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Easter 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Good, *Caring* Shepherd”
Text: John 10:11-18; 1 John 3:1-2

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

I don't care.

I say that. You too, I'm sure. But as I thought about that this week, it occurred to me that that little phrase, which rolls so easily off our lips and tongues, is perhaps one of the more hurtful things we could say. **I don't care.** Because we want people to care, and it hurts when they don't. I want people to care about what's important to me. I want people to care about me. And it hurts them when *I don't care*.

How many people in our world today just want someone to care about them? I think the number is staggering. I think this is why groups like the Mormons and Scientology are growing. They find people looking for someone to care for them, to care about them, and they offer them care. And when you've heard or felt **I don't care** often enough, it's easy to get hooked into groups like that. Who look like they care about your family, who look like they care about the amount of stress you're under. We want care. We *need* it.

But not all who promise care actually give care. False religions do not make things better, but worse. Husbands and wives do not always love and cherish each other as they should, but hurt one another. Parents do not always love and care for their children. Children hurt their parents with uncaring words and attitudes. Our friends let us down. And what do we so often hear about on the news these days? Clergy scandals, internet predators, nursing home neglect, malpractice, government inaction or ineptitude, lack of justice. It would be easy to go on. No wonder so many feel alone in this world . . . *and uncared for*. And it's not only a matter of evil, of those looking to take advantage of others – even those with good intentions fail and fall. Sin gets the better of us all. Even when we *want* to care, weakness, or inability, or tiredness, or stubbornness so often gets in the way. We don't want it to. How often do we resolve to do better . . . and fall again? And then the guilt piles up. Parents lose their temper. Spouses let little things grow into big barriers. Pastors do not prioritize right. We forget what we should remember. We fail to see the need others have because we are so focused on our own.

Good intentions are not enough. We need care. *Physically*, yes, with the things of this world and life. But even moreso *spiritually*, with the things of the life of the world to come; with the problem of sin; with our need for forgiveness. We are sheep who need a shepherd. We need someone who cares and loves us enough to not only promise care, but to do something about it. One from whose mouth we will *never* hear: **I don't care**.

And today, that is what we heard! ***I am the Good Shepherd***, Jesus says.

The Good Shepherd who cares and will not run away.

The Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep.

The Good Shepherd who knows His sheep – who knows us and all of our needs, physical *and* spiritual – and can provide for them.

The Good Shepherd who will not rest content until there be but one flock and one shepherd.

The Good Shepherd who would rather Himself die than any of His sheep die.

The Good Shepherd who is the perfect Shepherd, for that is what the *good* here means.

Not good as opposed to bad, but good as in perfect; good as in what the creation was before sin; good as the One who can take us through this world of sin, ***through the valley of the shadow of death***, and into the goodness and eternal life of Heaven. And out of His mouth you will *never* hear: **I don't care**. It is not in His vocabulary. It is not in His being. Even when it may *seem* that His care is very far away.

For throughout history, Jesus, our Good Shepherd, has proven His faithfulness and care. From the beginning of creation to its ending, we have not only His Word and promise, but His gracious acts of love fulfilling those words and promises – caring, always caring, for His sheep.

Shepherding them with both rod and staff.

Bringing them out of Egypt.

Disciplining them in the wilderness, but also caring for them there.

Providing them the Promised Land.

Fighting for them against nations and kings.

Caring enough to restrain them from further sin by allowing them to be conquered and sent into exile.

Sending prophets to speak His Word of repentance and life. . . .

And then coming Himself.

Coming in our flesh and blood, born of the virgin, to accomplish once and for all the greatest act of love and care: **to lay down his life for His sheep**. The only one who ever did. To enter the ravenous jaws of the hound of hell in our place. To take all of the sin and guilt that weighs so heavy on you away from you, and put it on Himself. And thus to

redeem you, forgive you, and set you free.

And so if you ever doubt His love and care; if you ever wonder because the things of this world seem so out of control, and so against you – you need look no further than the cross. And the fact that He’s there and you’re not! His nails, His blood, His crown of thorns, His death, all crying out to you: I care. ***I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep.*** I lay down my life *for you*. And this is *for you*. How do you know? Well, because He *sheeped* you! He made you His sheep in the waters of Holy Baptism. You were baptized into Him, and He said to you: *you are mine*. You are My lamb. And so the apostle John could write in the Epistle that we heard: ***“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, [or some translations say: lavished on us!] that we should be called children of God; and so we are.”*** We are. It is fact. You have been *sheeped* by your Shepherd, and brought into His flock. And even though (as John says) it may not look like it (at times) now, that does not change the reality. He does not “sheep and run.” He sheeps and stays. His Word is truth. His promises are sure. And so you can be sure. **He cares.**

St. Athanasius, whose day of commemoration was this week, and who knew his share of attacks and trials and troubles and danger and exile, was confident of this care, calling Psalm 23 “*a psalm of boasting in the Lord.*” Of boasting in His care. Of boasting that because of our Lord’s passion, because He stood in need of everything, ***we will lack nothing.*** In times of plenty, *or* times of little. Even in exile, even in danger, even in death.

And so because our Lord Jesus had no place to lay His head, ***He makes us to lie down in green pastures.***

Because He sat thirsty at the well and thirsted on the cross, ***He leads us beside the still waters.***

Because of His poverty, ***He restores our souls.***

Because He was driven from His hometown, ***He leads us in the paths of righteousness.***

Because He was beaten, flogged, and crucified, ***we fear no evil.***

Because He rose from the dead, ***He is with us.***

Because He hungered in the wilderness, ***He prepares a table before us in the presence of our enemies.***

Because He drank the cup of suffering and shame and death, ***the cup of His Supper for us overflows.***

And because He was forsaken, ***surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.***

Or to put that in other words, sheep without a shepherd are dead meat; but sheep with a

Good Shepherd *shall not want*, and *shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever*.

And we know this to be true, for the Good Shepherd not only laid down His life for His sheep, He took His life up again. And as He is risen from the dead, so will we rise. And as He will live forever, so will we. For His work did not stop with His cross and resurrection, but continues for all time, as *He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies* His sheep, through the Holy Spirit. (Explanation of the Third Article of the Creed, Small Catechism) And so He is still caring for and shepherding His sheep, feeding and forgiving us with His Supper, absolving us and washing us clean, and guiding and strengthening and keeping us with the rod and staff of His Word of Law and Gospel. He is not the Good Shepherd of history, but of *now*, as I said before, refusing to stop gathering His sheep until there is one flock and one shepherd. Until all are safe and secure in His fold, our bodies raised to life again, and He leads us home to live in His home, *our* home, in Heaven.

And in a world full of **I don't care**, what joy to hear and see and touch and taste our Good Shepherd's **I care**. And to rest confidently in *that*, no matter what rages around us in this world. No matter the disappointments, the failures, the problems, the guilt, the danger, the lack, the fear – whatever satanic attack. For none of that can change this truth – the truth of the cross, of your Good Shepherd, of His death and resurrection for you, of His forgiveness, and *of His constant care*. You are Jesus' little lamb. Today, tomorrow, and forever.

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds steadfast in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.