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Easter 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Good Shepherd, Good Life”
Text: John 10:22-30 (Acts 20:17-35)

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

I am the Good Shepherd, Jesus said. You’ve heard that many, many times in your life. Today I want to ask you one simple question about that: *why?* What makes Jesus the *Good Shepherd*?

Is it because He takes care of us? Yes . . . but there are many others in this world who take care of us. Parents and grandparents, teachers, friends and neighbors, doctors and nurses, and many more.

Is it because He is looking out for us and protecting us? Yes . . . but there are many others in this world who look out for us and protect us. The government, policemen, firemen, the military, and more.

Is it because He loves us? Yes . . . but there are many others in this world who love us. Husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, and more.

Is it because He lays down His life for us? Yes . . . but there are even others who have done this for you as well. The aforementioned policemen and firemen; soldiers give their lives for us. One of the professor at Virginia Tech gave his life by blocking the classroom door with his own body to save his students.

So *what makes Jesus the Good Shepherd*? Is it because He does these things better than all the rest? Or for more people than all the rest? Is it because He provides all these people for us, and works through them for us?

All of that’s true . . . but none of it is the answer.

For the answer is simply this: Jesus is the *Good Shepherd*, because He is the One, the only One, who can make us good and give us the *good life*. He is the Good Shepherd because He is the shepherd who is and does good.

Now, I have to explain what I mean by that, because usually when we use the word good we mean as the opposite of bad. And it's a term open to much interpretation – especially in our day and age when there are varying degrees of good, when what's good for me may not be good for you, and so *good is in the eye of the beholder*.

That's not what I mean by good, for that's not what the Scriptures mean by *good*.

Good, rather, is what the world was before sin, when *God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.* (Gen 1:31) Good is a world created in perfect harmony. Good is right knowledge of God. Good is life unaffected by disease, uninterrupted by death, untouched by tragedy, and unstained by selfishness. Good is God's plan. The way it should be, but no longer is.

And so it is to restore this *good life* in us – this is what Jesus has come to do. All the other people in our lives who “shepherd” us – who care for us, love us, protect us, provide for us, look out for us, and so much else – they can *sustain* the life that we have, they can *improve* our life, and they may even be able to *lengthen* this life, but they cannot *give* us the life that we lack. For this there is only One. The Creator who made all things good has now come to “good” it again – to re-create His broken and fallen world.

And so the Good Shepherd *does* good and *gives* good – healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, raising the dead. Restoring creation. But these things not as an end in themselves, simply to improve our lot in life here and now, and make us healthy, wealthy, and wise – but as signs of the “greater gooding” that the Good Shepherd has come to do. The good of both body *and* soul. The good for both this life *and* the next. The good of the forgiveness of sins. Giving us the *good life*.

Now before we go on: *a warning*. Like St. Paul warned the Ephesian pastors in the reading we heard from Acts: that *fierce wolves would come in after him and speak twisted things* – twisting his words to *deceive us and mislead us into false belief, despair, and other*

great shame and vice. (Small Catechism, Explanation to the Sixth Petition) And indeed, this is what has happened to our understanding of what is meant by *the good life* that Jesus has come to give us. And in two ways:

First, there are those who hear these words – *the good life* – and think only of pleasure and ease, of indulgence and getting everything I want. That the good life means pleasuring myself to death, freedom from responsibility, and Jesus as “the great Pez dispenser in the sky,” giving us all the candy and riches of this world that we can desire. Catering to my every wish and whim. TV commercials encourage this; some TV preachers preach this; and it’s exactly what our Old Adam wants to hear. *But this is twisting God’s Word.*

But **second**, there are those who hear these words – *the good life* – and hear them in exactly the opposite way: that this is something I have to do. Being a Christian means I have to live a good life. I *have* to live up to a certain standard. I *have* to do good. I *have* to be good. Good is as good does. *But this too is a twisting of God’s Word.*

For both of these things are the very opposite of the good life. The first is called *license*, and second is called *legalism*. The **first** is not the good life – it is what *destroyed* the good life in Eden! When Adam decided to indulge, and eat the forbidden fruit, and do what ought not be done. And when *we* indulge, and eat the forbidden fruits of this life, and do what ought not be done – we are not living the good life, but dying. Just look around. Families dying, relationships dying, cultures dying . . . But the **second** is not the good life either! Because no matter how hard we try, we cannot fix a dying world. We cannot be the good we need. For this there is only One.

And so into *this world* then comes our Saviour Jesus, the Good Shepherd. To work a different work. To give us not the fullness of this dying life, but to give us the fullness of Himself and His life. The *real* good life. To forgive our sins and give us a *new* life. Not one or the other – forgiveness without new life (which leads to license), or new life without forgiveness (which leads to legalism) – but *both* forgiveness *and* new life. Both grace and gift.

And so into *your life* then comes your Saviour Jesus, the Good Shepherd. To work

this different work. This new work. This *good* work. That His dying and rising be *your* forgiveness, *your* life, and *your* salvation. That in Holy Baptism you be joined to Him and His cross, the old man in you slain, and a new man be raised to life. That in Holy Communion the new man in you be fed with the very body and blood of your Good Shepherd, who gave His life **for you** and now puts His life **in you**. And that in Holy Absolution, this dying and rising with Christ take place every day. And all this that His death and atonement for your sins, and His resurrection and life, be a *present* reality for you. The gift of new life, the gift of the *good* life, even now.

This is why the Gospel is called the “Good” News. This is why the works that we do are called “good” works. And this is why Jesus is our “Good” Shepherd. Not just because the Gospel is better news than other news, or our good works are better works than other works, or our Good Shepherd a better shepherd than other shepherds. For while all that may be true, it is much more than that! It is that they are all Easter good. New life good. Resurrection good. New creation good. Because it was not only in the beginning that God saw all that He had made, and it was very good . . . but also now in Christ, everything is again very good.

And so too now *your* life. Your life *is* the good life. Filled with good works, filled with forgiveness, filled with love, for you are filled with Christ and the fullness of His life. It is who you are. And so you hear His voice, and you follow. He gives you eternal life, and though you will one day *die*, you will never *perish*. For no one is able to snatch you out of His hand. For your Good Shepherd, who is greater than all, has made you His own. And how *good* it is to be in His flock. Very good. Easter good!

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 faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.