

21 April 2013
Easter 4: Good Shepherd Sunday

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Forgiveness and Life in Your Good Shepherd”

Text: Psalm 23; John 10:22-30; Revelation 7:9-17; Acts 20:17-35

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.

You never know where the valley of the shadow of death is going to show up. We expect it in hospital rooms, but not alongside marathon routes, in white powder in letters, or explosions in your neighborhood. We expect it for those who are old, but not for those who are young. We expect it for those who are terminally ill, but not for those who are healthy. But in all these places, in all these ways, and to all these people - and more - it comes. Satan comes to deal death, to grimly reap the wages of sin, and he doesn't care who, he doesn't care how, and he doesn't care when or where. He will enjoy and savor his feast, and if it causes great grief and shock, well that's just the icing on the cake.

But wherever the valley of the shadow of death is, **there is also our Good Shepherd**. For He entered the valley of the shadow of death and came out alive on the other side. The only one who has done so. And so He is able to lead us through the valley too. Wherever it comes, whenever it comes, however it comes, you will not be alone. You have a Good Shepherd in life, but even more importantly, you have a Good Shepherd in death. For His care is not just for a time, not just for this life, but for eternity.

That's what we're celebrating this Easter season. Our Lord Jesus Christ is risen from the dead - the wages of sin have been paid, the grip of death and the grave have been broken, and the valley of the shadow of death has been conquered. In laying down His life for you on the cross, Jesus has provided you a way to life, that joining you in your death, you join Him in His resurrection.

And the reading we heard from Revelation confirms this outcome, that it is not Jesus alone who comes out of the valley of death, but **a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages . . .** [all who] **have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb**. And in that great multitude John saw his brother apostles, who had all been taken suddenly and tragically; martyred and killed in horrible ways. In that multitude are

those early Christians who had been used as food for hungry lions, burned alive for sport, or had their heads removed from their shoulders. In that great multitude are those who lived to a ripe old age and those taken too soon; the rich and the poor, the well-known and the unknown. And more recently, added to their number have been the many Christians slaughtered in hatred in Muslim lands, and maybe even one or more from Boston or Texas this week. ***These are the ones, John is told, coming out of the great tribulation.*** The ones who have come through the valley of the shadow of death, and are now at rest and peace.

For we have a Good Shepherd, and this is what He has promised us: ***I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.*** Though we die, we will not perish. And though we may be snatched from our loved ones in this world, no one will snatch us out of our Saviour's hand. For our Good Shepherd is no mere man, and His Church is no mere club. The one who has come to save us and care for us is the all-powerful, all-knowing, all-present God Himself. The Son of God born in human flesh, chosen not in time but before time, anointed not with oil but with the Holy Spirit, and come not to rescue us from mere earthly enemies, but spiritual powers who would do us eternal harm. Jesus is the original "first responder" who came with His promise of forgiveness and life after Satan had set off the bomb of sin to destroy our world.

Those pictures that came out of Boston and Texas this week, and from countless other places before them . . . I often wonder that if we could look at our world spiritually, if we could look past the physical and see the spiritual reality, if that's not what the whole world would look like. In chaos, in ruins, in devastation, because of sin, death, and the devil. And that not into a nice, organized, got-it-together world, but into exactly such chaos and death came our Saviour. To rescue us, to pull us from the wreckage, and give us life. The Good Shepherd calling out to His sheep, and His voice - falling upon the ears of those buried under rubble of sin - the most wonderful thing that could ever be heard. Calling out to us life and hope.

The apostle Paul knew well such spiritual chaos. He *caused* it among the Christians with his zealous persecution campaign. He *received* it, too, after the Good Shepherd reached out and rescued him and he began proclaiming Jesus. And so he warns the pastors in Ephesus (as we heard in the reading from Acts) about this. Don't be fooled by appearances. Don't be fooled by lulls in the fighting. Don't be fooled into distraction. ***Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.***

Notice that Paul points out two sources of this spiritual chaos. **First** are *those who will come from without, like fierce wolves*. This is persecution and trouble that can be seen and felt, to scatter the flock in fear and doubt, to cause us to wonder where the care of our Good Shepherd is and maybe to doubt whether He is really good or not. But the **second**, and more deadly, are *those who come from within the church, men speaking twisted things*, to draw the faithful away from the Word of truth and so away from their Good Shepherd. These are more dangerous because what they say and do may sound and look good and successful, yet be filled with the deadly poison of false doctrine, twisting the Word of God and causing devastation that cannot be seen and felt until it is too late.

Don't be fooled, Paul says. Which is a good warning for us today as well. When sin comes crashing down on you; when the siren song of "you're okay, we're all okay" religion starts to tickle your ears and then soothe your ears. Because it does *sound* good. Things like: *we're strong together, we can get through this together*. Now, in a worldly sense, in a national sense, that may very well be true and even helpful. But when that message seeps and creeps and makes its way into the spiritual, it's deadly. For if and when we start thinking we can make it through the valley of the shadow of death without Jesus and apart from Jesus, because *we're united*, because *we're strong, the valley has won*.

For when the valley of the shadow of death rears its ugly head, there's only one unity that matters - and that is our unity with Christ. Which is why anything that does not testify to all people - as Paul proclaimed - ***repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ*** is not the voice of your Good Shepherd.

For your Good Shepherd knows not just the physical but the spiritual chaos and ruin that we cannot always see. That's why, for example, when folks were brought to Jesus for healing, Jesus often looks at them and first says: *you're sins are forgiven*. He sees chaos and ruin and knows what is needed to save. And it's what you need, and it's what I need, and it's what the world needs. We may think we need a lot of things, and there are a lot of things important in this world and life. But none more important than this: *the forgiveness of sins and unity with Christ*. For when you have that, the valley cannot win. Wherever, whenever, however it rears its ugly head, it cannot win.

That's why we rejoice in Baptism - there is forgiveness of sins and unity with Christ. That's why we rejoice in Absolution - there is forgiveness of sins and unity with Christ. That's why we rejoice in the Supper - there is forgiveness of sins and unity with Christ. That's why we rejoice in the truth of the Scriptures - there is forgiveness of sins and unity with Christ. In all these ways, through all these means, the voice of our Good Shepherd calls out, and His hand reaches out, to save. To grab those whose lives have been buried under the rubble of sin and give them life again. The

rubble we may not always see, but which is always there.

That's why during His earthly ministry, when all those people ran up to Jesus and begged Him for help - I'll bet at least half the time their neighbors who saw them thought: *I didn't even know he was having troubles. I didn't even know she was sick. They looked so good. They looked like they had their life together.* And maybe that describes you. Maybe others don't know the sin, don't know the troubles, don't know the pain, don't know all the rubble *you're* trapped under, and we've become very good at hiding it and making it look like we've got it all together.

But know this: *you're not alone.* And I mean that in two ways. You're not alone, **first of all**, because everyone else here today has problems too. Don't be fooled by their appearance. There's just as much spiritual rubble in here as there is out there. But this not-aloneness, this kind of unity, is not the source of your strength or your help. I can't save you from the rubble I'm trapped under too. But you're not alone, **second of all**, because your Good Shepherd is here for you. Here with His forgiveness, here with His resurrected-from-the-rubble life, here with His victory. And He is your strength and your help, and He's not letting you go.

I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.

That's what it means to have a Good Shepherd. For there are wolves without and within. There is rubble we have heaped upon others and rubble that we've caused ourselves. There are turns in life and surprises coming that we cannot even imagine right now. It won't always be easy. But through it all, through forgiveness and unity with Christ, the valley cannot win. In forgiveness and unity with Christ, we have what we need the most. And with forgiveness and unity with Christ, though will die, we will never perish.

This Sunday proclaims: ***This Lord is your Shepherd***, for Christ is risen! [*He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*] 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.