

12 May 2019
Easter 4 / Good Shepherd Sunday

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“A Washed Flock”

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

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.

What does it mean to have a Good Shepherd?

Seems like a simple question. But what would you say? How would you answer that question?

For most, I think, the answer would be that Jesus is watching over you. That He is feeding you, protecting you, guiding you. That He is making sure you have all that you need. And that answer would not be wrong. A shepherd who does those things is certainly a good shepherd.

But it is more than that. For you have not only *a* good shepherd, but *the* Good Shepherd. The one and only. And so there is something that sets Him apart from all others. And so He is not just not a bad shepherd, or even better than most. But when you have the Good Shepherd - or maybe better to say, when He has you, in his flock, it means this: that you will be one of *the ones coming out of the great tribulation*.

That's what we heard in the reading from Revelation today, of the great multitude around the throne of God in heaven. *These are the ones*, we are told, *coming* - a continuous process, like a parade; it's already started but not yet finished - *coming out of the great tribulation*. Coming out of great trial and trouble.

So that's good news, right? That a great multitude has come out of that, and still is. That the tribulation did not win. That it did not engulf and consume the Shepherd's sheep. It tried. Or maybe better to say, the evil one behind it all, tried, but did not win. The Shepherd won. That's what we're celebrating this whole Easter season. Our Good Shepherd's great victory over the evil one, over our sin and death, over hell and the grave. For *Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!* Right?

But it's important today, I think, to go a little deeper, and think about this a little more. To think: *what is it for you?* What is the tribulation, the trial and trouble, you need your

Good Shepherd to get you through? What is the answer you are thinking in your mind right now?

If you think the answer to that question (or one of the answers) is disease, then what happens when the disease wins? When cancer or Alzheimer's or stroke or whatever, takes my love one away? Was your Shepherd, then, not a very good one?

Or maybe you were thinking of financial troubles, or relationship and family troubles, or unemployment, or some other kinds of hardship. Do those things coming, and maybe remaining in your life, mean that your Good Shepherd isn't watching out for you?

These things, and many more, are certainly tribulations. But what makes them so is not the fact *that* they happen, but *what happens* when they happen. That the evil one uses them to try to rob you of your faith. To stop unbelievers from believing, and to make believers believe no more. To make you think that your Good Shepherd really doesn't care about you; that He, in fact, hates you; that He isn't helping you, and *won't* help you. His love is a myth, a fiction. Because, see? Doesn't a Good Shepherd means a good life, so if your life is not good (in your estimation at least), then . . . And if people who don't believe have good lives (in your estimation, at least), then . . .

Now let's go a little deeper. If tribulation are those things in your life trying to rob you of your faith, then that list should include not just troubles or hardships - but things we might consider good, too. Pleasant and pleasurable. Sexual temptations. A good job, but one that keeps you away from church. Teachings and so-called truths in the world that cause you to doubt or disbelieve the teachings and truths of God's Word. Things that the world says are good, and that maybe even seem good to us, but God and His Word say no, not good. And your faith weakens and wavers . . .

It's hard being a Christian. It's hard being a sheep or a lamb in the Good Shepherd's flock. As St. Paul told the Ephesians pastors, in the first reading we heard today, from the book of Acts: ***I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.*** And there's no shortage of wolves, then or now.

But that's what makes the words we heard today so important, and so precious. ***These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation.*** They survived! But *how* they did is just as important as that they did. And here's how: ***They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.*** So the key to surviving and coming out of the great tribulation is not being spared either hardship or pleasure - that would be a rather dull and uneventful life! But in the forgiveness of our sins. That when these come, when trials and troubles come and we doubt our Shepherd's love, we have forgiveness for that. And when the pleasures and seductions of life come and we fall for them, we have the blood of the Lamb for that, too. For the ones coming out are not the strongest, the bravest, the most steadfast, or the most faithful, **but the washed.** The ones who got dirty, who got

bloody, who got beat up, who got trampled, but were *washed* by the blood of the Lamb.

Which means blood that didn't stay in the Lamb, but poured forth from Him. Just as water in the pipes won't clean your dishes, so the blood that stays in the Lamb won't cleanse you! But His blood shed for you, His blood that poured out of the wounds on His head, His shoulders, His back, His hands and feet, His side, that's blood that doesn't stain, but washes away the stains of sin - that washes away the unbelief of doubt, the unbelief of chasing after pleasure, and every other kind of sin. ***These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation*** because they have washed, they are washed, in this blood.

Which is the amazing thing about this Sunday, Good Shepherd Sunday - that the Good Shepherd isn't the Good Shepherd just because He's almighty and brave, but because He becomes the Lamb of God who put Himself into the wolf's jaws to be devoured in your place. But this too: the Lamb who is thus devoured then rises from the dead to be your forever Shepherd. That's what we heard from Revelation. Last week talked about the Lamb who looked as if it had been slain, for it had. But it was no longer. And today we heard that this Lamb is on the throne of God, because this Lamb is God. The Son of God. The Shepherd who became a Lamb, and the Lamb who became the Shepherd. The Good one.

My sheep hear my voice, He said; this Shepherd-Lamb, Lamb-Shepherd said. ***And I know them, and they follow me.***

And you have heard His voice. That's why you're here. And to hear it again. To be washed again. From the doubt you had this week. From the temptations you have fallen for this week. To wash your robes and make them white in the blood of the Lamb, here for you. From the very first words you heard today, the Invocation, which don't just tell us who we are gathered here before, but which remind you ***I am baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit***. I am washed in the blood of the Lamb . . . From these very first words, to the words you hear shortly after that: *I forgive you all your sins*, to the word of the sermon which proclaim this Lamb to you, to the Body and Blood of the Lamb put into your mouth. From first to last, beginning to end, you are being washed, forgiven, joining the parade of ***the ones coming out of the great tribulation***.

That is what it means to have a Good Shepherd. Not just one who is good, not bad, or one who is better than most. The Good Shepherd is the Gospel Shepherd. The Good Shepherd is the dying Shepherd. The Good Shepherd is the one who, risen from the dead, is a Good Shepherd forever. So that when He says ***no one will snatch them out of my hand***, He means it. No one. Ever. In life or in death. You have a Good Shepherd who is greater than all. Greater than all the evil hell can throw at you. Greater than all the seductions the world can heap up before your eyes. Greater than your doubts and fears, greater than your

sin and despair.

He won't make you stay here in His flock, in His fold, though. You can get up, walk out that door, and never come back. But stay, come back, repent, and all His promises are here for you. His washing is here for you. His Body and Blood are here for you. His love is here for you.

And then when you get up and walk out those doors, it is not to leave Him, but Him going with you, out into the world with that same love and forgiveness for others. For the dirty, the bloody, the needy, the downtrodden. For those in the seats next to you, in your home, and next door. That they may hear the truth of this Shepherd, the voice of their Shepherd, from your mouth, and have hope. For life now, and life forever. For you are, even now, even in this life, coming out of the great tribulation, following your Good Shepherd, being carried by Him, from life, through death, to life again.

Seems to me, that's a Shepherd worth having. A good one.

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.