Hokey Pokey
December 6, 2009
Luke 3:1-6 and Philippians 1:3-11

The common assumption that Advent is a time of waiting conveniently ignores the reality that God is present here and now, at work with faithful, committed disciples to reveal the holy realm of justice and grace. We are commissioned to participate in that work now, even as Advent unfolds. (The Minister's Annual Manual 2009-10, p 157)

Let us pray….

I would dare say that not many of us considered the hokey pokey, as was done during our children's time, as an example of how we are to put our whole selves into our walk with God. We are called to be intentional in putting ourselves, body and soul, into the calling of seeking justice and living into the grace that God has on our lives. There are times when like the game tells us we put a part of ourselves into that which God would have us to do and then we pull away. We remove ourselves from our calling and allow others around us to carry the load or pick up where we have decided to pull out. **Our gospel reading today makes clear** that our Savior is present to us not only during our times of joy –when we put our whole selves in--, but also in those times we pull ourselves out. Those times we might identify as desert experiences. Those times we feel as though we are alone and seemingly wandering aimlessly. We are gifted with the Divine's presence so that we may be a gift in the lives of others experiencing desert moments.

We find in Luke today the one spoken of in Isaiah 40:3, "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him," John the Baptist. Who is this character? We have a **man dressed in camel's hair** clothing that is cinched with a leather belt at the waist. We are told that he ate locusts and wild honey. People went to him confessing their sins and were baptized in the Jordan River. John's baptism [of repentance for the forgiveness of sins] represented a change of heart, which includes sorrow for sin and a determination to lead [a different or] a holy life.[1] You see we can **sin through our direct action or commission** and we sin when we fail to act, omission. We

[1] Luke 3:3; NRSV p. 1539

fail to live a holy life or a life that reflects the will of God for us and for the world around us. John the **Baptist says to us, "You brood of vipers!** Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (Luke 3:7) Not exactly a warm welcome, wouldn't you agree? But we are to hear his message. A message of repentance. A message which asks us, "Do our lives, does the life of our faith community reflect our belief in God? Can we identify what our relationship with God looks like?"

Consider for a moment the preparations we make for a guest in our home. We make certain the linens are clean, we plan meals that would make our guests feel welcome, and we plan what fun activities we are going to do when they arrive. We examine our home and our surroundings in preparation for the one that is to come. We want them to be comfortable and we want to give the best impression that we can. **We want to be at our best.** "John tells us to take a good hard look at ourselves and at our world. The hour is at hand, the time has come, he warns, for a radical change of heart and mind, **a dramatic course adjustment, a renewal of our spirits**."[2] We are to "Bear fruits worthy of repentance." (Luke 3:8) We are to live our lives such that they reflect that we are a people **of justice and we are a people committed to living into God's grace** for our lives and in all of creation. John challenges his hearers, which would include us, to act in ways that demonstrate an awareness that they have had a change of thinking. We are to bear the fruit of the spirit which **is joy, love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control**. (Galatians 5:22-23) Our behaviors must coincide with who we say we are as children of God.

Let us look once again at John the Baptist. He was **unkept, in the wilderness proclaiming** a message of repentance, wearing camel's hair clothing, eating bugs and honey. In other words he was **marginalized and on the outside** of the religious and political structures of his time. Yet, folks in power sought him out. They wanted to hear what this "wild man" was saying. They wanted what he was offering. They wanted **to claim their place in God's kindom**. They listened to his message and received the baptism that he offered. Would we do the same? When we look to those who are

[2] Kate Huey. "Make Ready" UCC SAMUEL. December 6, 2009

different from ourselves are **we able to identify God's presence** in their lives or do we make value judgments and deem their lives to be less than holy without looking at ourselves? John addressed this as well. He made clear that no **one can claim a racial or cultural identity** that elevates them above any other group. He is clear that God is no respecter of persons. We are all equal in God's eyes. That includes our sisters and our brothers in **Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq.** God is the Creator of us all. We are called to be **a voice for justice**. We are called to not only pray for peace but to be change agents actively **seeking peace in the world**. God is inclusive, it is we who are exclusive and it is we who discriminate.

John went before our Lord **to make straight the way**. His actions and his language challenged those who heard his message, including us**, to go the valleys of their lives** and truly look at who they were. John is challenging us to reach out to those people we would deem to be less than. It is time to let go of **that thinking and of that behavior**. Is there someone you need to apologize to but have just been too embarrassed to go to them and admit you were wrong? Now is the time to reach out them. Now is the time **to reach out to the homeless, the hungry, the poor**. It is time to reach out to those who are experiencing valley moments in their lives and help them up and out of their situation as best we can. John's message holds us accountable. He tells the wealthy to stop taking from the poor so that you might live your life in comfort while others suffer. Be content with what you have because **you have all that you need.** He tells us to see ourselves as equals. John tells us to be present with one another as God is present in our lives. We are called to bear **fruit worthy of repentance**. The fruit of the spirit – again, which is **joy, love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.** (Galatians 5:22-23) His message is for us to hear and act upon today. We must all repent of our sins of commission and omission and **must seek to live holy lives** in preparation for the One has come and who is to come.

John made straight the way for us and for others in making straight the way for Jesus coming. Christ is coming. He comes daily into the lives of those who are oppressed and marginalized. Christ

comes daily into the lives of the poor, the hungry, those imprisoned, those who are ill. Christ comes daily into the lives of those who are wealthy and in power. **Christ comes daily into each of our lives** as we experience what it is to live in a broken and hurting world. John tells us to prepare the way. We are to reach **back for one another as we look upon our lives and see only a mountain** of challenges, pain, and despair. The crooked web of uncertainty is to be made straight through our standing together as a family of faith and in community one with the other seeking to live lives that are holy lives. We are called to be present for one another. **Giving financially is a part of the call** on our lives because financial resources are used to feed the hungry, cloth the poor, keep the heat on … to provide for basic needs. But also of importance is our physical presence in the lives of one another. God operates in the here and now. **God uses us to share love, compassion, kindness, gentleness, joy, and to provide** needed resources. We are **God's agents here on** earth. And our work is to be present… to be present to God and to our work with God.[3]

We at Peace have much to celebrate in that we do reach out to those in need at the Hope Center providing them with a meal and sharing the love of God. **We can celebrate our Advent tree** and our desire to help keep others warm this winter. We can celebrate our monthly giving to the local **food pantries.** We can celebrate being a 5 for 5 church. We can also celebrate our adoption of families this Advent season. But we must also be **willing to acknowledge our short comings** continue to seek to live our lives such that they reflect who we say we are as people of faith. There are **times we live in fear and not in faith** and hold on to that which God would have us to give. God reminds us that **God is present in the here and now** and we are called to work in the present and to give of that which we have been given. Let us make straight the way for one another. **Let us put our whole selves in and make straight** the way for the one who comes into our lives in each moment, Christ. Amen

[3] Andrea La Sonde Anastos. Present. The Ministers Annual Manual 2009-10; p. 160