

## ***Swaddling Clothes***

Luke 2:6, 7

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Right before we sang *Away in a Manger*, one of my favorite Christmas Carols, we heard these words from the gospel of Luke. ***“And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.”*** That image of the Son of God, the Prince of Peace, Emmanuel, God with us, the King of kings and the Lord of lords, the precious Christ Child, Baby Jesus, being wrapped in swaddling clothes just strikes me as incredibly powerful. The swaddling clothes were probably nothing out of the ordinary. After all, everything about that night was less than ordinary. From no room at the inn to being born in a stable and placed in a manger, the birth of Jesus was humble and lowly. So the swaddling clothes were undoubtedly simple and plain. But Luke has told us that Mary was paying attention to every detail of this sacred birth, storing all of these things in her heart. I wonder if she also stored those swaddling clothes. I wonder if when Jesus was a grown man and beginning his ministry whether Mary might have pulled him aside and given him a gift. I wonder if she might have said, “I was there when you were born, and on that night you were wrapped in simple swaddling clothes. I saved those swaddling clothes. They are yours now. I have treasured them in my heart and stored them in my house, and now they are for you.”

Maybe Jesus wrapped those swaddling clothes around his shoulders when he went to visit his old hometown synagogue, that Sabbath day in Nazareth. Wrapped in swaddling clothes, they handed to Jesus the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and he unrolled it and found the place where it is written:

***“The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*** Wrapped in those swaddling clothes it was almost like he wrapped up the hopes and dreams of all the people of God when he said, ***“Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”***

Maybe Jesus was wrapped in those swaddling clothes as he was preaching and teaching out in the countryside, telling people about the kingdom of heaven and healing and making people whole. Then late in the day it occurred to everyone that there was not near enough food for all these people who had come to hear the good news of great joy. While the disciples were anxiously plotting how to send the people off to find their own food Jesus slowly unwrapped those swaddling clothes, spread them out over a flat stone to make a tablecloth, and then whispered to his disciples, "What do you say we give them something to eat?" As more than 5,000 people came and ate their fill from just a few loaves and a couple of fish, the words of the prophet Isaiah came true right before eyes, "***Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost...Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.***" (Isaiah 55) He spread his swaddling clothes out and made a banquet table and said to all of us, Come, come, come...just like he would later say come unto me all who are weary and heavy-laden and I will give you rest. He spread out his swaddling clothes and prepared a table of plenty for us and said *Come*.

Maybe those swaddling clothes were flapping in the wind when the leper came to him, his sad eyes filled with a glimmer of hope. "***If you are willing you can make me clean.***" If you are willing...how many besides the leper came, clinging to the possibility that maybe, just maybe God wasn't against them. Maybe, just maybe, even though life had been difficult and skin had been infected and legs and ears and eyes and tongues were not working just right, maybe, just maybe, God was not against them. Jesus seemed so kind, so loving, so concerned, maybe God was even for them. And so to the leper, the lame, the blind, and the deaf, he peeled those swaddling clothes from his back and he wrapped up in a bond of love the least, the last, and the lost. "***I am willing,***" he said. Be whole. Be whole because you are beloved.

Maybe those swaddling clothes were getting in the way that day in the house of the Pharisee. Do you remember that day? Jesus was invited into the home of a Pharisee, but when Jesus came in a sinful woman snuck in behind him. Then in front of everyone she bowed down at his feet, opened an alabaster jar of perfume and began kissing and anointing his feet with the perfume and adding her tender tears to the perfume as she poured out her heart and poured out her love to Jesus. And while she was anointing his feet maybe those swaddling clothes kept getting in the way. But those swaddling clothes were not in the way. No, they were there for a purpose. Jesus might have taken those swaddling clothes and used them to wipe away every tear from the eyes of this woman, this woman whose forgiveness was so real and so rich that it filled her heart with worship and adoration.

Maybe Jesus was wearing those swaddling clothes as his journey was coming to an end. Just before the Passover Feast, the last Passover Feast Jesus would ever celebrate, when Jesus knew the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father, he showed his disciples the full extent of his love. That night, with his disciples, he got up from the meal they were sharing, took off his outer clothing...took off those swaddling clothes, then using them as a towel he wrapped those swaddling clothes around his waist and began to wash the feet of his disciples, and he used those very swaddling clothes to dry the feet of his disciples. By now those swaddling clothes had not only wrapped up the baby Jesus they had dried tears and cleaned dirty feet and embraced the sinners and the broken and they had fed the hungry and been the robe he used when he was preaching the good news, and those swaddling clothes were showing the wear and tear of a God who really knew what it was like to be with his people.

But those swaddling clothes were still wrapped around Jesus, symbolizing just how much God cared for his precious children. *Those swaddling clothes were evidence that Jesus, the Man of Sorrows, had taken up our infirmities and carried our diseases.* So wrapped in his swaddling clothes he made his way out to the Mount of Olives. He prayed in anguish and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. As he prayed that if it was the Father's will the cup might be taken from him, the cold reality of the path he would walk caused a shiver, and he pulled those swaddling clothes tight around him.

Soon the words of the creed would boil things down to this simple phrase, "He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried." When he was buried, it would only seem fitting that as Joseph of Arimathea took the body of Jesus, the cold, dead, and lifeless body of Jesus, and placed that dead body in the tomb, that Joseph would wrap our precious Lord and Savior in a linen cloth. **Could that linen cloth be the very one that welcomed Jesus to the manger in Bethlehem.** Was Jesus wrapped once again in those swaddling clothes?

*During Jesus' time there was one way a carpenter let the contractor know a job was finished. It was a signature so to speak. Imagine a hot afternoon in Galilee. Jesus has completed the final pieces of a job he has worked on for several days. He takes a final...and welcome...drink of cool water from a leather bag. Then standing to the side, he pours the water over his face and chest, splashing it over his arms to clean himself before the journey home. With a linen cloth, he pats his face and arms dry. Finally, Jesus folds the linen cloth neatly in half, then in half again. He sets it on the work bench and walks away. Whoever arrives to inspect the work will see the cloth and understand its simple message: the work is finished. Christ's disciples knew this carpenters' tradition. On a Sunday of sorrow, three years after Jesus had set aside his carpenter tools, Peter will crouch to look into an empty tomb and see only a linen cloth that the risen*

*Lord had left behind. The linen cloth that covered the face of Jesus had been folded in half, in half again, and left neatly on the floor of the tomb. His work is finished.*

His work is finished. His life, his death, and his resurrection have won a victory that is lasting, complete, and eternal. His work is finished. In some ways, it is finished. But in other ways it is always just beginning. That same linen cloth that might have accompanied every step of his ministry stands as a sign this evening. Just as Jesus was once born into a manger, tonight he desires to be born into each and every heart. He is alive, and maybe he is holding out a linen cloth to you. It is a sign that he wants to wrap you up in his loving embrace. It is a sign that he wants to dry every tear. It is a sign that he accepts you and loves you and is for you and will let nothing stand against you or between you and the love God. It is a sign that you belong, that you are a child of God, that he longs to clothe you in his righteousness. Tonight, I invite you to imagine him wrapping you up in swaddling clothes and holding you close to his chest. Tonight I invite you to pray, "Come into my heart Lord Jesus, there is room in my heart for Thee.