

22 April 2018
Easter 4 - Good Shepherd Sunday

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church

Jesu Juva

“Death, Sin - You Have a Problem”

Text: Acts 4:1-12; John 10:11-18; 1 John 3:16-24; Psalm 23

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.

Cain had a problem with his brother Abel. Abel's offering was acceptable and his was not. So Cain's solution? Kill Abel.

Esau had a problem with his brother Jacob. Jacob had stolen both his birthright and his blessing and he was mad. So Esau's solution? Kill Jacob . . . though Jacob fled before he could do it.

Joseph's brothers had a problem with him. He was their father's favorite and they were jealous. So their solution? Kill Joseph. They wound up selling him into slavery instead, but their first thought was to kill him.

Pharaoh had a problem with the people of Israel. There were too many of them. So Pharaoh's solution? Kill them. Kill all the male babies born to Israel. Throw them into the Nile.

King Saul had a problem with a young upstart named David - people were talking about him and honoring him more. So King Saul's solution? Try to kill David.

Not too long later, David had a problem because of the affair he had with his neighbor's wife. She was pregnant and David needed to cover that up. So David's solution? Kill her husband, Uriah.

You're starting to hear a theme here, I think. Yes?

Even today this happens. One country has a problem with another country, so what sometimes happens? What's the solution? They assassinate that country's leader.

And while I could go on naming many more examples - which are even now probably running through your heads - here's the real question I want to ask: *What about you?*

Have you ever thought: *If only this person would go away, my life would be so much better.* And so maybe instead of a gun or a knife, you pulled out your words and stabbed them repeatedly with your criticism, or you threw them under the bus, or you did a little character assassination. Notice how even our cliches incorporate the idea of death? There's a reason for that. Because that's what we're trying to do, really, isn't it? Just respectably.

But it doesn't work. All those people I mentioned, they thought death would solve their problem, but it didn't. And you know who else found that out? The Jewish leaders. They had a problem with Jesus. The people liked Him and were following Him and they were losing control and losing influence. So, naturally, what did they think? What was the solution they came up with? Kill Jesus. And they did. All it took was a little arm-twisting to convince Pilate to lift Him up on a cross. And when Jesus breathed His last, they breathed a sigh of relief. Problem solved.

Except it wasn't. Sure, three days later there was the rumor going around that Jesus had risen from the dead - but that's all it was: a rumor. They could deal with that. But now, a couple of months later, they had a real problem: His disciples. As we heard in the reading from Acts, they were running around healing people in Jesus' name. They were proclaiming Him risen from the dead whenever they had the chance. And they wouldn't shut up! And if it were just them, just twelve kooks, who cares? But it wasn't. *Thousands* heard and believed. So now they had a problem.

So what do you think they turned to as the solution to this problem? Death, of course. They had the disciples arrested and stand before the Council, *just like we did with Jesus* . . . to send a message: they were going to be next . . .

But it didn't work. Because they didn't count on this: **the disciples were no longer afraid to die.** They had seen Jesus, heard Jesus, touched Jesus risen from the dead. They had a Good Shepherd who wasn't dead but alive, and was even now caring for them and watching over them. So they were bold, unstoppable. And without the threat of death, what power did the Jewish leaders have? So they punished them, beat them up a little, and told them to be quiet - to stop talking about Jesus.

Which is what many are saying to us today. Stop talking about Jesus. Actually, you *can* talk about Jesus . . . as long as its not the Jesus who says He's the only way to the Father. As long as it's not the Jesus who calls sin sin. As long as it's the Jesus who's nice, and doesn't care if people don't believe in Him, and who wouldn't do anything to make anyone feel bad. That Jesus is okay. But any other Jesus? No. *Or else.*

And we've seen some of the *or else.* In our country, Christian business owners put out of business or hauled into court. Judges have lost their positions. In other countries, Christians are slaughtered. Because what's the solution if you have a problem with

someone? Kill them, of course.

But, while it didn't work with the disciples, we must admit it often does with us, doesn't it? How, well, *sheepish* we become in the face of hostility. How timid - like a lamb alone in the woods - when threatened with some kind of persecution. How nervous and worried and fearful of death. How boldly we proclaim *Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! in here . . . but out there . . .*

So how good that we have this Sunday every year - Good Shepherd Sunday - to comfort us and give us hope in the midst of such a world. And to remind us of (1.) who we are and (2.) what that means.

And who you are are, **by virtue of Your baptism**, is a sheep in the Good Shepherd's flock. Through water and the Word He branded you with His cross; you are a sheep of His fold. You are valuable to Him. You matter to Him. You belong to Him.

And who He is, **by virtue of His resurrection**, is a Good Shepherd who is alive and well and caring for you and watching over you. Which doesn't mean nothing bad will ever happen. Sometimes we wander off and get ourselves in trouble, and sometimes the wolf comes rushing into the midst of the flock. But with a Good Shepherd, you are not alone. You have a Shepherd who will go after you. And since this Shepherd is the Son of God Himself and not a hired hand, He is a Shepherd who doesn't flee when the going gets tough; who will put Himself between you and the wolf. Which we know because He *didn't* flee when the going got tough - He *did* put himself between you and the wolf when He went to the cross and He stayed on the cross and He died on the cross. He ***laid down His life for you***, His sheep. And then ***He took it up again***. So you have a Shepherd who is alive and well, and a Shepherd not only for while you live but also for when you die. A Shepherd to take you ***through the valley of the shadow of death*** and safely out the other side.

Which means that while we who live might have a death problem, a Good Shepherd who is risen from the dead means that death now has a life problem! The enemy of our enemy is our Saviour. The death of death means life.

But there's more. Because we who live not only have a *death* problem, we have a *sin* problem. I kind of referred to it before a couple times . . . when to protect ourselves (instead of relying on the protection of our Good Shepherd) we use stabbing words of criticism and hurt others; we throw them under the bus; we assassinate their reputations. And then also when our doubt and lack of trust in our Good Shepherd leads us to act sheepishly instead of boldly; timidly instead of courageously; and fearfully instead of faithfully confident in our Saviour. When we live as if our Good Shepherd did not defeat death but is still dead; when we live as if He is not caring for us and looking out for us, but we have to take care of ourselves. That was not the disciples before the Council! And

it doesn't have to be us. Because Jesus *is* alive, we can do what John wrote in his Epistle, and love others as He has loved us; and lay down our lives for others as He has done for us. Because He has us and we have Him.

But John said something else really important there, in his Epistle, too: that *if our heart condemns us* - that when we see our sin and how we do not live as we should; that when we see our sin and how we don't love as we should; that when we see our sin and how we do not have the faith that we should - *that whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart!* Or in other words, what God says is greater than what our hearts says. And so when your heart condemns you, when your hearts says: Guilty! Failure! Worthless! God's *greater* words says: Not guilty! Absolved! Loved! I forgive you all your sins. You heard it again today. That greater Word. Your Good Shepherd giving you love and life and forgiveness.

So when Jesus said in the Gospel that He *lays down His life for the sheep*, you know who He was talking about? All those people who didn't! All those people I mentioned earlier - Cain, Esau, Joseph's brothers, Pharaoh, King Saul, David, and yes, you. His life for all sinners and every sin. So that whatever your heart is condemning you for, whatever you have done or failed to do, spoken or failed to speak, desired or failed to desire, thought or failed to think - and your heart is nagging you and making you feel like unworthy dirt - not God! He died for all that. He does not condemn you. Your Good Shepherd loves you and has healing for you, strength for you, courage for you, and forgiveness you.

And now He who laid down His life for you and took it up again, lays Himself here on this altar for you to eat and to drink. *Still* giving His life for you. That you be raised up just as He was. To live and to love. To live boldly and act fearlessly. To be a sheep like your Shepherd. A sheep no longer with a death problem, and no longer with a sin problem.

For **Christ is risen!** [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!] **Alleluia!** And you belong to Him.

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.

This sermon inspired by a sermon in Concordia Pulpit Resources, Vol. 25, Part 2 (Feb-May 2015), 34-35.