

26 April 2026  
Easter 4

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“The Good Shepherd vs. the Death Shepherds”

Text: John 10:1-10; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:14 (Introit)

*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.

The question is not whether you will have a shepherd or not, but *which* shepherd?

The question is not whether you will follow another or be your own boss, but *who* will you follow?

Life is not multiple choice. You can do it this way, this way, or this way - whatever you think or like best. Certainly there are choices we make in life, to do this or that. But those choices also come with consequences. Life and death consequences, sooner or later. And contrary to popular belief, like gender, life is binary. There is a way and choices that leads to life and there is a way and choices that lead to death.

Which will it be for you?

Stupid question, right? Except it's not. It's something not just other people, but you are choosing everyday. To help us think about this, consider these words from Psalm 49 (vs. 10-14a):

*For [we see] that even the wise die;  
the fool and the stupid alike must perish  
and leave their wealth to others.  
Their graves are their homes forever,  
their dwelling places to all generations,  
though they called lands by their own names.  
Man in his pomp will not remain;  
he is like the beasts that perish.  
This is the path of those who have foolish confidence;  
yet after them people approve of their boasts.  
Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol;  
death shall be their shepherd.*

Did you hear that? At the end? **Death shall be their shepherd.** So there it is: that's the choice before you today, on this Good Shepherd Sunday. Which will it be for you: *the Good Shepherd or a death shepherd?*

Again, stupid question, right? I mean, who would pick a bad shepherd, a death shepherd? But people are. Because the death shepherd isn't going to call himself that. He's going to call himself the good shepherd and make himself look good, and life-giving, and fun, and logical. Let's look at a few, shall we?

How about first, one of the more popular ones: *yourself*. Follow your own instincts, your own desires. Do what you think is best and best for you. Do what feels good. That's living! But is it? Does that give life? A lot of really smart people make really bad decisions. What feels good has led to record setting levels of drug addiction. And how often have you done something today that tomorrow you regretted? It may have felt good to play that video game instead of studying, but . . .

How about *the wisdom of the world*? Or, let's say, of the *majority* of people in the world. The pooled wisdom of the world. That's got to be a better guide, right? Well, how often have we been told one thing today and then later the exact opposite? What's good for you today is bad for you tomorrow. And has the majority always been right? And not just 55, 60, or 75 percent - in the days of Noah, all but eight people - 99.99 percent or so! - thought one way, and it was the eight who were right, who lived.

*Science!* Follow the science! Well, science can be good, no doubt. Science has done some wonderful things. Science has also caused a lot of death. See Covid. And pain. See transgenderism. And how often has science changed it's conclusions? What we were *so sure* of today, new data proves wrong tomorrow.

How about *social science*? Social science which tells us any lifestyle you choose is good. But look at the evidence all around us. Same-sex relationships cannot create life. Has unbridled sexuality led to fuller and more abundant life? Or an epidemic of broken families, abandoned families, fear, poverty, crime, unwanted babies, and abortion? Has social media brought us life and brought us closer together? Or actually caused us to be more *unsocial* than ever before? And caused more separation, isolation, confusion, and stupid challenges that lead to death?

Well, those things *could* be good and life-giving, we're just doing them wrong. We just need better leaders. This is those who look to *politics* to be their shepherd. . . Do I even need to go there? Look how politics is driving us farther apart, not closer together. And how about this delicious paradox: we're fighting a war to prevent a

future war! Using weapons of death to prevent weapons of death.

And I'm sure you can think of a few more for this list . . .

But how many are following these, looking for life? Thinking that this will make my life better? When the reality and the evidence show exactly the opposite. How many times do we have to keep running head first into the same wall before we realize *that's a stupid thing to do!* That wall called death. That wall we cannot go over, under, around, or through. We've been trying for a very long time now. Thousands of years, or millions or billions if you've bought into the myth of evolution. And we're *still* dying. There is no fountain of youth. No magic potion to make you live forever. No progressing beyond death. In fact, if anything is evolving, it's death! Not life. New ways to die keep cropping up - new diseases, new weapons, new lifestyles, new ways to strip away life.

***Death shall be their shepherd.*** Yeah, when you look around, pretty accurate isn't it?

And so it is into this world, into all this, that Jesus comes and says: ***I am the Good Shepherd***, and ***I am the door***. The door through death to life. And then says, ***I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.***

Pretty bold claim! How do we know we should follow Him? That this is the way we should go? That He is the way of life? How do we know? Well, one very simple fact. The fact that we are proclaiming especially this season: **because His is the only grave that is empty!** Everyone else who says *Follow me* is still in the grave that swallowed them up. Still on the wrong side of the wall named death. *Only Jesus* punched a hole in that wall and passed from death to life. And so to follow Him is to find that way to life. And not *just* life, or a *little* life, but, Jesus says, ***abundant life.*** Lots of life. Overflowing with life.

Because that's the kind of life Jesus is, and has, and gives. Life filled with love and hope and joy and peace and contentment and forgiveness. Life filled with Himself and His Spirit. Life as He created it to be in the beginning, but which we, following our first parents, ***like straying sheep***, have wandered away from.

But Jesus still wants that life for you and has that life for you and so is here with that life for you and has brought you here to give that life to you. Yes, the fact that you are here is the work of your Good Shepherd, who brought you here to restore you and heal you from the disease of sin with His forgiveness, to give you the water of His Word to refresh you with the truth, to wash you clean from the filth and stench of sin in His Baptism, and to feed you with the food of His Body and Blood. That after another week of life-stealing sin, persecution, attacks, doubts, fears, lies, and death,

Jesus is here with His life-giving Spirit. For there is life in no one else. **Jesus is the door** from death to life.

Which makes Him ***the Good Shepherd***. There are lots of death shepherds. Only one Good Shepherd. Only one who can make things good again. Who can make you good again. *Objectively* good, not just what you think is good. Good as in what creation was before sin came into the world. That's the good your Good Shepherd wants for you.

*But is that even possible?* I mean, there is so much sin in us and in our world, is it even possible to restore it *all*? In all people and in a creation falling apart because of sin? We certainly can't do it! But nothing is impossible for God, right? So He will. But as Jesus showed us, the way to that good, the door to that life, is through death and resurrection. So there will be a *new* heavens and a *new* earth, Jesus said (Isaiah 65:17; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1). The old will die and a new will be brought forth. A new creation. Good again. But there must be a new you as well. So you must die and rise with Jesus.

And that begins for you in Baptism. That's where Jesus joins you to Himself, so that you join Him in His death and resurrection and begin to live a new life. A *good* life. But not what the world thinks is good. *God's good*. And as we heard from Peter today, you might suffer for doing that good, for living as the Christian you are. *As He did*. For what did Jesus do to warrant His death? Healing the sick? Casting out demons? Raising the dead? Speaking the Word of God? But, you see, living that good also highlights the bad and the errors that are in the world. And we don't want to admit, confess that of ourselves. That we are sinners. That we haven't been good. That we've gone our own way. You know it. You don't like to do that.

*But that's the good breaking into this sinful world.* You see, that's what the door also does. When Jesus knocked a hole in the wall of death to life, that also enables life to flow into this world of death. And so after His resurrection, Jesus sends back His Spirit of life to give us life, and sends out His apostles to give His life-giving forgiveness and to baptize. To baptize more people into His death and resurrection. That more people pass through death to life already now. That you do. To live a new and good life. A good and godly life. Following the Good Shepherd, not the death shepherd.

*It seems like such an easy choice!* And maybe on paper it is. But in real life it's hard. Because those decisions not to sin and not to follow the crowd and not to do what everyone else is doing and not to do what you want . . . *that's not easy*. Others will think you strange at best, dangerous at worst. Dangerous to them and the way they want to live, and so persecute you. Even if you're not really doing anything against

them and just want good for yourself and for them. Maybe you've had that happen to you. In words of ridicule, in actions at work, some Christians having lawsuits filed against them. Sure doesn't seem like **abundant life** when those things happen to you!

But don't be fooled. Don't be deceived and misled. That's exactly what the devil wants you to think. The devil wants you to think the way of Jesus, the way of life, is actually the way of hardship and death so you'll give up and give in and follow others. The *death shepherds*. Which *promise* life and good and fun . . . but as we considered earlier, cannot deliver in the end. Which many find out too late. That they've been swindled. Robbed of the life they were pursuing.

But Jesus isn't here to rob you of anything, but to give you life. He died for you so you may have life. A brutal death by crucifixion! But He did so to break death and the grave for you, to punch a hole in that wall of death with His resurrection, so there be life for you. And that you not have to wait for that life, He gives it to you now. And yes, living this life in a world of death will be hard. But it is also good. And good trumps hard! Because hard is only for a while. Good will be forever.

So take a look at your life. How've you been? Who have you been following? If you're like me, it's a mixed bag! Some good, some . . . So repent, hear those wonderful words of absolution, remember you are baptized and have passed from death to life in Jesus, and come through that door to the green pasture of His Supper, to eat His Body and drink His Blood and be nourished in the good life. **Abundant life**. Because with Jesus, there is no other kind.

Because *Christ is risen!* **[He is risen indeed! Alleluia!]**  
To life! And so in Him, so are you.

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.