

The Rev. Seth Dietrich
December 24, 2023 - Christmas Eve 9:00pm

Bands of Cloth

It is good to be together on this most holy night, to gather in the darkness around this sacred story once again. We always have many guests with us on Christmas Eve. Wherever you have traveled from, whatever spiritual tradition you are a part of (or not a part of) be at peace in this space, you are most welcome here.

On its simplest level, the story of Christmas is a birth story. Mary of Nazareth delivers the long-awaited child in the dark night of Bethlehem. There is layer upon layer of miracle and mystery, spectacular prophecy and pronouncement, but underneath, at its core we have a newborn taking his first breaths. Emmanuel, God with us, in fragile flesh and bone.

We love the stories of childbirth. We often ask the parents of a newborn to tell us the story, to share the unfolding of labor and delivery, how many weeks were you, induced or surprised, on the 10 point helpful scale, was dad a 3 or was he all the way up to a 4. Similarly, parents who adopt are asked to tell their own child's story of origin and how the child came into their home. As a joyful aside, I wanted to relay that the child I mentioned in last Sunday's sermon, Vincent, newly adopted by Katie and Gabe Benavides, just hours ago was the first live baby in a Christ Church Nativity Children's Pageant in decades. [How it went...].

Each birth or homecoming has its own collection of details, and each birth is likely a mix of some parts extraordinary with many more parts deeply ordinary. Our oldest, now 20, was born in the midst of a massive July thunderstorm in Madison, the lighting so close and fierce, that the large windows in that 1950's hospital shook as the storm passed through. Our youngest had a surprisingly quick exit. When labor began, we went from "ho hum, no big deal, we're pretty much experts at this because we've been through it ONCE" to "Umm, if we don't beat D.C traffic, things are going to get really interesting." But besides these little bits of drama, everything else was much more normal, even if still critical: the loving, competent hands of the doctor, the first skin-to-skin contact of mother and child. The little stocking hat, pushed down over that tiny little head.

The story of the birth of Jesus, the Christ, at first glance seems 100%, through and through remarkable. All extraordinary, no ordinary. As the gospel writer, Luke, tells it: from the spiritual conception to the Emperor's required registration to the animal's presence and the hay-filled manger, to this greasy pack of sheep-herders, barging in and proclaiming this mystical vision of not just one angel, but a sky full of angels announcing this child as the Messiah, every detail in the story seems almost completely unrelatable to normal human experience of birth. And isn't

this what you want for the arrival of the very Son of God, the one whose path of Love is the only path that can save the world?

But it isn't actually 100% exceptional. There is one detail of this birth story that is so common, so universal, that it often goes unmentioned in our own birth stories. It's actually mentioned twice in this story: once in the birth itself and once when the angel is telling the shepherd to go and find the child. "And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth." The King James Version says, "She wrapped him in swaddling clothes." The Common English Bible says, "She wrapped him snugly."

It is an ancient practice. Archeology has uncovered references to newborns being tightly wrapped in cloth in different cultures all over the world. In the ancient near East, a thick band of cloth, or several smaller bands maybe, all maybe 10 feet long would spiral around the child. It helped her feel secure, coming right out of the womb where things are pretty snug. And such a practice has carried through for thousands of years. Culturally we took a little break from it in the 60's and 70's when we had all kinds of fantastic ideas about how the laboratory could outsmart mother nature, and how kids needed to be free, not all bound up. But we eventually it became common practice again in the 90's. So that at first glance, a newborn in Milwaukee in 2023 looks not that different from the infant Christ two millennia ago. The swaddling clothes are a link to Jesus' common humanity. Emmanuel, God with us, is truly with us, one of us.

Now throughout the ages, some in the Church have wanted to turn even this detail into something spectacular. One of the oldest cathedrals in Europe, Aachen Cathedral in Germany, built during the reign of Charlemagne in 800 A.D has a collection of relics, these sacred physical objects that date to the time of Jesus. One of the treasured relics is supposedly the original swaddling clothes of Jesus, the Windel Jesu. Every seven years, the bands of cloth are brought out of this ornate, golden reliquary, and displayed for the pilgrims who have come from all over the world to be in their presence. For those interested, the next showing is in 2028.

Or take the astounding stories of the swaddling clothes found in "The Infancy Gospel of Jesus Christ." Written in the second century, and eventually rejected as heretical and non-authentic, the Infancy Gospel offers stories of 5 year old Jesus and 10 year old Jesus (and his mother) doing all these spectacular things. In one story, a young girl is possessed by a dragon-like demon. Mary hears about this and travels to the girl and she tells the girl to cover her face with Jesus's swaddling clothes for protection. And the little girl does. The dragon-demon comes back and the body of the girl trembles with fear. But then we read in Chapter 8:17 *"But as soon as she had put the swaddling cloth upon her head, and about her eyes...suddenly there issued forth from the swaddling cloth flames and burning coals... so that the dragon cried out with a loud voice, What have I to do with thee, Jesus, thou son of Mary, And the girl was delivered from this trouble, and sang praises and thanks to God.*

It's easy to poke fun. But I think many of us are tempted by this same underlying heresy: to associate God only with the extraordinary, the exceptional, the sensational. A wonderful part of the Christmas story, even in all its layers of miracle and mystery is that the divine comes among us in the beautifully ordinary, rough-cotton cloth pulled tight.

I also think we sometimes confuse the object with the action conveyed by the object. The swaddling clothes are not in themselves holy. The swaddling clothes are a vehicle for Mary's love and care for the Christ child. While we often think of faith as nouns, Holy Scripture thinks of faith as verbs. She *wrapped* him in bands of cloth and *laid* him in a manger. The emphasis is on how the Savior of the world, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, is utterly dependent on the tenderness, the attention, the loving touch of a mother. In other words, the ordinary can be transformed into the extraordinary by love.

When my father was dying of cancer 9 years ago, a woman from his small, neighborhood Baptist church knit him a blanket. The woman told us, she prayed for my father as she knit it. As he went deeper into hospice care, she continued to knit. And when it was completed, some of the other women put their hands on the blanket and prayed over it, and they prayed for my father. And then they brought it over. I don't know much about knitting, and this sounds harsh, but it was not the most attractive blanket in the house. It was rather plain. But it was very soft. And most importantly, it was a physical reminder of love and attention, an embodiment of mercy for his frail body. In those long dark nights he kept that blanket close, and it was on him when he took his last breaths.

Jesus, too, is wrapped not just at his birth but also in his death. He is taken from the cross, and tenderly wrapped in linen and placed in the tomb. And then the same Luke who has insisted on highlighting the bands of cloth on the baby, gives us this detail near the very end of his gospel: "Peter rose and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw *the linen cloths* by themselves; and he went home marveling at what had happened." (Luke 24:12). The story begins with Mary's wrapping Jesus in love and ends with the Father releasing the Son in love. And so goes our beginning. And our end.

And in the meantime, on this most holy Christmas night, may we give thanks that we have been bound to God in love, wrapped tight and snug, in tender care. And as we have been swaddled so shall we swaddle others, channeling the Lord's grace and goodness and mercy, offering warmth and security, in the most ordinary acts of love. Amen.