**Held By The Arms of Faith**

Isaiah 61:10**-**62:3
Luke 2:22-40

 Perhaps you have seen the add. The sun is out, the day is just begun. Mom stands in the doorway holding her young child. A boy, who is probably about 6 or 7, peers eagerly out of the screen door. The father has gathered up all his tools in the back yard along with all the parts needed for assembling a swing set. The dad says to himself, “Ah Fatherhood….” Looking at all the various parts he confidently exclaims to his wife, “take an hour, maybe an hour and half”. Hammering away, he again says to himself, “Building the perfect childhood with my own two hands. I’m going to be that guy, part crafts man, part artist, all dad.”

Even as he makes these bold proclamations, you see the day getting longer, and the frustration mounting, the hammering growing more intense as the various parts don’t quite come together in the smooth efficient manner he is anticipating. He nonetheless persists, proclaiming to himself, “this will be my legacy”. By now, it is, of course dark, and the dad is working by floodlight. As he steps back from the finished product, the swing sets creaks as it lilts precariously to one side.

 I am guessing that Joseph, the father of Jesus, would have managed to assemble a swing set without too much frustration or too many problems. After all he was a carpenter, building a swing set would have been second nature. But, Joseph also knows that creating an ideal childhood requires more than what you can do with your own two hands. This is also a view shared by Mary, the mother of Jesus.

 It is always tempting and rather compelling to imagine ourselves as people who are completely self-reliant. We can be that person who tackles a problem, a challenge head on and without asking or needing anyone’s help. We can solve it, we can overcome, we can build the perfect swing set or whatever it is we are setting out to do. This image of us as self-reliant doers and creators is reinforced by a larger American narrative of the rugged individual, celebrated in song and story, “creating our legacy.”

 In his book, Healing the Heart of Democracy, Parker Palmer reminds us about the French Philosopher , Alex de Tocqueville who toured the U.S. in the 1830s from which he wrote an often quoted book called “Democracy in America”. While de Tocqueville has much that is positive to say about the U.S. one of his overriding concerns was what he names as American individualism. Here is what de Tocqueville says, which as Palmer points out sounds very much like the dynamics of twenty first century U.S. “there are more and more people who, though neither rich nor powerful enough to have much hold over others, have gained or kept enough wealth and enough understanding to look after their own needs. Such folk own no man anything and hardly expect anything from anybody. They form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine their destiny (or at least a swing set) in their hands”.

 When it comes to raising the baby Jesus, Joseph and Mary know better than to think they alone can create the ideal childhood. They are people who themselves have been nurtured in the covenantal theology of the Jewish faith. Biblical scholar and theologian, Walter Brueggemann refers to the covenant theology of Jewish faith as the foundation for a “new social identity”, standing in sharp tension and contrast to the imperial theology of Egypt from which God has set them free and God continues to set us free. Imperial theology finds great comfort with the primacy of individualism, because empire theology works against any effort to collectively create a more just and compassionate world.

 Covenant theology creates an alternative consciousness where the joy and pride of building a swing set or creating a better world for children doesn’t come from what we have done all by ourselves, but rather what we have done together. It is not only O.K. to ask for help in covenantal theology it is encouraged and expected, because in this theology we share in life together and it is where God is known.

 Joseph and Mary are under no illusion that raising the baby Jesus is all up to them and them alone. Luke tells us “when the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.” Although they are poor and are of limited means, they have full access to the tradition of faith which keeps them in community, providing them with guidance and support. There are no first class, business class or coach tickets in this covenantal theology of community and God’s grace. Even though all they can afford for their sacrifice are two turtle doves, their offering is no less valued than that of a wealthier person who can afford a lamb. Everyone, regardless of income, circumstance or background is on equal ground before God and within the community of faith.

 Mary and Joseph come to the temple with Jesus because they have no intention of creating the perfect childhood for Jesus on their own. They barely enter the Temple gates when an elderly man by the name of Simeon takes the baby Jesus in his arms and begins praising God for the gift of this child. Luke tells us Simeon was a righteous man, which means that Simeon is one who even in his old age continues to work for a more just and compassionate world. You will find Simeon serving meals for the hungry. You will find Simeon in protest and prayer on behalf of those who are locked up in jail because they are considered to be here illegally. As one who lived a life time under Roman domination, Simeon has every reason to be discouraged. Yet, Simeon lives with the confident expectation that God is at work in our world. When Simeon sees the Baby Jesus, he takes Jesus in his arms proclaiming, “my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

 Also in the temple that day, was a prophet by the name of Anna. She is 84 years of age. Luke tells us she became a widow after just seven years of marriage. The community of faith has been her strong support all these years. She never misses worship. She is present at virtually every gathering. She knows all the hymns by heart and bravely sings all those global music songs the congregation now includes. Anna is a person of deep faith. Luke tells us that upon seeing the child Anna begins to “praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Israel.”

 Neither Anna nor Simeon has the energy to do all the things they used to do in their younger years. Anna moves much more slowly. Simeon is unable to fully straighten up. Pain is a regular companion. Yet in spite of those limitations their presence in the congregation is invaluable. Anna and Simeon’s embrace of Jesus, their compassion and care for all the children, stems directly from their love and justice of God, nurtured and strengthened in their lives together in community. Anna and Simeon are filled with trust and hope that God is at work. As one Biblical commentator notes, they are expecting God “to come down, not to thresh evil doers or crush the Romans, but as an infant, to elicit love, to nurture tenderness.”

 Although Joseph and Mary are amazed at the things being said about Jesus, it comes as no surprise to either of them that they encounter people like Anna and Simeon. Anna and Simeon are the type of people one expects to encounter in a community of faith, living by the covenantal theology of God’s grace at work in our world.

 Among the blessings I can name as a result of over 33 years as a pastor of this congregation are countless people who have been Anna’s and Simeons at Cherokee Park United Church, remaining faithful, living out the love of God in ways both large and small, providing a nurturing space for families and children, enabling this congregation to remain a prophetic witness to God’s love and justice. Ruth Albrecht was the spouse of a former pastor, filled with kindness and love. She laughed when at the age of 90 we asked her to serve on our Long Range Planning Committee, but Ruth did serve. We held our meetings in her apartment because it was difficult for her to climb steps.

Ori Erickson was a roofer, who in his later years took care of his wife who had a long battle with cancer. Ori was a person of deep faith who rarely missed church because as Ori said, he needed to be regularly reminded about the story of God’s love. Rose Sandburg, well into her 80s continued reaching out to members others found difficult because Rose believed no one was excluded from the grace of God. Betty Greider never ceased bringing a spirit of joy to the community she helped shape while baking fruit cakes and organizing sauerkraut dinners, for which I eventually forgave her. Jim Stoll, who could be stubborn about certain things, nonetheless was as faithful as the day is long, first one here and often the last to go, tending to things only a few people ever knew. The list goes on and on, including people among us today, who I will not mention so as not to embarrass or leave anyone out.

 Mary and Joseph could have taken a go it alone approach, doing the best they could to build a perfect childhood for Jesus, working on their own individual legacy. Instead, they chose to enter this place of worship where they and Jesus encounter people like, Anna and Simeon, Ruth and Ori, Rose and Jim and Betty. It is in community where God’s love and justice is proclaimed and lived out that we are all held by the arms of faith.

**Isaiah 61:10-62:3**

*In our first lesson we hear from the third of the Isaiah prophets, who like those who have gone before, puts trust in the righteous justice of God to spring up among all the world’s people. It is with this confidence and this trust that the prophet finds his voice insisting that he will never keep silent about the love and justice of God.*

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations. For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch. The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

**Luke 2:22-40**

*Our second lesson tells the story of Joseph and Mary who bring Jesus to the temple, drawing upon the resources of their faith, both for Jesus and for themselves as young parents. It is while in the temple that they are embraced by two elderly members of the congregation who immediately recognize the fullness of God’s love that is present in the child Jesus.*

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons." Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,
 "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too." There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.