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Easter 4
29 April 2012
Grace-Trinity Lutheran Churches, Wichita
John 10:11-18

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit

Jesus is the Good shepherd.
And we're sure of that because He says so Himself.

But who are the hirelings?
Who are those hired hands that are given care of the sheep,
but who don't own the sheep?

Whoever they are, they're not Christ.
They're not the shepherd.
They're not willing to lay their lives down for the sake of the sheep.

No, the hired hands don't care much for the sheep at all.
They don't know them, their voice sounds strange, and frankly they're just there for the money.

So when a wolf comes, they flee.
When danger arises, so long.
The hired hands won't do you any good when it counts, if you're a sheep.

And what about the wolf?
Who is this wolf that comes with such terror and fear?
Who is it that snatches and scatters the sheep?
Who is such a threat that the hireling won't defend himself or the sheep?

And then who are these sheep?
What do they do?
What *can* they do?
They have no defense, no strength, no power to fight back.
They graze and wander and end up in all sorts of trouble.
They're neither the shepherd nor the wolf nor the hireling—
they're just sheep; so I guess they do whatever sheep do.

The only thing we're sure of in today's Gospel reading, is Jesus.

He is the Good Shepherd.
He owns His sheep.
He calls each by name.
He knows them, and they know Him—
“**just as the Father knows Him, and He knows the Father**” (10:15).

Jesus is the Good Shepherd, but what makes Him good is not what any sheep or wolf or hireling would ever expect!

If we were to imagine a good shepherd,
 we'd imagine a heroic shepherd, a strong and mighty defender of the sheep.
 We'd go to his house and see above his fireplace a few wolf heads on display.
 We'd hear his stories of snatching the sheep out of the jaws of death.
 We'd hear of his wisdom and discernment as a careful shepherd.
 We'd hear his success. His greatness. His power and strength.
 But we'd never hear of His death.
 Perhaps *near* death, to highlight his great victory—
 but never death.

The death of the shepherd is failure.
 It's weakness.
 It's opening the sheep up to all the terror and torment and scattering and snatching that
 the wolf so eagerly desires.

That's at least what we'd tend to think.
 We fear death.
 We're terrified of weakness.
 We do our best to avoid any story of failure, or how we might not have done so well.

But not with Christ.

No, He's the Good Shepherd precisely because it's *not* about His strength and power, or His
 heroic near-death escape.

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep" (10:11).

Jesus is *Good* because He dies for you.
 Because He sacrifices His greatness and His honor and His life *for you*.

***"For this reason the Father loves me,
 because I lay down my life that I may take it up again"*** (10:17).

But how?
 How is His death any good for the sheep?
 How will He protect them?
 How will He feed and guide and shepherd them?

And this is the point of Easter. This is why Easter is more than just a day, but 7 weeks long!
 Because when Jesus rises from the dead, when He *takes His life up again*, He destroys death.

The cross of Christ is the place where Jesus lays His life down.
 He gives Himself over to the enemy, to the Law, to the wolf, to Satan.
 He lets the law and Satan do their worst.

They lash and pierce, they mock and scourge, they crucify Him, and leave Him for dead.

But when the wolf devours this Christ, he eats and drinks in the most unworthy way—
 for he does so without any faith, without any trust that this Christ, this Shepherd has died for him.

And so what would have been a life-giving medicine of immortality,
was in fact the greatest poison.

The wolf who ate this Shepherd took what wasn't his.
He overstepped his reach.
And the result was death, eternal death.
So much for the wolf!

But on the third day, our merciful Father wakened from death the Shepherd of the Sheep.

So now the Shepherd is no longer dead.
He has laid His life down for the sheep, and now He has taken it up again.
The Shepherd lives and the wolf is dead, and there's no need for a hireling.

And now the Shepherd continues to shepherd His sheep by calling out to them.

“The sheep follow Him, for they know His voice” (10:4).

He calls them each by name.
He calls them out from death, out from the grave, out from their sadness and fear and anxiety.
He calls them away from their sin, out of their sickness, and into His green pastures.

They will not thirst, for His cup overflows.
They'll never be hungry, for the bread He gives is the Bread of Life, His own body and blood.

And the sheep, well they just keep on being sheep.
The same old sheep as before.

But now they're *His* sheep, in *His* sheepfold, following *His* voice,
and having nothing to fear.

He has other sheep out there as well,
other sheep that He continues to call,
other sheep that He gathers by His word of the Gospel,
other sheep who need to hear the preaching of forgiveness,
their forgiveness.

All these sheep, those gathered around the Shepherd now, and those still being brought in,
all these sheep make a flock, one flock,
under a shepherd, one Shepherd.
One flock, one Shepherd, One Church, One Savior.

And while we don't know for certain who the hirelings are,
or how the wolves might come to attack,
or even what it means to be a sheep—

we can be sure of one thing:

Jesus is the Good Shepherd of the Sheep, *because He lays His life down for you.*

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit