

Head of Christiana Presbyterian Church
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Newark, Delaware

Psalm 23
John 10:11-18

“More Sheep”

Pregnancy is a challenging job, even in the best of circumstances. To have good health, a caring family, a strong support system and financial resources ... and so much more is needed to navigate through pregnancy, delivery and to make a solid start.

You understand that some pregnant women don't have all that. Some, in Delaware are languishing in prison. Many stuck with alcohol and drug addictions. They receive minimum medical assistance for themselves and their yet unborn child. For delivery, the mother is transported to the hospital. The baby is born ... and in a few cases, taken home by extended family. In too many cases, the child taken by child protective services and placed in foster care. The mother returns to prison. And that is that.

There is a new way, however ... a better way inaugurated here in Delaware. Located here in Newark. Kate and I learned about it last Thursday at the monthly meeting of the interfaith council of pastors and leaders of Newark. Thursday, the interfaith group met here at Head of Christiana.

“New Expectations” Is the name of this fledgling organization. They have taken over property that was formerly Emmaus House. This home in Newark houses pregnant, drug addicted offenders so they can give birth while in custody and bond with their babies after they are born.

New Expectations was created by the Department of Corrections and its healthcare provider, Connections Community Support Programs, in cooperation with sentencing judges. It is an alternative to incarceration in prison.

With New Expectations, a mother is sentenced to live there for the duration of her pregnancy plus up to six months after birth to allow for critical post-birth mother-baby bonding. Also, through

the mother's entire stay she is surrounded with intensive care, counseling and practical assistance and training so that upon discharge she her child can return to a home, in a new community, with her baby. Really, a new start.

State Corrections Commissioner Robert Coupe said the criminal justice system struggles with how to handle pregnant female offenders who use drugs and he wanted to have a better way.

"The more I learned about the problem, the more I thought, 'There has got to be a better way,'" he said. "How do we help these women? How can we meet their needs without sending them to prison?"

New Expectations has been open since November and has room for up to 17 women and their newborns. Last Thursday we pastors and religious leaders learned of new program. We were quite impressed.

I'M TRUSTING THAT YOU CATCH THE CONNECTION ...
MORE SHEEP.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. And the good shepherd cares for sheep ... and flock.

We think about "The Good Shepherd," and the 23rd Psalm gives us a very good picture:

The good shepherd gives me rest in green pastures.
Provides me water.
Restores my soul.
Leads me in right paths.

But as we consider that psalm within the church, the community of the faithful ... the reading/the appreciation expands ...

The good shepherd gives **us** rest in green pastures.
Provides **us** water.
Restores **our** souls.
Leads **us** in right paths.

Even though **we** walk through the darkest of valleys
we fear no evil. The good shepherd comforts **us**.
Prepares a table before **us** in the presence of **our**
enemies.

Certainly goodness and mercy shall follow **us** all the days of **our** life, and **we** shall dwell in the house of our Lord **our** whole life long. (Psalm 23)

That's a pretty good picture of the way we live within the body of Christ. The church. Those who are called. We are not alone.

Please look to your left and your right.

To those in front of you ... and those behind you.

We belong to God.

Jesus, God's special child, is our good shepherd.

But even more ... The good shepherd affirms ... **I have other sheep who are not of this sheepfold.** I wonder, who are these other sheep? John Calvin, and many before Calvin and since identify those "other sheep, not of this fold," as the **Gentiles.**

... Those who did not identify as being Jewish and who follow Jewish laws and customs.

But here in the 21st century the context requires that we expand the boundaries of the historical context. Who are the contemporary Gentiles? Who are the "other sheep" for us?

And that's what got my heart and mind racing last Thursday morning as I learned about this outreach/this mission with women who are addicted, pregnant, and incarcerated. Yet who are seeking a restored, hope filled life.

Those different. Ignored. Criticized. Ostracized. The key theme is that these others are Christ's sheep too, just as we ... and they too may recognize his voice.

So the good shepherd does not merely care for the sheep, but also gathers the flock. As I see it, those who see, hear and come to trust in Jesus belong to the community; and so the door is open wide to the outcasts of the day – to sinners, lepers, women, Samaritans, tax collectors, and more.

Jesus is concerned for the individual welfare of each sheep – Jesus knows each by name.

and he cares too for the communal destiny of the flock ... Jesus gathers them into the fold!

The text before us this morning speaks of intimacy and security. The good shepherd is sufficient for the care of the flock – after all, the shepherd and the sheep know each other. And how we hunger to know and to be known – so we create virtual communities like with Facebook and through online chats.

Forming authentic and all-inclusive community is hard work. We dole out parts of ourselves in stingy bits and pieces,
 we avoid being vulnerable with each other,
 we hold back our thoughts and feelings,
 we are afraid to challenge another, it's like
 walking on egg shells.

We judge each other without mercy,
 hold grudges,
 clutch to impossibly high standards for
 ourselves and for others.

Our good intentions are misunderstood and rejected and we avoid commitments because we don't want to risk being exploited or abused.

We have a difficult time trusting one another.

So I wonder, how can we form community that is real and that provides and supports life?

Jesus assures us that our fears are real, and that there is an alternative.

Our emptiness and anxiety can be overcome, because we have one who knows us and cares for us and is willing to die for us, and is our constant companion – our Good Shepherd.

You fear you are losing it? You can't keep track of what used to be so easy for you. I hate to hear it said of another, "he's failing." I think, "Good Lord, when will they say that of me?"

Look, we have a constant companion – the Good Shepherd.

You're troubled by the seemingly endless barrage of bad news near at hand and far afield. Senseless killings, failing schools, languishing children.

Look, we have a constant companion – the Good Shepherd.

You have been praying for another in ill health ... or perchance, praying for yourself ... yet there's little improvement. Actually, **regression.**

**Look, we have a constant companion –
the Good Shepherd.**

I believe sheep and shepherds get a bad rap. Shepherds were listed in the ancient Rabbinic code as being one of the least desirable jobs for a Jew -- right down there with tax collectors and sinners. Why? Well, it's rooted in the long-time enmity between farmers and nomadic/shepherding people.

Around Jesus' time shepherding was limited to rugged land...land not suitable for farming. Shepherds, without maps and set directions, might wander over into property owned by a Gentile. Even worse, wander over into Samaritan territory and so defile themselves. Shepherds defiled. So too, their sheep defiled.

Cows and cowboys are admired. Sheep and shepherds, not so much. I read, and Jerry Cole confirmed that cows are driven ... driven from the rear. Cowboys surround the herd from the rear, hoot and holler and the herd moves forward.

Sheep, on the other hand, are led from the front. If you're trying to lead sheep, if you do so from the rear, they will line-up behind you. Dumb sheep? Not if you're a sheep ... and trust the shepherd ... trust the shepherd to be a good shepherd.

And it seems to me that the challenge ... the opportunity ... is to find our role ... discover our role ... as Good Shepherds. **And** as sheep. At times we lead. Other times follow. Many times, we walk alongside.

Where is the hurt? Where are the hurting ones? Lost sheep? Let us stop, listen, encourage, and carry along with us. And let us trust the good shepherd. The good shepherd will supply all our needs.

Amen.

