**Fourth Sunday of Easter**

**May 3, 2020**

**Text—John 10:1-18**

During World War II, in the year 1942, a joint British and American force was able to defeat the German military presence in North Africa. After the Allied victory, Winston Churchill, the prime minister of Great Britain, delivered a speech to the British Parliament in which he said these words: “This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.” That, I think, is exactly where we are in our national fight against COVID-19: the end of the beginning. For the past seven weeks, we have been under some form of shelter-in-place order. We have left our homes much less frequently than we’re used to, and we’ve visited far fewer places. We have not seen many of our friends and loved ones in person in quite some time. Some of us have lost jobs or taken significant financial hits because of the lockdown. And of course, we have not met here at church for any purpose, including Divine Services, since March 15.

Altogether, as a result of this virus, we have so far missed twelve different worship opportunities that we normally would have had during this time of year. We missed seven Sundays (including Palm Sunday and Easter), three Wednesday Lenten services, and Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. During the holiest week of the church year, we were confined to our homes and unable to meet together or receive the Lord’s Supper. As a pastor, this was a tough pill for me to swallow. In my calling as pastor, there is nothing I like better than to preach the Word and administer the Sacrament to this congregation. And for the past seven weeks, I haven’t been able to do that; at least, not the way I’m used to doing it. Preaching to an empty congregation is not nearly the same thing as actually having you all here for Divine Service. Recording the Sunday service on a Thursday afternoon in an empty congregation is not ideal. Recording Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services back-to-back on Wednesday night of Holy Week is not ideal. Recording Easter Sunday service on the morning of Good Friday is not ideal. This has been, without a doubt, the weirdest stretch of my nine years here at Trinity, and I’m sure it has been very weird, and maybe painful, for all of you as well.

But God is good. God is good. And he has showed that to us over the last seven weeks. As far as I know, nobody in our family here at Trinity contracted the coronavirus, which is a great blessing from God. As far as I know, even though some people may have taken financial hits, nobody is in real danger of being unable to support themselves, which is also a great blessing from God. As far as I can tell, our congregational offerings have barely decreased at all, which is a blessing from God and a testament to the dedication of our members. And even as we have been unable to meet together as a congregation, the ministry of the Word has still happened here. Our modern technology has allowed us to record services, Bible studies, and devotions and send them all out to you in your homes. We’ve been able to keep in touch with everyone in the congregation by phone and e-mail. And overall, I believe that we as a church will come out of this with our faith intact, and perhaps even stronger than before. Why would that be? It’s because we follow the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ.

In our Gospel text today, Jesus says those familiar words, “He who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep…The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out…the sheep follow him, for they know his voice…I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and my own know me…and I lay down my life for the sheep.” For me at least, these words have become especially meaningful over the last seven weeks. No matter what is happening to us as a result of this virus, Jesus remains our Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. No matter how scattered we may be and unable to meet together as a congregation, we remain Jesus’ sheep whom he has brought together in his flock. He leads us out to pasture: the eternal pasture of his Father’s kingdom. As Jesus says later in John 10: “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.” Nothing will snatch us out of Jesus’ hands, not the virus, nor financial difficulty, nor isolation, nor political instability: nothing! And he has showed us how good of a shepherd he really is with his protection and provision for us since this whole thing started. He has kept us strong in the true faith and has prevented us from suffering major hardships, and for that we are truly joyous and thankful.

But remember what Winston Churchill said, “This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.” Right now, we are poised to relax the social distancing regulations that we have been abiding by for almost fifty days now. We are preparing to head back out into the world. We are getting ready to go back to work, to see our family and friends again, and possibly to come back to church for Divine Services. We are justifiably excited about this. But we have to remember that things are not going to go back to normal for a while, maybe a long while. We won’t be able to have normal physical contact with people. We will have to continue to responsibly distance ourselves to an extent. Church services here will not look exactly the same as they did before the pandemic. And it’s going to take a long time for the economy to recover from this huge shock that it has received. If we think that this is going to be all over tomorrow, we’re in for a very rude awakening.

And that’s why it’s so important that we continue to remember that Jesus is our Good Shepherd, because only he will be able to shepherd us throughout this entire process of recovery. It’s often obvious during times of trouble that we need to rely on God for support, but when things start to improve, it can be easy for us to get swept up in the busyness of regular life once again. We seem to be on more solid ground, so our perceived need for Jesus to shepherd us gets smaller and smaller. We won’t be watching online sermons and Bible studies as much, because we’ll have time to go do other things. The place of Jesus in our lives may have grown considerably during this time of isolation, but now that it is coming to a partial end, we might once again allow ourselves to be distracted by all the things that used to distract us before. And that would be a terrible mistake on our part. All tragedies or difficulties in our lives serve as God’s call to us to repent and return to him, and that is exactly what many of us have done during this crisis. It would be foolhardy to allow the cares and distractions of this world to ensnare us and draw us away from the stronger relationship that our Lord has built with us. It would be foolish to cling to Jesus only when we need him, and then toss him aside when things start to improve. As Churchill said, this is only the end of the beginning! We still need Jesus to be our Good Shepherd and lead us through the rest of this crisis. We still need him to comfort us in our sorrows, to provide for us when we are lacking, and to give us hope for the future. Just because social distancing restrictions are being relaxed, that doesn’t mean we’re out of the woods and don’t need Jesus anymore. On the contrary, we need him more than ever to help us restart our society as safely and prudently as possible. If we ignore Jesus now, we will be rushing outside with no clear idea of where we’re going and no one to help us when we run into problems. But if we remain strong in our faith, he will remain with us to guide us and help us do what is right in this situation. No matter how much progress we have made in the fight against COVID-19 so far, we still need our Good Shepherd.

And we will always need our Good Shepherd, won’t we? Even after all this coronavirus stuff actually *is* over, and we have some kind of vaccine or other treatment for the disease, we will not stop needing Jesus. We will still be living in this cruel and sinful world, and we will need our Good Shepherd to see us safely through it. There will always be one more crisis, one more disease, one more economic depression, one more war. We will still be facing the assaults of the devil, the world, and our own sinful natures. Without our Good Shepherd, we would be absolutely lost, with no hope of ever finding our way to safety. But thanks be to God, we have a Good Shepherd who not only leads and guides us, but who also lays down his life for us. He made the ultimate sacrifice by dying on the cross and taking all of the sin, sickness, and sorrow of the world upon himself. And after he lay his life down, he took it up again, proving that nothing could defeat him, and that he was able to protect his sheep from everything that would seek to destroy them. In him, we, the sheep, have protection from all the evil forces of this world. In him, we have the hope of an eternal life that will put our lives here to shame. And in him, we have a shepherd who will guide us into all truth and prevent us from falling into spiritual danger. We trust Jesus to give us these blessings just as sheep trust their shepherds. He has seen us safely this far in our lives. How could we not trust him to see us through to the end?

Winston Churchill was basically right when he described the Allied victory in North Africa as “the end of the beginning.” World War II would drag on for three more long, bloody years, and much more suffering and death would occur before it was finally over. The “end of the beginning” was nowhere close to the actual end. And the same could be true of our situation today as well. Nobody really knows what will happen with COVID-19 over the next few months or even years. We don’t know how many more people will be infected, how many more will die, how badly the economy will suffer, or how long we’ll have to continue some measure of social distancing. We just don’t know what the future holds. But there is one thing we do know: that Jesus will be here with us through all of it as our Good Shepherd. He shepherded us safely through this first part of the fight against coronavirus, and he will continue to shepherd us through the rest of it as well. His promises to us will always stand, and his love for us will never waver. He will never let anything snatch his sheep out of his hand. So as we move into this next phase of recovery from COVID-19, let us not forget that we have a Good Shepherd who always watches over us and protects us. No matter what you may be feeling right now, whether it be joy, excitement, anxiety, or fear, Jesus will always be with you, and he will never abandon you. He will call you by name and lead you, and because you know his voice, you will follow him gladly. Follow him where he leads, and you will find your way to that eternal pasture of the kingdom of God, no matter what trials and tribulations you have to go through to get there. Amen.