

THE FIRST THANKSGIVING

*This play is written by Yvonne Brandon, using information and quotes from
Thanksgiving: A Time to Remember by Barbara Rainey*

CHARACTERS:

William Bradford - _____
William Brewster - _____
John Howland - _____
Elizabeth Tilley - _____
Susanna White - _____
John Billington - _____
Sqanto - _____

SETTING:

Harvest-time, 1621 – first harvest feast. Pilgrims and Indians are seated together around a table.

WILLIAM BRADFORD:

Thank you for joining us for our harvest feast. God has abundantly blessed us in this year of 1621. We gather to remember His goodness, to thank Him for His faithfulness to us, and to celebrate. Let's remember together the many things God has done for us since we left England in 1620.

WILLIAM BEWSTER:

In England, I lived in Scrooby, which is near Sherwood Forest. Perhaps you have heard of this forest. I was the royal postmaster of Scrooby. As Englishmen, our lives were ruled by King James, who required us to worship in the stale Church of England. My family and a small group of Christians formed our own church gathering, and we called ourselves Separatists, because we wanted to separate from the Church of England. William Bradford, here, was an orphaned youth when he used to attend our meetings. We met secretly, always knowing that spies from the House of Bishops could discover us, and have us fined, arrested, or even thrown in prison.

Finally, we decided to move to Leyden, Holland, where we could worship freely. Life was very difficult there. We all worked long hours, to earn a living. I worked as a silk weaver and a printer. We also could not own land, since we were foreigners. Moreover, we were concerned about the effect that the morally "loose" society in Holland was having on our children.

After 10 years in Holland, some of us decided to sail for the "New World," in hopes of religious freedom and the opportunity to own land. Our pastor, John Robinson, chose to remain in Holland, and appointed me to be the spiritual leader of our group. *We thank God for giving us the courage and resources to make this voyage.*

We sailed in July, 1620, to England on our ship, the *Speedwell*. We picked up another ship, the *Mayflower*, a crew of sailors led by Captain Christopher Jones, several non-Separatists passengers who wanted land and adventure (we called them "Strangers"), and Captain Miles Standish, who would help us with military preparedness. People began calling us "Pilgrims"

WILLIAM BRADFORD:

We departed from England in August, only to find that the *Speedwell* leaked and could not make the journey. Discouraged, we returned to Plymouth, England. Since we were left with only one ship, some people volunteered to stay in England. *"And thus like Gideon's army, this small number was divided, as if the Lord by this work of His providence thought these few too many for the great work He had to do."*

When the *Mayflower* finally left England, on the 6th of September, 1620, there were 102 passengers, including 33 children. Most of us were in our 20's, including my wife, Dorothy, and myself. But, we had several who were older than this, such as Mr. & Mrs. Brewster, who were in their 50's.

ELIZABETH TILLEY:

At the beginning of our voyage, the sailors were not favorable toward those of us who are Separatists. They called us “landlubbers, “psalm-singing puke-stockings,” and worse. They ridiculed us for taking time each morning to recite or sing psalms and pray.

There was one sailor who was especially nasty, cursing the passengers who were seasick and telling them he looked forward to throwing them overboard if they died on the voyage. Well, about 2 weeks out to sea, this same sailor unexpectedly developed a raging fever. Within just one day he died of an unknown sickness, raving and cursing as he breathed his last. His body was buried at sea. This sobered the other seamen, a superstitious group even in normal circumstances. They wondered if God caused this to happen to him because of his cruel treatment of God-fearing people. The other sailors did not want to risk this fate, and no longer teased us. *We thanked God for delivering us from this persecution.*

JOHN HOWLAND:

I thank God that I am alive. I came very close to death during our voyage. During an intense storm, we were all cooped up under the main deck. We couldn't open the hatch for fresh air, because the lower decks would fill up with water if the hatches were opened. Well, the air was thick, smelly, and I felt like I could hardly breathe. We were not allowed to go up on the main deck, but I decided to go up there anyway. The waves were huge and the winds were strong. Suddenly, the ship tipped, and I fell into the frigid sea. But, it pleased God that I caught hold of the topsail rope that was trailing behind the ship in the water. Somehow, some of the sailors realized I had fallen overboard, and they were able to pull me in. My skin was blue, and I became rather ill after this, but, thanks to God's amazing grace, I survived!

SUSANNA WHITE:

Our conditions were not very pleasant on the *Mayflower*. The food was terrible – brine-soaked beef, pork, and fish and stale, hard biscuits, which often were full of insects. The rats living on board helped themselves to the same food supplies.

The rooms for passengers were crowded and mainly below deck. Conditions were miserable: cramped quarters, seasick people vomiting into pails – if they were able to find one in time, no sanitary toilets; the hatches were sealed off because of constant storms, and so we were unable to get fresh air. A foul mixture of odors grew in this environment.

Yet, we thank God that, in spite of such unpleasant conditions, only 2 people died on our journey. One was that cranky sailor. The other was a servant boy who refused to obey the orders to drink a spoonful of lemon juice daily. He became sick with scurvy and died. After this, everyone was sure to drink his daily lemon juice. *God definitely protected us!*

WILLIAM BRADFORD:

There is another time we saw God's amazing protection over us. During one of the most severe storms, one of the huge crossbeams supporting the main deck suddenly cracked due to the constant stress of the high winds. The sailors were clearly worried, and we knew this was serious. We prayed, took our concerns and fears to God, and asked Him to deliver us. We remembered a large iron jack screw we had brought from Holland for lifting heavy beams when we would begin our building construction in the New World. The sailors were able to use this screw to lift the beam back to its original position and hold it in place. They relaxed and said it would hold for the remainder of the voyage. *We give God the praise and glory for sparing our lives.*

WILLIAM BREWSTER:

On November 9th, 65 days after leaving Plymouth, England, a sailor spotted land! What a relief this was! We shouted for joy and fell to our knees to pray. Then we read Psalm 100 together. Let's do that again now:

EVERYONE:

Psalm 100

Shout joyfully to the LORD, all the earth.

Serve the LORD with gladness

Come before Him with joyful singing,

Know that the LORD Himself is God.

It is He who has made us, not we ourselves.

We are His people and the sheep of His pasture.
Enter into His gates with Thanksgiving,
And His courts with praise.
Give thanks to Him, bless His name,
For the LORD is good.
His lovingkindness is everlasting,
And His faithfulness to all generations.

JOHN HOWLAND:

We discovered that we had landed about 60 miles north of our intended destination in Virginia. Bad weather prevented us from traveling down there. This posed a problem because we had a contract of laws which would not be valid in this new location. So, on November 10, 1620, the leaders drafted a new agreement, which they called the Mayflower Compact. It was the first time that free and equal men had voluntarily covenanted together to create their own new civil government. It was quite amazing that both the Separatists and the Strangers could come to an agreement about the laws by which we would live. *We are very thankful to God for this unity among us.*

My master, John Carver, was elected governor of our whole group for a term of one year. What an honor it was to be the servant of the governor!

WILLIAM BRADFORD:

On November 11 we dropped anchor. *We all fell on our knees and blessed the God of heaven who had brought us over the vast and furious ocean, and delivered us from all its perils and miseries, again to set our feet on the firm and stable earth.*

In the days that followed, several expeditions were made to explore the area to seek the best location for a settlement. One day, the explorers were attacked by Indians. Yet, God protected us, and no one was injured. The remaining passengers were still on the *Mayflower*, waiting for news from the explorers.

JOHN BILLINGTON, JR:

Excuse me, Mr. Bradford. May I tell about how God protected us on the ship, while we were waiting for you to return?

WILLIAM BRADFORD:

Sure, John.

JOHN BILLINGTON, JR:

One of those days, my 10 year-old brother, Francis was really bored. He was in a room on the ship where gunpowder was stored in big barrels. For some crazy reason, he fired a musket right near the barrels of gunpowder. He could have blown up the whole ship! *All the grown-ups told him that God's mercy saved all of us that day!*

WILLIAM BREWSTER:

Well, the explorers returned with the good news that they found an ideal spot for us to build our settlement. It had fertile soil, four spring-fed creeks, and a large section of ground already cleared and ready for planting. *We all rejoiced at God's bountiful provision of such good land.*

They were told the good news of God's protection during the gunpowder incident. They were also told of the good news of a baby who had been born.

SUSANNA WHITE:

While they were out exploring, my baby was born. He was the first baby born in this New World. We named him Peregrine, which means Pilgrim. We like names that have special meanings. Some of the names of other Pilgrim children were Love, Wrestling, Fear, Humility, and Oceanus (who was born while we were at sea). *I was so thankful that God provided us with a healthy baby.*

ELIZABETH TILLEY:

On December 22, the men began building the Common House. We all lived here while they began to build individual houses. But, the weather was so cold, that this work progressed very slowly.

As the weeks went by, the weather grew worse. In the coldest stretch of winter, after many had suffered long with head colds, a flu-like illness swept through the colony. This disease, which we called the “general sickness,” had made many people desperately ill. Most of us were coughing and gasping for breath, unable to leave our beds. Even Mr. Bradford, Mr. Carver and other leaders fell sick. During the worst of the epidemic, on any given day only six or seven out of the hundred might be strong enough to help tend the sick.

People began to die in alarming numbers – often two or three each day. The men strong enough to work carried the bodies out for burial at night. This was to hide our worsening situation from any Indians who might be spying from the nearby woods.

As spring finally came, half of our colony had died, including both of my parents. Governor Carver kindly took me in to live with his family. Amidst our grief, we were reminded that during the first winter of the Jamestown, Virginia settlement in 1607, 90 percent of their settlers died! *How gracious God was to allow us to still allow 51 of our original 102 to still be alive.*

WILLIAM BRADFORD:

Springtime brought new hope for all of us. The biggest surprise came in March when an Indian walked into our settlement and said, “Welcome,” in English. His name was Samoset, and he was a chief of an Indian tribe north of here. He told us that he had learned some English from English fishermen.

He was able to explain to us that the Indians who used to live on the land we had settled were the Patuxets. They were a tribe who had murdered every white man who had ever landed in their territory. But, four years earlier, the tribe suffered a mysterious plague, and everyone had died. Neighboring tribes were so surprised by the tribe’s misfortune that they avoided the area, fearing they too would be killed by the plague. As a result no one lived on this land, and no one owned it. They are the ones who had cleared the land on which we would soon be planting our crops.

This is another example of God’s remarkable, sovereign provision for us! A tribe who would have killed us cleared our land, and then died out, leaving the land perfectly prepared for us! And God brought a friendly Indian to us who could explain all of this.

SQUANTO:

I am Squanto, and these people are now my family.

WILLIAM BRADFORD:

Squanto, you are a special instrument sent of God for our good, beyond our expectation.

SQUANTO:

I am thankful for you too. A few years ago, I was captured by a treacherous sea captain and taken to Europe as a slave. I was a servant for some men called Monks. They taught me about their God. They also taught me their language, Spanish. They were very good to me, and sympathized with my desires to return home. With their help, I went to England. In England, I learned the English language while I tried to find an Englishman who would sail back to my homeland. Finally, two years ago, I found such a sea captain and sailed home.

But, when we arrived, I learned that a great illness had swept through my tribe, and none remained but I. I went to live with a friendly tribe nearby, the Wampanoags. Samoset came to meet me and tell me of the arrival of white men on the land of my tribe. He brought me to meet you, and I saw immediately that there were many ways I could help you. I asked you if I could stay and live with you in peace, since this land is my home. You are now my family.

WILLIAM BRADFORD:

Squanto, we are so grateful for all that God has provided through you. I don't believe we could survive without you. You have acted as our translator and mediator in our dealings with other Indians. You taught us how to catch eels and fish to use as fertilizer for our planting of corn. You taught us how to plant pumpkins and tap the maple trees for syrup. And you introduced us to the trade of trapping beaver for their pelts. We have been storing up many of these pelts to use for trading.

WILLIAM BREWSTER:

Squanto also introduced us to Massasoit, the chief of the Wampanoags. He is a peace-loving man and a kind leader. Thanks to Squanto's help, we made a peace treaty with Massasoit. We have agreed to treat each other honorably, not steal from one another, and not cause harm to one another. We also agreed to come to the aid of one another if either was attacked in war. This has greatly eased our fears about living in this land which is so full of Indians.

How good God is to bring us to a place near such a friendly Indian chief!

SUSANNA WHITE:

I am thankful for my marriage to Edward Winslow in May. During the winter, his wife died, and so did my husband. Ours was the first marriage in the New World.

WILLIAM BREWSTER:

I am thankful that my wife, Mary, lived through the winter. Only 4 married couples have both husband and wife still living.

JOHN HOWLAND:

In the Spring, my master, Governor Carver died. *I am thankful to God for providing us with a very wise man and a good leader to replace him - William Bradford.*

WILLIAM BRADFORD:

The crops have grown well this year, due to Squanto's instruction and God's blessing. Our harvest is abundant. We invited Chief Massasoit to join us in a harvest celebration, thanking God for His faithfulness to us. We prepared much food for the feast – wild turkeys, eels, geese, lobster, partridge, oysters, clam chowder, parsnips, turnips, cucumbers, onions, carrots, cabbage, beets, radishes, dried fruit, pies, and hoecakes, made from cornmeal.

Massasoit did surprise us when he arrived, accompanied by 90 Indian braves! We were worried that they would consume all our stores that we need to save for the winter. So, they went into the woods and seashore to gather more food. Soon five deer and more fish and seafood were presented for roasting. We breathed a sigh of relief!

This is our third and final day of feasting. We have enjoyed delicious food and many games. Our people and the Indians have joined together in races, exhibitions of shooting skill, wrestling matches, and stoolball, which resembles a game some call Croquet.

We all agree that we shall do this again next harvest season.