaim that all ye Pilgrims, with your wives and little ones do gather at ye meeting house, on ye hill, between the hours of nine and twelve in the day time, on Thursday, November 29th of the year of our Lord one thousand six hundred and twenty three, and the third year since ye Pilgrims landed on ye Pilgrim Rock, there to listen to ye pastor, and render thanksgiving to ye Almighty God for all His blessings.

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2 Ibid, p. 35.
And so here we are, all gathered together on Thanksgiving Eve, “to listen to ye pastor, and render thanksgiving to ye Almighty God for all His blessings.”

It so happens that we have at least one person among us whose heart I know is overflowing with gratitude to God. I am speaking of our old friend Luis Cartagena. We are receiving Luis into membership here at Immanuel this evening, after this sermon. Luis was baptized long ago in Puerto Rico. Now he is affirming his baptism. He is solemnly saying Yes to his baptism. He is solemnly recommitting himself to Jesus. And he is doing so for the most pure and innocent of reasons: he is grateful to God for many blessings and he believes that when one is grateful to God, one should go to church. Amen! I agree with that absolutely.

I bet that many of us join Luis in gratitude to God. We can thank him for the blessings we have had so far in life. We can thank him for blessings we could well receive in the future, down the road a ways. We can even thank God for things that he has withheld from us. Not getting what you want and what you have been praying for can be hard, especially in the grip of the moment. But some of us have lived long enough to realize that it would not have been good for us to receive something we so very much wanted at the time. We have come to believe that it was God’s mercy that led him to withhold that which we wanted at the time. In the end, when we reach heaven, I believe that we will see that God’s love and wisdom upheld us every moment of our lives – even those moments that were hard.

And when we stop to ponder Jesus, I believe that each of us has reason to give thanks to God. Just think of the encouraging words of Jesus in this evening’s Gospel Lesson. Jesus invites us to not worry so much. He invites us to enjoy some peace in this world and to trust God. And so we read:

28And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; 29yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. 30But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you...
(Matthew 6:28-30, RSV)

This means that we have some hope in life – indeed, we have hope that will not fail us, because Jesus says so. In our Gospel Lesson, Jesus is speaking so very sweetly and gently to you and to me. He backs up his words with his very life. When Jesus bids us to not be anxious he is giving us eternal encouragement that will not let us down.
And I so it is that on this Thanksgiving Eve we have good reason for gratitude to our God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to whom belongs the glory now and forever. Amen