

29 April 2012
Easter 4 - Good Shepherd Sunday

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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"The I Am, The Good Shepherd"
Text: John 10:11-18 (Acts 4:1-12)

Alleluia! Christ is risen! [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!] Alleluia!

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

I am the Good Shepherd, Jesus says.

Take note of the definite article there. THE Good Shepherd. There is only one. Jesus is not A Good Shepherd - one among many to choose from. He is the only one. Or as Peter testified to the rulers at Jerusalem: ***there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.***

Not that there aren't others to follow - there are. There is a great multitude of people and movements and gurus in the world, all telling us what is good, what we should do, where we should go, how we should act, what we should believe, and wanting us to follow. There are lots of shepherds we *could* follow. But they are not *good* shepherds.

Now that sounds judgmental. How could I say they're not good people? Well, I didn't say that. I do not think that many of them, or most of them, set out to be nefarious or to do harm, though some do. Some want only to fleece the sheep and take advantage of them for their own good. But many, or most, want to be good, I think. It's just that they don't know what good is. There is only one who truly does. Only one who is truly good. For there is only one God, who knows all.

Remember the story in the Gospel (Mark 10:17ff) where a rich young man comes up to Jesus and calls Him "Good Teacher." The young man meant it as flattery, but He has said something He doesn't realize. *No one is good except God alone*, Jesus replies. Notice that He doesn't say the young man is wrong! Jesus wants Him to see that what He said was true much more deeply than He realized. For Jesus was, in fact, the Good Teacher, for He was the Good one, God Himself, in flesh and blood. And then Jesus goes on to be good to this young man, to be the Good Shepherd to him, which in this case meant showing him his sinful heart and that he loved his wealth more than God. The Good Shepherd knew that's what this rich young man needed,

even though to the rich young man, these words didn't seem good at all, and he went away - at least for the moment - filled with sorrow.

And so it is with you and I. Our Good Shepherd gives what is good all the time. Even when it may not seem very good to us. Other shepherds - even well-intentioned ones - do not know what we need like the Good Shepherd does. He knows when you need care and when you need discipline. When you need to be carried and when you need to struggle a bit to get stronger. When you need to rest and when you need to be exercised. When you need comfort and when you need to be challenged. When you need the rod and when you need the staff. He knows all these things for He created you. ***I know my own***, He says. Yes, He knows you better than you know yourself.

And my own know me, He says. Which means at those times when you think He is giving you more than you can handle, or you think that it's just not the right time, or the pasture you're in right now doesn't seem green at all - faith knows our Shepherd and that He is Good, in all His work and all His ways, all the time.

But it is at those times when faith is tested, and you are tempted to follow other shepherds, to things that seem better, or ways that seems easier, and dine in pastures that seem greener. And sometimes you do. Tasting the delights of sin, drinking in false teachings, and thinking that this is good; this is the pleasure and ease your Shepherd should have been giving you all along . . . *not realizing the danger*. That these pastures of sin and false teaching are not good, but deadly.

But even then your Good Shepherd is good and comes for His wandering sheep. He is the Shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep in safety to go after the one in danger (Matt 18:12). He is the Shepherd promised by the prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel who would not abandon His sheep in need. He is the Shepherd whose care we hear from David in the 23rd psalm. You may not know how your sin is killing you, the false teachings deceiving you, and the beast of evil plotting against you - but He does. He knows the wolf. And so He comes for you, your Good Shepherd. To rescue you from the danger.

I am the Good Shepherd, Jesus says. Yes, Jesus is the Good one, our God, who has come in flesh and blood, to rescue us. That's not just *one* of the things our Good Shepherd does - it is the thing, the main thing, and everything else flows from that. For had Jesus not come to take on the satanic wolf and rescue us from his deadly teeth, everything else He does for us - all His care and feeding - would be useless. No, *even worse*: it would simply be fattening us up for the wolf. And what good would that be?

And so the Son of God came to stand between us and the wolf. He came in our

flesh and blood, the God-man, to stand between the wolf and us and say: *OK, Mr. Wolf. If you want to devour them, you must devour me first.* Jesus would not run from the wolf, but as we heard during Holy Week, faced his fangs and laid down His life for His sheep. *Willingly.* That by being devoured by sin and death, He would devour them in His resurrection. And so, as Jesus said, ***He laid down His life and then took it up again.*** Only God has such power over life and death, and Jesus, the truly Good Shepherd, used that power for you.

And He lifted you up and rescued you in that victory, His victory, over sin and death *when you were baptized.* Before you were dead in your trespasses and sins, but now you have been raised in His forgiveness and life. To live no longer under the hungry gaze of the satanic wolf, but now under the loving and caring watch of the Good Shepherd. To feed on the poison of sin and lies no longer, but to eat the good food of His Word and truth. And to live in peace, knowing that your Good Shepherd who went through death to life again, cannot die again. He has conquered death. And so He is your Shepherd who will care for you not just now, but forever.

And truly He does. Though the grass may not seem quite as green as you want it, though the waters be not as quiet as you hope, though the valley of the shadow of death look very dark and long and fearsome, the voice of your Good Shepherd will never mislead you or deceive you, and He will never give you anything less than good. He cannot. For in all that He gives you, He gives you Himself. All that He created is good, and so all that He gives is good.

I am the Good Shepherd, Jesus says.

I am. That's the divine name God revealed to Moses at the burning bush. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is the *unchangable* God. Not the one who *was* or the one who *will be* - but the ***I am***; the one who always is, and is always the same. Unchangable, reliable, consistent. The God of creation, the God who led His people out of their slavery in Egypt, the God who gave them the land promised to Abraham and a home, who came in the flesh, who died on the cross, who rose from the dead, and who is coming again at the end of all things. The ***I am*** - the ***Good Shepherd*** - Jesus - one and the same. Caring for you and working for you all the time.

That's what Peter confessed in the reading from Acts. *We didn't do this,* he said; heal a crippled man. It was Jesus, the Good Shepherd, working and being a Good Shepherd still. And in all the apostles did - forgiving, healing, caring, preaching, baptizing, giving the Lord's Supper - it was not them, not really. But the Good Shepherd, working through them.

And that is true today, through pastors who teach and preach and baptize and

forgive and give the Lord's Supper. All this is not them, not really. But the Good Shepherd, working through them, for you. And He is using you too, to do good, in all your vocations. In your families, at school or work, at home or away. The Good Shepherd, working still. Watering, protecting, feeding, sheltering, rescuing, and giving peace.

You may not even realize all that He is doing and providing, all the dangers that *don't* come upon you because of His protection and care. But that's why it's good to be a sheep under this Good Shepherd. Because He knows. He is working, and we are the happy recipients. In sickness and in health, for better or for worse, even when death - suddenly or slowly - draws near. We change and the world changes and the threats and temptations change - but the Good Shepherd does not change. He has given you life, He has conquered death, He has forgiven your sins, and He has promised you resurrection to life everlasting.

There's only one Shepherd who can do all that. The Good one.

For Christ is risen! [He is risen indeed!] Alleluia!

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.