

Christmas Day 2024
Luke 2:1-20
St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth
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Christmas faith, joy, hope, and love to you from God: Father, Christ child Jesus, and Holy Spirit, one glorious God, now and forever. Amen.

The angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' Let's pray: ...

We know this story from Luke's Gospel well don't we; retold through Christmas carols, nativity scenes, Christmas cards, and street pageants. We know it so well that at every point we know what comes next. And yet, it seems to be able to continue to reveal something new.

There's one phrase in Luke's Christmas story which seems trivial: "She wrapped him in bands of cloth" [2:7], or some may prefer, "she wrapped him in swaddling cloths."

It's mentioned twice in Luke's Christmas story: once, right after Jesus' birth when Mary tenderly bundles him up, and again, when the angel tells the shepherds to find him, with the promise that: "you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger" [2:12].

There's nothing extraordinary about Jesus being wrapped in bands of cloth just moments after his birth. That was normal practice for babies at that time. They were kept confined like this for as long as two or three years to ensure that they would grow up straight and well-formed. Swaddling a baby was nothing remarkable in itself.

Yet, the angel mentions the wrapping of Jesus to the shepherds, and Luke mentions it twice. Maybe there's more going on here than we're aware of.

Interestingly, the reference to bands of cloth wrapped around a baby appears in another writing - Wisdom of Solomon, an Old Testament writing translated into the Greek Septuagint but not accepted into the canon of scripture. In this passage, the speaker is King Solomon. He's explaining that he's like the rest of us, a mortal moulded in his mother's womb, who, once born, began breathing the same air as everybody else. Then, he goes on to tell us that he was nursed with care in swaddling cloths [Wisdom of Solomon 7:1-4].

So, Solomon, the son and successor of King David, is wrapped in bands of cloth as a baby. Centuries later, Jesus is born of the house of David as a son and successor of David in an even greater sense. He too is wrapped in bands of cloth. Like Solomon, he is a truly human king. His confinement in bands of cloth is important enough to be part of the angel's announcement to the shepherds when glory lights up the night sky in the fields outside Bethlehem.

Picture the scene: the newborn is a prisoner confined by swaddling cloths. Like Solomon, Jesus is David's son, and a king far greater than Solomon or David. Jesus is a captive bound in swaddling cloths and so much more, but no confinement can keep him captive.

He escapes from the cloth bands as babies do, because he outgrows them and becomes a man. But he escapes other constraints as well. The religion into which he is born is a high and holy one leading many to life with God. Yet, there are too many rules, some of them far removed from God's will on how to live life. The religious practices are often concerned with maintaining distance from others, whether sinners among his own people, heretical Samaritans, godless Gentiles, or oppressive Romans. Jesus struggles hard to escape these tightly wrapped swaddling cloths, and he succeeds.

The gospels are loaded with stories of how Jesus breaks free of the swaddling cloths of religious restriction and social custom to demonstrate compassion toward the rejected leper, the marginalised sinner, and numerous others who are deemed unacceptable. That Jesus finds his freedom means that they find theirs as well.

People expect to see babies outgrow what they wear in infancy. However, they don't expect to see adults outgrow deeply entrenched traditions. Therefore, it comes as quite a shock when the contemporaries of Jesus witness the spectacle of him escaping from the swaddling cloths of the culture they accept and support. For his trouble, Jesus is crucified on a cross, and his body consigned to a tomb. Somewhere in his early thirties, Jesus' body is again bound in strips of cloth.

Again, he escapes. Beyond natural growth, beyond liberation from cultural bondage, Jesus breaks even the power of death. He shows himself to be the true king, greater than Solomon, greater than David, for his reign is eternal. Jesus wants to reign in every human heart.

The Bethlehem manger begins the journey to the Jerusalem tomb. One sort of confinement leads to another. And the Son of God, the son of Mary, escapes from them all to irreversible freedom. This, he offers to all of us who are created to reign with him.

The newborn baby is wrapped in swaddling cloths... for us. When we celebrate Holy Communion, we announce his death and resurrection... for us. The mystery of Jesus is an indivisible whole. The cross meant for the man is already present in the cloth wrapped around the child. And all of it happens... for us.

Jesus comes to lead the way for all of us out of confinement toward that freedom which God intends for us. So, how are you bound? What imprisons you? What parts of your life are restricted?

Perhaps it's fear, anger, shame or grief. It may be a broken relationship, a betrayed vocation, a crushing timidity, a reluctance to trust God. Maybe you experience a nagging sense of unworthiness, an addiction, an episode from your past, harsh words spoken by someone in authority.

You may suffer anxiety about your future; a fear that you're not good or worthy enough to receive the good that lies beyond the grave.

Any of these, and many others, may be the swaddling cloths that hold you prisoner.

Whatever it may be that holds you captive, I want you to know that it is precisely for this, that the baby is born and becomes the man who dies and rises again. Whatever it may be that unravels you and holds you prisoner, the true king has arrived to lead you out of darkness into the bright sunshine of true life.

- Today, we celebrate our king, born in a stable.
- He is wrapped in bands of cloth, but eventually outgrows them.
- He experiences every way we humans dream up to stifle our lives, and he breaks free from them.
- He is killed on a cross, consigned to a tomb, dressed in grave clothes, but leaves them behind too.
- Christ has broken every shackle and his rule is eternal.
- Today, we rejoice that Jesus calls us to freedom with him. May we rise and follow where he leads.

Merry Christmas, everyone, and may the Child of God grow in you, and his love bring you home. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus, this Christmas and always. Amen.