

26 November 2023
The Last Sunday of the Church Year

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Always the Shepherd of His Sheep”

Text: Matthew 25:31-46; Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; 1 Corinthians 15:20-28

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

A shepherd gathers his sheep. They have been out in the pasture all day, being fed and watered, and now it is time to gather them into the fold for the night. He will count them and make sure none are missing, and if any *are* missing, he will go and find them and bring them back. He will note those who have been peaceful during the day, and those who have been a bit rebellious, a bit unruly, and perhaps need a little extra watching and discipline. He will bind up wounds and check on past injuries to make sure they are healing well. He will clean those who have gotten dirty. He will pay special attention to the little ones, the little lambs, who might need a hand. And once in the fold, he will continue to watch over them. He will defend them against the wolf and other predators, putting his life on the line for them, and comfort them when they get spooked. They know as long as he is there, they are okay, they are safe. They look to him and he looks out for them. Their lives are intertwined. They are his sheep. He knows them, and they know him. They would not be were it not for him and his care and protection.

And that is how it will be on the Last Day.

When Jesus *comes again in glory, and all the angels with Him, and He is sitting on his glorious throne*, what will He do? He will do as He has all along - care for His sheep. He will not stop being our Good Shepherd just because it's the Last Day! **He will be the Shepherd He has been and will continue to be.** His sheep who have been out all day in the world He will gather into the fold of His kingdom. He knows who are His, and He separates them out - the sheep from the goats. He knows those He has fed and nourished. He knows those He has searched for and found. He knows those whose wounds He has healed with His forgiveness. He pays special attention to His little lambs, so dearly loved. He knows the satanic wolf wants to claim His sheep as *his* own, but He will not let him. They are His. For them He has prepared a kingdom, and on the Last Day, He will gather us in, joyously. And His joy will also be their joy. OUR joy.

For He not only knows us; *we know Him*. The one we've been with here every week. The one who has cared for us, watered us; whose voice we know, who has fed us with His Body and Blood. He'll gather us - calling some of us from our graves, and gathering together those still alive - and there will be one flock, one shepherd, in one kingdom, with

no more wolf, forever.

That is how it will be on the Last Day!

The prophet Ezekiel promised us such a shepherd, and Jesus came. He fulfilled all those words, and still is. As I said, Jesus isn't going to turn into a mean, harsh judge just because it's the Last Day, the day of His return! **He's going to be who He was all along.** The one who shepherded Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. The one who shepherded His people out of Egypt, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land. The one who shepherded them through kings like David and Solomon, and who spoke through prophets like Ezekiel. The Good Shepherd who came and put Himself between the satanic wolf and the flock, laid down His life for His sheep, and then rose from the dead and continued to shepherd His flock through the Apostles and His Church.

And that is how it will still be on the Last Day!

And then he will also joyously point out how His sheep were just like Him, though they maybe didn't know it. Like Shepherd, like sheep. But under Him and His care, they (you!) were conformed to His image. Jesus fed the 5,000, and His sheep fed the hungry. Jesus gave living water to a Samaritan woman, and His sheep gave drink to the thirsty. Jesus visited outcasts and foreigners, and His sheep welcomed strangers. Jesus provided for those in need, and His sheep clothed the naked. Jesus healed all manner of diseases and sicknesses, and His sheep visited and cared for the sick, too. Jesus set free those in the prison houses of sin and death, and His sheep visited those in prisons both physical and spiritual. Sheep follow their shepherd. *Monkey see, monkey do* isn't only true for monkeys! We, too, follow the lead of our Shepherd. *And He is delighted.*

You don't even realize it, though. ***Lord, when . . . ?*** they ask. But Jesus sees it and knows it. ***When you did it for them, you did it to me,*** He says. You don't even realize it. But I see it. The care you show each other. The love and support and prayers. Giving your time; your generosity. You don't let others know - you just do it. But word gets out. And it is wonderful to hear and see. Sheep doing sheepy things, *shepherdy* things. Because that's who you are. Your Shepherd knows it, knows you. And on that day, He will gather you and welcome you. ***Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.***

That is how it will be on the Last Day!

Sadly, though, just as sheep do sheepy things, *shepherdy* things, so goats do goaty things. And this not so much what they *did*, but what they *didn't* do. They weren't sheep. They didn't see and know what the Shepherd was doing, so neither did they do those things. They didn't listen to Him and know His voice. And so not part of His flock in *this* life, they are not part of His flock in the *next* life. This is not what the Shepherd wants, what

Jesus wants! He wants all to be in His flock and receive His care now and forever. But those who don't want to be, they will get what they want. Not blessing, but curse. Not feasting, but fire. Not eternal life, but eternal death.

But what makes the difference is not what the sheep DO, but who the sheep ARE. What you do is because of who you are. You aren't sheep because you do sheeepy things, you do sheeepy things because you are sheep of the Good Shepherd. Because you do what He does.

And so you also have the promise that what He does, you will do . . . namely, what Paul wrote to the Corinthians: you will also rise from the dead to life, like your Shepherd. ***For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.*** Those who belong to the Good Shepherd. Jesus is the *firstfruits* - that is, the first of the harvest. The first of much more still to come. That on the Last Day, the Good Shepherd is going to gather His flock and present us to His Father. Every enemy will be destroyed, even death. And we will live in Jesus' flock, in His Father's kingdom. A kingdom without end.

That is how it will be on the Last Day!

Which is why Paul ended so many of his letters, his Epistles, by saying, *Come, Lord Jesus!* It is why the early church so often said, *Come, Lord Jesus!* They weren't afraid of the Last Day, but eagerly looked forward to it. I think we've lost some of that in our world today. Our world where we often look to the future in fear, not confidence. In uncertainty, not faith. It is what happens when sheep take their eyes (or better to say, our ears!) off our Good Shepherd. Without Him, we should fear! Without Him, we do wander off from the flock. Without Him, we are open and susceptible to the wolf and his lies.

So maybe we should get back into that habit! Of praying, *Come, Lord Jesus!* Good training for sheep. Our Shepherd doesn't need us to pray that - *we need it*. To remember. To look forward with joy and anticipation. To remember that our Shepherd who is coming on the Last Day is our Shepherd who is coming even now to us, caring for us here - washing us, speaking to us, feeding us. Forgiving us, mercying us, *lifing* us. Protecting us and providing for us. So that when that Last Day comes - sooner or later - we'll be ready. As ready as those five wise virgins. As ready as those servants who received their master's gifts with joy and used them in joy. And as ready as sheep who are ready to go home to the fold after all day in the field. Ready for our eternal rest with our Shepherd.

That is how it will be on the Last Day!

So Come, Lord Jesus!

*The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want;
He makes me down to lie
In pastures green; He leadeth me
The quiet waters by.*

*Goodness and mercy all my life
Shall surely follow me;
And in God's house forevermore
My dwelling place shall be (LSB #710 vs. 1, 5).*

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.