

23 November 2008  
Last Sunday in the Church Year

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“In the Footsteps of the Shepherd”

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

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

The Shepherd knows His sheep; the sheep know their Shepherd.  
He speaks to them; they know His voice.  
He feeds them and washes them; they are satisfied and clean.  
He leads and protects them; they live under His watchful eye.  
He searches for them when they wander, and rescues them from danger; they rest  
in His arms, and lie down in peace.  
It is an intimate relationship, this Shepherd and His sheep.  
A relationship of love.

And as it is now, so it will be on the last day, in the resurrection, at the final  
judgment, when all stand before the Judge.  
For the Judge is our Shepherd.  
The Good Shepherd who knows His sheep now, will know them in the end.  
He separates the sheep who follow Him by faith, from the goats who do not.  
And the voice that we hear then will be the voice we have heard and known all  
along.  
The grace we receive then, the grace we have received all along.  
What will happen on that day will not be a surprise - it is the Good Shepherd  
keeping His Word.  
That all who live in Him now will live in Him forever.  
And that all who do not now, will not forever.

And so we who live under the care of our Good Shepherd now, need not fear the  
last day or the final judgment.  
For the One who is coming is the One who has come, to save us.  
And so He came, born of a virgin; born in a manger; and named Jesus.  
He is the promised Son of David - Ezekiel's "**servant David**" - who came and  
rescued His sheep.  
He felled the Goliath of our sins,  
He crushed the satanic lion who threatens us,  
and He established His kingdom forever.  
And this He did through His death on the cross and His resurrection from the grave.

The Good Shepherd laid down His life for the life of His sheep, giving Himself into the jaws of sin, death, and the devil in our place, that we be not devoured, but live.

And with His resurrection, sin, death, and devil were stripped of all their power, insuring that we live under His care not only now, but forever.

For as St. Paul told us, He is the **“firstfruits”** - the first of the harvest. Not the only, but the first of all who will be raised to eternal life.

And so our Saviour, who kept His Word to come and save us, will also keep His Word to come, raise us from the dust of death, and take us to our heavenly home.

And this Jesus desires for all people.

Note well, that **“the eternal fire [was] prepared for the devil and his angels”** - not for man.

Every man, woman, and child, Jesus wants to be with Him.

He came for all that all might live.

That we might live in His love and forgiveness.

For, in fact, we are the **hungry** ones, to whom Jesus has given daily bread, and then fed with Himself, the bread of life, in His Supper.

We are the **thirsty** ones, for whose bodies Jesus sends rain upon the earth and whose souls have been satisfied with the living water of His Word.

We are the **strangers**, for whom Jesus provides family, friends, and companions, and whom Jesus has welcomed into His house and made members of His family.

We are the **naked**, to whom Jesus provides clothing, shoes, and shelter, and whom He has clothed with His own robe of righteousness in Holy Baptism.

We are the ones **sick** with sin whom Jesus visits as the Great Physician of body and soul.

And we are the ones in the **prison** house of death, set free through the forgiveness and life of Jesus, given to us here.

All this the Good Shepherd does for His sheep.

All this you have received, and continue to receive.

That you might live and not die. That you might live the life of Christ. A life that never ends.

A life that is not just a future thing, but that begins even now.

And that's what Jesus points to in His sheep as evidence of their faith.

This life of His that has begun even now.

They were not His sheep because they did good things, they did good things because they were His sheep.

Sheep following in the footsteps of their Shepherd.

Freely giving what we have freely received.  
Doing for others what our Saviour has done for us.  
Loving, serving, forgiving . . . not in order to be loved, but because we are loved.  
Because we have been changed.  
Changed from sinners to sheep, who love their Shepherd; who love as He loved.  
Feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, clothing the poor, visiting the sick and imprisoned.  
Doing it all for Jesus' sake, for He works in you and through you.  
Doing it all in His name, for He has placed His name on you.  
And doing it all as doing it to Him.  
Loving Him by loving His poor and needy ones, His weak and lowly ones, His little ones of every age. For He does not need your service - but they do. And we will not find Jesus by trying to climb up to Him, but by descending to where He descended for us.  
For was it not among folks like these where Jesus was always to be found?  
And did not Jesus become all these things for us and for our salvation?  
Becoming like us, that we might become like Him.  
And so He was hungry and thirsty.  
He was the stranger and the outcast.  
He was imprisoned and stripped naked.  
He became sick unto death with the sin of the world as He hung upon the cross.  
Becoming like us, to make us like Him.

Do we not see Him among those who need our help?  
Do we pass by uncaring and self-obsessed?  
Then repent, and receive the forgiveness and life of Christ which is here for you, that not only saves you from your sins, but gives you the life of Christ.  
That you live like Him.  
That you live for Him.  
Turning away from your unbelief and our idolatry of the things of this world - which bring us only heartache and death - to live under our Shepherd. Under His care.  
A very Good Shepherd, indeed.

And when the last day comes, at the final judgment, well, perhaps we will be surprised after all.  
Surprised not that we are His children - He promised us that in Holy Baptism.  
Surprised not that we are forgiven - He told us that here every Sunday!  
Surprised not that we have eternal life - He pledged that to us as He placed His very body and blood into our mouths here in His Supper.  
No, of all these things we are sure! They have been sealed with His blood. They are yours, for you are His.

But maybe we will be surprised at what Jesus points to in our lives and commends.

Not the really big, important things you thought you did!  
But all that stuff you forgot.  
All those little things you did in love - feeding, caring, visiting, serving, praying.  
For your family, for friends, for complete and utter strangers.  
Not because you had to, but because the love of Christ compelled you.  
Those things that were no big deal to you, but they are to Jesus.  
He treasures every one.

So do not fear the last day.

For ***“when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, . . .***

***[and] sits on his glorious throne” . . .*** you will see your Shepherd.

The One who has cared for you all along.

The One who knows you, and whose voice you know.

And you will hear those wonderful words: ***“Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”***

And you will. You will enter His rest and take your seat at His table, at the marriage feast of the Lamb in His kingdom, which has no end.

Until then, come and take your place at *this* Table, to receive the forgiveness and life of our Saviour in His body and blood.

That as His sheep we live His life now, and look forward to the feast to come.

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.