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Easter 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Good Shepherd We Need”

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

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.

Do we even need a Good Shepherd anymore? Or a Good Shepherd Sunday? It's kind of old fashioned, don't you think? I mean, who's even *seen* a shepherd these days! Or, some would say, paternalistic - I don't need someone to watch over me, or take care of me, or love me! It's kind of insulting, actually; to think that I do. We've got technology. We've got AI now. *I can love me better than you can* anyway, a popular song proudly proclaims these days. Don't put me in your box . . . or your pasture. I'm free. *It's my life and I'll do what I want*. That's from a song from when I was growing up! So if the Church wants to be relevant, maybe Good Shepherd Sunday is one of those things that has to go. Thank you, but you're not really needed anymore. Time to put the Good Shepherd out to pasture.

But do sheep make good shepherds? Or are we being duped? Because that happens a lot these days, doesn't it? That's why people are afraid to open emails, afraid to answer the phone, afraid to open the front door. Because who is that email really from? Who is calling me? Who is that person at my door? Is that voice on the phone a deep fake? That person at the door a scammer? That email a virus-carrying, malware-infested, worm-delivering trojan horse? So now we keep our doors bolted, we have caller ID, we subscribe to anti-virus software, and it's still not enough. So, okay, maybe *some* shepherding would be okay. Maybe I could use *some* help. But not too much! I still want to be free! To do what I want.

So, who then? Who should be my shepherd? But just when I want one, or need one - not *all* the time! Maybe the government. They'll protect, they'll provide, they'll help me when I need it and let me be when I don't, right? But is the government a good shepherd? What if the people *in* the government aren't good? Oh, but that would never happen, would it? They would never take things too far, or get selfish, or abuse their power. I mean, that *could* happen, I guess. That *used* to happen. Tyrants, dictators, empires, crusades, corruption, world wars - but that doesn't happen anymore, right? Well, okay, maybe government's not the answer. Not in an imperfect pasture.

And it is imperfect. That's one thing we can all agree on! Although we would disagree about *how* imperfect, I think. How far gone our world is. And even what would make this world perfect. Lots of different opinions about that. So, who do you listen to? How do you decide? Because sometimes, you know, people who say they will help you are really only helping themselves. People who seem to care about you really only care above themselves. We call them **predators**. And the thing about predators is that they never look like predators. If they did, you'd know what they were up to and stay away from them! Duh! So predators have to disguise themselves. We used to say they were a wolf in sheep's clothing. But we don't need a Good Shepherd, right? So . . . so today we called them *identity thieves*. They take someone else's identity to misrepresent who they are, to make themselves look like someone else, to make themselves look good, and helpful, and honest, and caring, when they're not.

But how do you know? Obviously that's a problem because many keep falling for them. And it's not a new problem. Because the very first identity thief was satan himself. In the Garden. With Adam and Eve. And you know who he pretended to be? A Good Shepherd. He promised our first parents he'd take care of them, give them not only what they needed but what they wanted, to help them, but not too much! So they'd be free! And the world went to hell in an apple basket. And hell filled the world with predators. Not to feed you; to feed on you.

So who can you trust? Or maybe that's not even the question anymore, but now, who can you *tolerate*? Who can we allow in our pasture? How do we know they're not predators? Well, *I'm* not, right? So you have to think like me, you have to be like me, you have to accept me as a sheep, or I'm going to label you, call you, a predator. Then you're going to be forced out. So there's a lot of **pressure** in the pasture, to go along, even if it's not good. Because the alternative . . .

In such a pasture, virtue, vice, right, wrong, aren't even categories anymore. Only in or out. And you don't want to be out, do you? So the latest vice, or perversion, or alternative lifestyle that comes along, you must tolerate, then accept, then encourage, then exalt. Or you're out.

But living like that isn't harmless, it's infectious. It can change you. If you grow up in a pasture like that, it's all you know. It's how you think, it's how you live, maybe even what you begin to **desire**. It's not so bad. They're not so bad. Bad are the people who think it is! They're the predators! We need to be saved from them. The bigots, the phobes, the deniers, the close-minded.

So what do you think would happen to a shepherd who came to such a pasture? To care for the ones they pushed out. To heal the ones who got gored. To carry the ones who were trampled. To bring back the ones who went astray - either on purpose or by accident. To unmask the fakes, the predators. To speak the truth of right and wrong, of

virtue and vice. To save the sheep in this hellish pasture. What would happen to such a shepherd? **He'd be crucified!** So an ordinary shepherd wouldn't take that chance. But a good shepherd would. Because a good shepherd isn't there for himself or his own life, like an ordinary shepherd earning a paycheck. A good shepherd is there for the sheep. Because they need him. Because they can't live without him. Because the danger is too great. Because the **predators**, the **pressures**, and their own **desires** are too much for them. They will be consumed and led astray.

So the Good Shepherd comes and *is thrown out!* He lays down His life for the sheep. Which would be foolish if that's all He did! For what good would come of that? But, of course, He did more. He didn't stay dead. That's what we're celebrating this Easter season. That this Good Shepherd who came and was thrown out, *came back in.* He didn't stay out, where they wanted Him - He rose from the dead *to stay in the pasture* - not to make the pasture perfect and do away with all that's wrong, because then He'd have to do away with us! For when we've played the **predator** and preyed upon others. For when we've **pressured** others. For when we've wandered and followed our own **desires** and wanted to be our own shepherds.

So instead, the Good Shepherd stays in the pasture - this sinful world filled with sinful people - to be the Shepherd we need. You can go eat weeds if you want, but here, He says, is good grass, good food, the **green pastures** of His Word of truth. You can go drink polluted water if you want, but here, He says, are the **still waters** of baptism and forgiveness that revive your soul. Even though **predators** and **pressures** surround us, and our own **desires** tempt us and mislead us, **He is with us** with **His rod and His staff** to protect us, to correct us, and **to comfort us**. His **table**, too, is here, **in the presence of our enemies**, those who hate us and accuse us for not going along with them. And the healing **oil** of His love is here, for when we get gored and trampled and shoved aside.

And He's not leaving. Even if the pasture of the world seems really big and really strong, and He and His flock seem really little and really weak, they killed Him once - He cannot die again. He's here for His sheep. For He is the Good Shepherd. **Because we need one.** We need Him.

And He is your Good Shepherd not just here, but wherever you go. Because you have to go to work, and maybe where you work is filled with weeds and polluted water, and predators, pressures, and temptations. And maybe your school is like that and maybe your neighborhood is like that. And the internet and social media are like that, and maybe your friends are like that. And it's hard. Life in this pasture, this world, isn't and isn't *ever* going to be easy. Don't expect it to be. If they crucified the Good Shepherd, they're not going to like those who live in His flock. So expect to get gored and trampled and shoved aside and called names and rejected and taken advantage of. But also know you have a Good Shepherd not far off, but right here in it with you. Who knows you, who knows what you're going through, and has put you in His flock with others who are also here for

you, who *love not just in word or talk, but in deed and in truth.*

And then this too: in such a pasture, such a world, when others get gored and trampled and shoved aside and called names and rejected and taken advantage of, we know what they're going through and we know where there is help for them. And *who* is here for them. That they too have a Good Shepherd. *Come over here. Green grass, still waters, healing, truth, safety, rest.* And some will. Not all. As we heard, when Peter and the others were saying this and inviting people to the Good Shepherd and His good pasture and flock, many came, many believed, but many were also greatly annoyed and angry. That's just how it is.

But one thing is for sure: **we surely haven't outgrown our need for a Good Shepherd!** We need one now more than ever. The predators, pressures, and temptations aren't going to stop until everything is consumed, until there is nothing left. Our only hope, then, **is in the one who was consumed but rose to life again.** In the one who gives life and can protect and preserve that life. In the one who knows both us, and the predators, pressures, and temptations we face. The one who came as one of us to be with us, and who stays with us. The Good Shepherd we need.

I am the Good Shepherd, Jesus said. Come to the still waters of baptism which give peace and rest to your soul. Come to the green pastures of My Word which feed you with the truth you need. Come to the healing balm of My forgiveness when sin, death, and the devil take a bite out of you and restore your soul. And come to My table, right here, in the midst of your enemies all around, feed on My risen and living Body and Blood for the strength and assurance you need in a dangerous and frightening pasture. Come to Me who came for you. Come to Me who comes to you. And come to Me until I come again for you, and the ***goodness and mercy*** that were here for you ***all the days of your life***, will bring you to ***the house of the Lord***, where you ***shall dwell forever.***

Forever, for Christ, your Good Shepherd 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.