



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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Poland, Ohio 44514
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December 7, 2014

Second Sunday of Advent

Mark 1:1-8

The Rev. Robbin Del Nagro

“The Fork in the Road”

Yoga Berra had a saying that I love. “When you come to a fork in the road, take it.” We are all on a spiritual journey with lots of forks in the road. How do we determine which one to take? If there is one thing we seek on our spiritual journey it is direction. Finding the right fork in the road takes something we call spiritual discernment. Spiritual discernment takes self awareness, reflection on where we are on our journey, honestly looking at where we have been in the past and what forks we took, and, most importantly, listening to God.

Sometimes the choice seems easy because one path is open and clear and the other is overgrown and seems inaccessible. That is just the time that we cry out to God, “If you want me to take the difficult path, please send someone to prepare the way first.”

Charismatic figures in Biblical history have prepared the way of the Lord, from Isaiah to John the Baptist in his rough hewn clothing, reminiscent of the prophet Elijah. They prepare the way, they point to the way, and then they get out of the way and fade into the background. Only God gets the last word.

John the Baptist drew crowds larger than Jesus ever drew. Even when Paul arrived in Ephesus he found that there was already a community there founded by John's missionaries. But John had the wisdom to know that there was a limit to the work that he had been called to do. He knew that there was one coming who was far greater and that when he came John's influence would decrease as Jesus' influence increased.

When I found myself in the role of Sr. Pastor last March it wasn't clear to me what ministry God had called me to do in this congregation. I just put one foot in front of the other and did what needed to be done. Looking back on these past months I can see that my role has been one of preparing the way. I've been here to help level the rough places. But one is coming whose work with you is going to be different. The Rev. Dr. Brent Eelman will arrive on January 16 to be your Interim Pastor and I will need to stay out of his way as he does the work he has been called to do here among you.

The first task of Interim Ministry is to help the congregation come to terms with its past. That means taking a self critical, introspective look at where this community has

been over the past ten to twenty years, what mistakes have been made, what accomplishments have been celebrated, and what forks in the road have been chosen as the right ones to follow, identifying places where the wrong path might have been taken. We are all reluctant to look at ourselves with eyes not clouded by denial, compensation, or defensiveness. To begin the process of doing critical self reflection, we must first feel secure in who we are so that the facades we use to hide our authenticity can come down without fear. The task of coming to terms with our past, whether individually or as a community, is not easy and it takes a great deal of courage. My job has been to bring you to this point, to help you gain a healthy sense of your own identity, to help you become secure enough to enter into the process you will be undertaking in the coming year. I have every confidence that you are able to courageously enter into this process.

Advent is also a time for us individually to take account of the way we have lived our lives over the past year and even before that. It is a time to be truthful with ourselves about the direction in which we have been headed and to ask ourselves the difficult questions about whether the direction we have been going is indeed the direction that leads us to the greatest opportunity for growth and health in our spiritual lives. If we find that we missed the fork in the road this is a time for us to double back and find it again. This is a time for bringing closure to an old way of being as we prepare the way for the promises of God to break new upon us and be fulfilled.

We begin each worship service making an effort to confess our sins and ask forgiveness, but in the Presbyterian church we don't have altar calls inviting people to change direction and profess their desire to draw closer to Christ. But that doesn't mean that God isn't calling you to repent and renew your commitment to Christ. Every time that we celebrate communion together as we are about to do today, the pastor issues an altar call, asking each person to renew their faith in Jesus Christ and be reconciled to one another and to God. Every time that you partake of this bread and wine, you are answering that altar call. So we should be taking the time for serious self examination before we answer.

We all stand in need of correction even tho not many of us want to be corrected. In our scripture reading today we see that even Jesus is preparing the way. He is preparing the way for the Holy Spirit to come. The Holy Spirit convicts us of our need to be corrected and to turn around and make a change in our lives. Maybe the change is about being more honest with yourselves and others. Maybe it is decluttering your life of the unnecessary, maybe it is vowing to spend less on yourself and give more to God, maybe it is getting healthier or having a more positive attitude on life. Maybe turning around means that you will stop being a nominal Christian and begin being an intentional Christian. Maybe it means that you will reconcile with one from whom you have been estranged or maybe it means that you will spend more of your time devoted to service to God and others. Maybe it means that you will take an honest look at your own past and where you have fallen short of your goals and how you can learn from that past to do things better this time around.

Long before Christ ever appeared on the scene, people were yearning for a time

when it would be safe to look honestly at themselves and turn over a new leaf. People have always been longing for a second chance. Christ did come and brought us the good news that our history does not define us and that we can be reconciled to God no matter what we might have done to separate ourselves in the past. Today is a new day and we are given the assurance that we can indeed move beyond our history. We are being called by Christ to the new life-giving path that has been prepared for us. How will you answer Him?