

The story that we have just heard from Luke’s Gospel has been told and retold in many forms: Through the lyrics of Christmas carols, through Nativity scenes large and small, through Christmas cards, through Children’s pageants, as well as numerous other ways. For many of us this story is ground that we have traveled many times before. At every turn we know what comes next. But something so familiar can hold within it unexpected depths of insight.

So tonight, I would like us to consider one phrase in Luke’s Christmas story that we usually gloss over, and rarely pay much attention to. We first come across it in verse 7: *“And she gave birth to her first born, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger.”* Some of us may expect to hear the classic phrasing of the old King James Version, that reads, *“She brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger.”*

This simplest of actions, carried out by the child’s mother, is mentioned *twice* in Luke’s Christmas story. Once, when it happens immediately after the baby’s birth, but then again, when the angel of the Lord speaks to the shepherds telling them where to find him, promising that this will be a sign to them: *“You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger”* (v. 12).

Naturally, there is nothing unusual in how Jesus, just moments after his birth, was wrapped up in bands of cloth. It’s called *swaddling* and this is what mothers did and still do for their babies. They were kept in this confinement for months perhaps, to insure they would grow up straight and well-formed. As a rule, nobody would think swaddling a baby is remarkable. Indeed, my daughter-in-law swaddles baby Sophie, the newest member of the McDonald family.

Let’s also remember that the angel of the Lord tells the shepherds that the baby they seek will be wrapped in cloths, **thus giving mention of this detail a second time in Luke’s gospel story.** Perhaps, my friends, there’s more here than meets the eye. The reference to bands of cloth wrapped around this baby

could be a reminder of a passage from the Book of Wisdom, found in the Apocrypha. In that passage, the speaker is King Solomon. He's explaining that he's like the rest of us, a mortal formed in his mother's womb, who, once born, began breathing the same air as everybody else. More than that, he goes on to tell us that he was nursed with care *in swaddling clothes* (Wisdom 7:1-4).

So, Solomon, the son and successor of King David, is wrapped in bands of cloth as a baby and centuries later, Jesus is born of the house of David as a son and successor of David in a much greater sense. He too is wrapped in bands of cloth. Like Solomon, he is a king truly human. **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 this: The newborn is a prisoner confined by cloth that swaddles him. Like Solomon, he is David's son, and a King far greater than Solomon or David. This infant Jesus is in a sense a captive, a captive of the swaddling clothes, yet no confinement can keep him captive. (*The Great Escape Manual: A Spirituality of Liberation*, Forest of Peace Publishing, 2001, pp. 305-6)

He escapes from the cloth bands, as babies do, because he outgrows them. He grows up, leaves them behind as he first becomes a toddler, then a boy, then a man. He escapes the constraints of the swaddle clothing. This is normal. 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 it is characterized by hundreds of requirements, some of them far from God's final word on how to live life. His religious practice is often concerned with remaining separate from others, whether those others are sinners among his own people, or heretical Samaritans, or godless Gentiles, or oppressive Romans.

**Wrapped tightly in his swaddling cloth, Jesus struggles hard to escape but eventually he succeeds!** This is merely the first story of how he escapes. He reaches out beyond the swaddling cloth of religious restrictions and social customs to show compassion to a rejected leper, a marginalized sinner, and numerous others who are deemed unacceptable. That Jesus eventually escapes to find freedom will mean that mercifully others find their freedom too.

People expect to see babies outgrow what they wear in infancy. But they do not expect to see adults outgrow the taboos that normally go unquestioned.

Therefore, the gospels recount the conflict that ensues when Jesus' contemporaries witness the spectacle of him escaping the swaddling confining cloth of the culture which they accept and support. For his trouble, they place him on a wooden cross to die and consign his body to a tomb. This time, beyond thirty years of age, his body is once again bound in strips of cloth.

And again, he escapes—like Houdini! Beyond natural growth, beyond freedom from cultural bondage, Jesus breaks even the power of death. He shows himself the true King, one greater than Solomon, greater than David, for his reign is to be forever. He wants to reign in every relationship and in every human heart.

The Bethlehem crib leads him to the Jerusalem tomb. **One sort of confinement leads to another and the Son of God, the son of Mary, escapes from every one into an expanding and unstoppable freedom.** Then he offers this freedom to his sisters and brothers, all of us who are destined to live with him.

On this night, the newborn baby is wrapped in swaddling bands—FOR US! Remembering his death and resurrection during Lent and Easter—we realize it all took place—FOR US! **You see, the mystery of Jesus' incarnation is an indivisible whole. The CROSS that is meant for the man is already present in the CLOTH wrapped around the child in the manger.** And all of this happens—FOR US!

Jesus comes to lead the way out of confinement toward freedom from sin and evil and death. God intends this for us. And so, it would be wise for all of us to ask ourselves: By what am I bound? What is it that seems to imprison me? Whatever it may be that entangles us or holds us captive, we can be certain that for this reason the baby is born and becomes the man who dies, and who God raises from the dead. Whatever it may be that keeps us bound and holds us prisoner, the true King has arrived to lead us out of this present darkness into the bright light of a life that is life eternal and free. What binds you? How are you confined? Dear friends, what is it that may be holding you prisoner?

Perhaps it is fear...

Perhaps it is anger...

Perhaps it is shame...

Perhaps it is grief...

It may be a broken relationship, a painful betrayal, an incapacitating self-image or a stubborn refusal to trust God.

It may be a persistent sense of unworthiness, an addiction (legal or illegal), an episode from your past, or harsh words spoken by someone in authority.

It may be anxiety over the future or desperation born of belief that beyond the grave nothing good awaits us. Any of these things, and perhaps many more, may be the bands by which we are so tightly wrapped. They may turn us into Egyptian mummies—lifeless, parched and dry, ready to crumble into the dust.

But tonight, strange to say, a tiny King is born in a stable. He is wrapped in bands of cloth and placed in a manger. He will outgrow the bands of cloth. He will experience the way we humans are confined by our humanity, and yet he breaks free. He is killed on a cross, placed in a tomb, wrapped in grave clothes, yet he also leaves the grave clothes behind. John's gospel records that Mary Magdalene ran to Simon Peter and John and tells them, "*They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!*" Peter runs to the tomb: "*He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there...*"

But no Jesus! Do you see what I see? **Jesus the baby and Jesus the man is The Eternal Houdini! He escapes everything that binds him!** We can rejoice that he is calling us to freedom with him. Amid the ordinary bustle of a Roman census, something extraordinary is breaking through. A child is born—not in a palace but in a lowly stable. The angel says, "*This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger*" (v. 12). **God enters the world not in a blaze of glory, but as a little Child wrapped in strips of cloth—FOR US.** Because this Child grew to be a man, we too can break free from sin and evil and death. If we trust in him to free us, we will have the faith to follow wherever he leads. *Glory to God in the highest! Amen.*