

“Swaddling Cloth Savior”

Sermon by Oby Ballinger

Christmas Eve

Edina Morningside Community Church; December 24, 2017

**Luke 2:1-20**

*In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

*In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But 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 Savior, 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.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

Earlier this month I attended one of the Christmas concerts put on by area colleges this time of year. In between the musical pieces, narrators read various biblical passages, including the Christmas story that we just heard. As I listened to verses from Luke’s gospel for the umpteenth time, I heard something I’d never paid any attention to before. Tucked in there among registrations, Nazareth, Jerusalem, shepherds and angels, there’s a little, overlooked mention. Mary gives birth to the child, “and wrapped him in bands of cloth” before laying him in the manger.

Those bands of cloth—such a throwaway detail. No need to pay attention to them, right? Except for this: they’re mentioned again a few verses later. The angels *knew* God was present in those scraps of cloth, and they told the shepherds so. “This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth....” There might have been dozens of children born that night in the city of Bethlehem, but the one “wrapped in bands of cloth” was the one to look for. Though I’ve never noticed them before, the bands of cloth that Luke describes are a homing beacon. Here...here...here...God—born to us this night.

English translations use different words for the wrappings that contain Christ. Some opt for a general term, “swaddling clothes”, which brings to mind the little blue, pink and yellow blankets used by hospitals for newborns today. But just as many other versions use some form of a different phrase: “pieces”, “strips”, “bands”, or “large strips of cloth”. That suggests instead the stained rags of old clothes, maybe with more holes than can be patched. Instead, they’re torn into long fragments, then wrapped around the baby to keep him warm against the night chill. I suspect this translation is closer to the truth, because remember who we’re talking about here? Mary and Joseph are unwed travelers, likely staying with distant relatives in Bethlehem. They share space with animals because they haven’t the status or money to afford a guest room, even if one were available. Emperor Augustus would have had downy-soft

blankets. Governor Quirinius could have been wrapped in warm wool. But Christ? The swaddling cloth savior born this night will be found in holey rags.

Do you know the kind of rags I'm talking about? Certainly the physical ones, like old t-shirts repurposed for another use. But that which is worn out, rubbed thin and used up doesn't just appear in cloth form. Sometimes *people* start to resemble such "strips of cloth". I'm thinking about someone who feels threadbare this time of year when others are feasting at decadent, joy-filled tables. Those whose "tidings of comfort and joy" are marred by a zero balance in the checking account, a haunting medical diagnosis, no job to get a day off from, divorce or endless fighting, disappointment at God, exhaustion at caregiving, or bleak grief from the loss of a loved one. We fear that the trials, losses, and hardships of our lives have ultimate power to define us and our future, so we pretend they don't affect or apply to us. Maybe you're someone (like me) who tries to stave off such fear at failure by striving for the perfect life, yet counting all the ways we (or our children) fall short of perceived expectations. Perfectionism can become a fearful obsession—always checking things off on the to-do list, never enough, never sufficiently done, never able to truly rest. Do you burden yourself by fearfully pulling at threads of imperfection, until all of life starts to feel like torn rags? This is to say nothing of the marred world we live in, stripped of idealism by the realities of violence, abuse, racial oppression, overwhelming climate change, and fear of the neighbor. Where do you find—and feel—the threadbare cloth tonight? The rags, and the ragged?

But remember what the angels told the shepherds? "You will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth". On a night such as this, the God of heaven and earth is swaddled in bare pieces and torn strips. Such are the baby clothes through which Christ enters the world! Rather than being something shameful to hide from others, ourselves or God, that which is ragged is the very spot where Christ is born! God takes something which feels throwaway, left over, and used up, and uses it instead as the *very* sign of Christ's presence. It's so unreasonable, so unlike our human expectations of worth and prestige, that it can only come from far within or far beyond, as divine grace. The promise of a savior in swaddling clothes is this: you, me, all of us flawed as we are—even the entire imperfect, ragged humanity—are the cloth bands where Christ is born. That's the message that the shepherds knew to look for. You will find Christ in the swaddling clothes.

When we feel ourselves useless or would throw ourselves away; when we wonder about the state of the world and feel reduced to rags, Christmas is the promise that in such desolation, God is present and Christ is born. Into the humble manger, into the driftless and fearful life, into mere bands of cloth. And from such humble birth, this child Christ will grow to become the Savior of the world. Let that promise wrap you in every bruised and hurting place. Carry it with you and offer it to others in need of God's incarnation love in fragile flesh. Return to the humble manger as often as you can—any time you forget—to hear such reminders. Do not be afraid; you are enough for God to be carried in you. Let Christ be born anew this night. Amen.