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A Sermon Preached by
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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF DELRAY BEACH

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Moving Through Despair

John 10:7-17

Listen for God's Word:

"I am the good shepherd. I know my own sheep and they know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. I give up my life for the sheep.

John 10:14, 15 (Common English Bible)

There are people who cling very tightly to the past. They are unable to let go. They hold on beyond anything that is reasonable. Consequently, they are unable to live fully in the present. The result is despair – despair for what is lost.

Then there are others who teach us another path. An old man is lying in his bed. He is surrounded by his wife, daughter and four grandchildren. His breath comes slowly now. When silence stretched to an unbearable length, the youngest granddaughter throws herself on the bed and cries, "Oh, grandpa, grandpa, don't leave us." The man slowly moves his hand to take hers and says lovingly, "Let me go. It's peaceful there."

A great tragedy of life is that there are some who never hear the great message of the Old and New Testament; the news that we have a God who is a shepherd who covers us with grace and gently leads us into God's future for us. That is the message the church has for a frightened

world – a world that clings too tightly to the past. God extends the shepherd's hand to lead us into a future that is bright with God's promises. What is required is that we learn to recognize the hand of the shepherd and to trust it. God is a shepherd who, in the person of Jesus Christ, has walked before us, knows the future and will accompany us on the journey. More, Jesus is the great shepherd who has personally experienced loss and brokenness and fear and yet found His way forward.

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This is the message the church has to share with the world; a message of hope. It is not a message of optimism. It is not a message that life will be free of disappointments, failures and brokenness. It is a message of hope.

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What is the difference? Look at our Bible lesson carefully. Jesus self-identifies as a shepherd. When sheep become lost or injured, a shepherd cares for them and shows them the way forward. Despair is the inability to move forward. The shepherd moves us forward. We don't have to stay stuck; we don't have to be a prisoner of the past.

Winston Churchill said that if the present quarrels with the past there can be no future. That is to say that we cannot move forward until we let go of the past. Some churches have difficulty understanding this. Just this week, I spoke with a national church consultant who said he was working with a church in a large city. The church has a rich and proud past but is seeking help with moving forward. As he began work with them as a consultant, he tasked them with developing a campaign slogan. What they came back with was, "Preserving Our Past." The consultant predicts that they have less than five years of ministry remaining. Yet, this consultant is also working with another congregation that has an equally rich past and tradition. They too were tasked with thinking deeply about a campaign slogan for their long-range strategic initiative. They came back to the consultant with one word,

"NEXT." That is a church that has every promise of a vital, dynamic ministry for years to come. Winston Churchill is correct. If the present quarrels with the past there can be no future.

Perhaps you are familiar with the Roman god, Janus, from which the month of January is named. Janus has two faces; one face looks back to the year that has past with despair and sorrow. The second face looks forward into the New Year with hope and anticipation. The shepherd, Jesus Christ changes our face from despair to hope and anticipation. Despair is refusing to let go of the past – past hopes, past dreams, and past relationships. The dying grandfather understood that peace was in moving forward.

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In my second year of theological studies I was given a most remarkable opportunity though I did not immediately understand it as such. I was asked by the Dean of Students to move out of my dorm room and into the home of a retired professor who had never married. Dr. Ludwig Dewitz had been professor of Old Testament and Hebrew Language for many years at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. He was a man deeply admired by the faculty and administration of the seminary. Yet his reputation among students was somewhat different. Legendary were stories of Dr. Dewitz becoming exasperated at

unprepared students and throwing a piece of chalk at them. His aim was remarkably accurate. There seemed to be an unusual calm that came over the campus at his retirement.

Dr. Dewitz had now suffered a stroke and lost the use of his right hand and arm. Doctors advised the seminary administration – the only family Dr. Dewitz had – that someone would be required to move in with him for the first four months of his rehabilitative care. The faculty nominated me. Knowing only the legend of the man, I declined. I am ashamed to say that my “no” became a “yes” when I was further told that I would receive a stipend of \$100 per week and the removal of all room and board charges from my graduate bill. The relationship I developed with Dr. Dewitz became one of the most meaningful of my life.

He introduced me to the Opera and Masterpiece Theater; concerned that I was not sufficiently appreciative of the arts. He cultivated a deep love for the Old Testament that I did not previously have. More, he showed me what it meant to trust the hand of the shepherd, Jesus Christ.

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Early after I had moved in, I asked Dr. Dewitz, “What’s it like? What’s it like to lose the use of a hand and arm?” His answer taught me much; “You speak as if

I am stuck. I am not stuck. I simply have a difficulty to overcome.” He proceeded to tell me that his car was now in the garage being specially equipped for one-hand drivers. He pointed to the piano bench where he had just received in the mail music for one-hand piano. Dr. Dewitz had no time to lament what is now lost; what he once had but was now in the past. Dr. Dewitz was not stuck. With the help of his shepherd, Jesus Christ, he was moving forward. Despair believes that you are stuck. The good shepherd comes to move us forward.

Some years ago the wonderful preacher John Claypool shared with me this story. One clear day an Italian peasant met a Roman Catholic monk who had come down a mountain; down from a monastery atop the mountain. The peasant asked the monk what the men of God who lived in the monastery did day after day. “What do us men of God do up there on the mountain top day after day? I’ll tell you what we do. We fall down, skin our knees and then we get back up. We fall down, skin our knees and then we get back up. We fall down, skin our knees and then we get back up. We all belong to the Society of Skinned Knees. But we know that when we fall, the hand of the shepherd is there to grasp us and place us back on our feet and move us forward. You must learn to recognize the hand of the shepherd. Then, you must trust it. It is the hand that leads from despair to God’s future for each of us.”

