

11 May 2003
Easter 4 – Good Shepherd Sunday

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Our Good and Faithful Shepherd”

Text: John 10:11-18

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

When what you see with your eyes contradicts what you hear with your ears, you begin to realize how little and fragile and weak our faith really is . . . and how hard it is to live by faith.

When Martin Luther was alive and trying to teach about faith and living by faith, he was confronted by one of his students who didn't believe what Luther was saying because it sounded too easy. There must be more to it; things we must do, said this student . . . to which Luther responded, “*You think living by faith is easy?*”

When Jesus was teaching His disciples, He called them (a number of times), “***O ye of little faith.***” And it wasn't just His disciples then that He was talking about. He could just as well say those words to you and me, couldn't He?

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday, and we heard again those wonderful words of Jesus, “***I am the Good Shepherd.***” And we heard of all the wonderful things our Good Shepherd does in caring for His sheep: feeding us, leading us, guiding us, protecting us, never abandoning us, knowing us. . . . But then we look around us, and what happens when what we see with our eyes contradicts what we have heard with our ears? When it seems that rather than receiving all the blessings of our Good Shepherd, we instead seem to be stuck in the middle of never ending struggles – at home, at work, at school, with our church, in our personal lives, with our finances? When it seems that the Good Shepherd isn't being too good at all? Or that maybe He's in another pasture and has forgotten about us. . . . We heard those wonderful words again today, but about the reality of what we see happening all around us?

Well if that is the case with you, as it is with me, know that you are not alone. Such is the way it has been for God's people, God's sheep, of all times. Living by faith is not easy, and it will never be. Abraham could tell you that. So could Moses, and Jacob, and Joshua, and Samuel, and David, and Elijah, and Jeremiah, and Daniel, and the Apostles,

and Joseph and Mary, and the fathers of the early church, and Luther and the other reformers, and the list goes on and on. For as long as we are in this world, there will be struggle. Satan will see to that, for he wants nothing else than to destroy the church of our Lord Jesus Christ and how he goes about that is by destroying the faith of one Christian at a time. Therefore if you are a Christian, you are a target. You will struggle as a Christian. We will struggle as a church. We will be attacked relentlessly. It may even appear as if our enemy is winning. To expect otherwise is simply not realistic, nor an option . . . although that is what we want, isn't it?

And so it was for the Apostles, to whom Jesus first spoke the words that we heard in the Holy Gospel this evening. Jesus said to them, ***"I am the Good Shepherd."*** And they too knew the words of Psalm 23, as we do. But what did they see all around them? Jesus was being opposed and challenged and plotted against by the Jewish authorities. He was called a liar, and an illegitimate child, and possessed by the devil. Those who followed Jesus, or were healed by Him, were being thrown out of the synagogue. Because His teaching was so challenging and offended the sensibilities of some, even some of His followers stopped following Him and went home. And seeing all of this happening, could you have blamed the disciples if they began to think, *"With a Shepherd like this, who needs wolves?"*

Its not easy, is it?

But still we know that these words are true. Despite what we see around us, despite the struggle and the attacks of the devil, despite the contradiction between our eyes and our ears, the faith that God has given you and me, however little it may be, knows that we have a Good Shepherd. A Good Shepherd that is not a hireling that runs away when things get tough, but who sticks around and fights for us. He is a Good Shepherd who knows His sheep. We're not like the sheep you see in the Serta mattress commercials on TV – anonymous sheep with only numbers on our side. Sheep number 245,673. No, your Good Shepherd knows you and knows who you are. And you have a Good Shepherd who would rather He die than you die. A Good Shepherd who will lay down His life so that His sheep can live. . . . Clearly, no ordinary Shepherd!

And so a few weeks ago, we saw the Good Shepherd on the cross, doing what He said He was going to do, laying down His life for His sheep. Being the point man in the battle with Satan, taking all that Satan had to give, so that He would receive in His body the payment, the punishment, the price of the sins of His sheep. . . . But as we heard Jesus say today, He had the authority not only ***"to lay down His life, but also to take it up again."*** And so neither death nor life have any power against Jesus, for He has authority over both. Both must bow to His authority and obey Him. Life must because He is its

creator, and death must because He is its conqueror. And so when the dead son of a widow crosses His path, and Jesus commands death to die, it must be so. When Jesus goes to the tomb of Lazarus and commands life to come forth from that tomb, it must be so. When Jesus tells an aged and barren Sarah that despite her lifeless womb she will have a child, it must be so. And so when our Good Shepherd, Jesus, enters the grave on Good Friday, the outcome is never in doubt. The Good Shepherd enters death to defeat death – but not for Himself, but for His sheep. So that His sheep may rise from the dead as He is risen from the dead. That His flock be an everlasting flock – one flock, with one Shepherd, forever.

And so it is. Not and so it will be, some time in the future, but not right now. No. So it is, already, right now. As we heard in the Epistle from First John, ***“Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when He appears we will be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is.”*** We are God’s children now, part of the one flock now, under the care and protection of our resurrected Good Shepherd now, even though we still struggle now. The struggle and the attacks we endure are simply signs of who we are . . . and does not and cannot change the truth and reality of who we are in Christ Jesus. And it certainly does not change the authority of Christ, our Good Shepherd. For He who holds the power and authority over life and death can certainly take care of those who belong to Him. And He does. Feeding, leading, guiding, protecting, building, and *raising* . . . in His time, in His ways, and according to His good and perfect will. For He has promised to do so, and the Good Shepherd does not let His sheep down.

And so what are we to do then? What are we to do when what we see with our eyes contradicts what we hear with our ears? When problems and doubts and uncertainties fill our minds and threaten to drive us to despair? Jesus, in fact, tells us in the Holy Gospel: His sheep ***“listen to His voice.”*** What we see may or may not be reality, like a mirage on a very hot day. But the voice and Word of the Good Shepherd is the absolute truth. And listening to His voice and following Him, we hear and follow and know what is most sure and true; what we can rely on and count on; what will not let us down. And we live by faith – both as individual Christians and as a church. We live by faith – not by sight, or reason, or our own strength or ingenuity or ability – for they will all let us down. Only One will not let us down, and that is our Good Shepherd. And so faith in Him is certainty. Faith in Him is hope. Faith in Him is confidence.

And so in this life, we listen to our Good Shepherd’s voice and rely on His promises. When filled with doubt, we sing the hymns of His Word even more confidently right into the ears of Satan. When struggling even to stand, we pray His Word from our knees ever more fervently. When bowed low under burdens and fears with no strength of our own,

we receive His strength, in His life-giving body and blood. When racked with sin and guilt, and when the threats and accusations and uncertainties of this world beat heavy on us, we hear and receive His Word of forgiveness and new life. And when this world has used us up and beaten us up and left us for dead, our Good Shepherd raises us from the dead. For that is what your Good Shepherd is here to do. Its not going to be easy – as a child of God, you have a powerful enemy. But as a child of God you have an even more powerful Father and brother. And He will not let you down, and He will not let His church down. Even in the midst of the valley of the shadow of death, when all seems hopeless and lost, He is there, with His rod and staff, with the oil of joy and gladness, with His life and forgiveness.

So have no fear, little flock; have no fear. The Lord is your Shepherd. You shall not want. He makes you to lie in green pastures. He is leading you to His quiet waters. He restores your soul. And surely His goodness and mercy are with you all the days of your life – not just the good days and the good times, but including the days of struggles, the days of doubts, the days of fears, the days of despair and pain and darkness, the days when nothing seems to be going right. *Especially* those days, for He is the Good Shepherd, who does not run away or leave you all the days of your life, for He is seeing to it that you will dwell in the house of the Lord forever . . . and forever includes now.

So have no fear, little flock. Have faith.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus our Lord unto everlasting life. Amen.