

Bands of Cloth Christmas Eve, 2009

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph 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. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And 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.

When I was growing up, I always heard this final verse differently. I never heard bands of cloth, I always heard it that Mary wrapped him in Swaddling clothes and laid him in the manger. Never in my life did I know what swaddling clothes were.

I always kind of assumed that they meant baby blankets and the like. I didn't know what swaddling was, or why anyone would wrap a baby in it. I didn't know if it was a good thing or a bad thing, I just knew that baby

Jesus had indeed been swaddled. I mean, the Gospel of Luke really drives the point home. The gospel not only says in verse seven that Mary wrapped Jesus in bands of cloth, but when the angels are talking to the shepherds and telling them how they will recognize the baby, the angel says you will find the baby wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. So, what were these bands of cloth, and why were they so important to merit all this attention?

Apparently, swaddling is a practice where the new born infant is wrapped tightly to restrict the movement of their arms and legs. This is intended not only to keep the baby warm, but was thought to help the newborn develop straight limbs and good posture. From what I read, there is archeological evidence of swaddling as early as 4000 BC, and there are many people who still practice it in the world today. So, this was nothing new. Mary was not starting a new fad. In fact, we can bet that most infants at the time were indeed wrapped in this manner.

So, why then would the angels even mention it? Why would the gospel writer bring it up not just once, but twice? What were they trying to tell us?

It seems to me, that the gospel writer is trying to let us see how

human, how fragile, how mundane this newborn messiah was. This was no warrior god, descending on a thundercloud to walk the earth and free the people of Israel from their oppressors. This was a child; born of woman, through all the pain that entails. And like any newborn, this messiah, this savior, this Son of God was helpless and cold, and needed to be wrapped in bands of cloth to keep him warm and safe. Just like any other child.

And I think this is what the Gospel of Luke is trying to tell us here. Wrapping an infant in swaddling clothes was no big deal back then, but the writer wanted us to know that even though angels had heralded his birth; even though Gabriel had come to Mary and told her she would bear the Son of God, in many ways, Jesus was still a baby, just like any other. And that after his birth, Mary had taken Jesus and wrapped him up with loving care to keep him warm and keep him safe. I almost think this was Luke's way of saying that Jesus put his pants on one leg at a time, just like everyone else.

See, I think this is one of the miracles of Christmas. This is part of the Good News of the Gospels; that God not only wanted to come down and be among us, but that God was willing to share and experience every single part of what it means to be human. God was willing to go through all of it, from his birth in Bethlehem to his death on the cross. God was willing to

come and be a helpless child, wrapped in bands of cloth and laid in a manger, all for us! That, is love!

We all know the verse from John, "That God so loved the world that he gave his only son..." but it takes new meaning here, doesn't it? God loved us enough; loved Mary and Joseph enough to trust them with the care and nurturing of Jesus. Trusted them enough to allow his human presence on earth to be entirely dependent on them, to be entirely in their hands...and in our hands as well.

There is this wonderful phrase from Paul's letters, that I love to use, and that is that we, as the church, are Christ's Body in the world. And that is just another part, just another side of God's love. You see he didn't just trust Mary and Joseph to watch over the baby Jesus then, God trusts each and every one of us now to watch over and become Christ's body today!

We need to show that we trust in the Lord, in the same way. We need to give ourselves over to what God would have us do with our lives, to be His church in the world. Tomorrow is Christmas, the celebration of the beginning of that bond, of that trust, and then we move into a new year. Imagine if we went into that new year searching for what God would have us do. Imagine if we went forward giving ourselves to the path that Jesus

has laid out before us!

I'm not talking about just coming to church once a week, or once a month, I am talking about those everyday things that we think about but never do. Maybe it is helping with one of the ministries of the church that you've always thought you should get involved with, but never have. Maybe it is going and helping sort donations at the Northern Illinois Food Bank, or volunteering at Lazarus House. Maybe it is dropping some money in the cup of the man on the street that you pass every day on your way to work. Maybe it is actually going and talking to your neighbors, finding out about their lives and telling them about your own, or inviting a friend you've known for years to come to worship with you. Maybe it is starting something new that you've never tried, like a Bible study or a Sunday School class, or maybe God is trying to tell you that it is time to go back to something you haven't done in a long time.

It is almost Christmas. A time when the world was changed forever, because God sent his son, Jesus, to be born in a stable, wrapped in bands of cloth and laid in a manger. God trusted Mary and Joseph then with the body of the baby Jesus, just as we are trusted today, with the care of Christ's body, the church. Let us trust God in turn, that we may find ourselves

wrapped in the bands of His love!

Amen.