

"Oh Those Swaddling Cloths" -- Luke 2:12

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Pastor Michael L. McCoy

Fear not, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, Who is Christ the Lord (Luke 2:10-11).

Dear Children of God,

Christmas Eve is an especially wonderful time to hear the old, old account of the Savior's Birth. On this night, very little needs to be said to get us into the mental mood to make the journey to Bethlehem to see this thing that has happened, that the Lord has made known to us through the Word written by the hand of the beloved physician, Luke. It is truly a privilege for me to relay those events to you once again this evening.

So please, we have just come to the gentle hills outside the little town of Bethlehem. Do you see what I see? There are several shepherds ahead of us. Something must have been quite different for them, for they have left their flocks in the field and are, themselves, making haste to go over to Bethlehem. Of course, we know why, don't we? They were faithful shepherds, keeping watch over their flocks by night. In the crowded little town where King David was from, a Jewish virgin has given birth to the promised Christ, the long-awaited Messiah, the Redeemer from of old. The Ancient of Days is a newborn baby.

The blessed angel heralds the Good News of Jesus' Birth to those shepherds up there on the road ahead of us, announcing the Birth of the Prince of Peace, the King of kings, and the Lord of lords. Earlier, when those men were overseeing their flocks, a heavenly host of like messengers present themselves before those herdsmen and, forming an angelic choir, begin proclaiming the liturgical hymn: *Glory be to God on high! And on earth, peace, good will toward men!*

As suddenly as the choir of God's angels appeared, it departed, returning to Paradise and leaving the stunned watchmen of the sheep in the double darkness of this world's night. What would they do? Would they go? If so, where would they go? All they had and all they needed was the Word of God delivered by the angel. Not only did the angel tell them *fear not*, and not only did he make the Birth announcement of *the Savior, Christ the Lord, in the city of David*, but also specific directions to the *Word made flesh* and dwelling among us. Those directions are the sermon text for this holy night's message of Good News to you. The text is Luke 2:12 and the theme is ...

... *Oh, Those Swaddling Cloths!*

And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.

Thus far the Word of the Holy Spirit -- the Word of the LORD our God.

The Baby had dropped down within her womb and Mary had begun to walk the waddle-walk of impending birth. Had we been there earlier, we would have witnessed Joseph helping Mary, his betrothed, to find a place for her to give birth to her Firstborn Son. A manger is in the place they found since there were no rooms at the local Bethlehem inn. Evidently the place was for animals -- it could have been like a barn, a stable, or even a crude hole-in-the-ground, a sort of dug-out cave in the Bethlehem hillside with the earth on three sides forming the sides of the stable. Had we been there, and certainly we were not, but had we been there we would have discovered that *the days were completed for her to be delivered* and would have seen that *Mary brought forth her Firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger.*

Only because of the special revelation of the Word did the shepherds know when the event took place, where to go to find the Christ Child, and what to look for: *And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.* The herdsman are told that the when is *today* - this very late night/early morning - this "now" is the time. The where is *in a manger, this day in the City of David.* The what is the Birth of the Creator of the universe, the Savior of the World, Wisdom incarnate, *a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths.*

"Oh, Those Swaddling Cloths!" Foster father Joseph and mother Mary take the little Lord Jesus and wrap Him in strips of common fabric woven on a Hebrew loom by humble people ... peasant strips of cloth that some used to protect, secure, and warm newborn babies. But there was another reason for wrapping a baby in swaddling cloths. These strips of cloth were used to restrict the baby's movements, to still the infants arms and legs, and to bind the newborn. *When the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons (Galatians 4:4-5).* And so they wrapped the Son of God in swaddling cloths.

Certainly, the proper protocol would dictate that the Lord God Almighty would be given the very best that this creation could offer. Surely, the royally correct thing to do would be to find gold-laced, purple satin strips and wrap the King's tiny torso in them. But no, the great Jehovah must be encased in the rough cloth bands of the poor, must be placed in an animal's feeding trough, and must be housed in a little hole-in-the-ground; and we say, "Oh, Those Swaddling Cloths!"

The Incarnation of God in rough, common swaddling cloths is what we would least expect and is exactly what the Lord desired. In the Christ Child's humility and

poverty, God has come to the aid of His people, and not to the Hebrew people only, but to the aid of all people - you and me and that person sitting next to you as well. For our sakes, Jesus left the riches of heaven above and came down here to this world that sat in the darkness of sin and took upon Himself the clothing of the poor. *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:9).*

However, to accomplish our salvation, Jesus must leave the stable and be about His Father's business. Likely in the matter of a day or two, certainly after the third day, He left the stable-cave. Not long afterwards, the rough swaddling cloths that bound the Baby Jesus would be removed. I mean, they could not hold Him forever. Babies outgrow them, you know.

We followed the shepherds to this poor, humble place in Bethlehem and we beheld this thing that God has done. But it is time to get back to our lives, be about the business of our lives, and go to pre-school, to work, to retirement, and then, to the end. The shepherds had to go back to work, and so they did, making *widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.*

It's all true. Years have passed now and we are no longer following Bethlehem's shepherds, but rather, we follow the Good Shepherd -- this same Jesus Who, years ago, Whose Birth in the City of David was announced by the messenger, sung by angels, and believed by shepherds. As the years go by, the steps taken are no longer in such haste, for the way becomes more difficult and exhausting. The steps are shorter and tentative. As the burden is being carried, staggering steps cause a stumbling through the streets of this world.

The reasons are legion.

There are the sorrows of death from a loved one being snatched away in the prime of life; the gnawing aches because brothers do not believe in Jesus; the common pangs of hunger, thirst, and being exhausted physically; the compassionate heart that looks upon the many lost people in this world; the indignant anger at those who would lead the little ones astray; the special, numbing hurt of knowing that tomorrow's cup of sin must be drunk to the dregs; the agony of friends abandoning you; the awful pain when One must suffer because of the sins of others; the hurt on a mother's face as if her heart had been pierced by a sword; and the hardest stroke of all is when One is forsaken by God.

Dear people, aren't we a long way from the manger scene and those swaddling cloths? They seem so long ago as we stand here upon this earth with reddened, tear-filled eyes casting a vacant gaze upon the cursed ground that cries out for vengeance. If we were to lift up our eyes, it would not be Bethlehem's star that we

would behold in the dark Judean sky. That was many winters ago. If our ears hearkened to the noise about us, it would not be the cattle lowing and the shepherds glorifying and praising God that we would hear. Those sounds are from the distant past. We have left Bethlehem and shepherds, mangers and inns behind us and followed Jesus, arriving at a different place and a later time. Indeed, our eyes see Life coming to an awful, horrid end and our ears hear the Divine Hammer of God striking out the cold, hard, objective truth that *it is finished*.

Then what happened with Jesus? Well, after He suffered all those things mentioned and died on the cross for us, they took what was left of Him down, wrapped Him in linen cloths and laid His Body *in a tomb that was hewn out of the rock, where no one had ever lain before (Luke 23:53)*. The Son of God had fully atoned for - completely paid for - the sins of the world, from Adam's, to Mary's, to the shepherds, to yours, to mine, to that person sitting next to you, and to generations unborn. So they took the Body of our Lord and wrapped Him linen cloths woven on a Hebrew loom. "Oh, Those Swaddling Cloths!" This binding was not to keep Him warm nor to protect Him nor to still His arms and legs, for indeed, He was dead. Consequently, *they took the body of Jesus, and bound it in strips of linen with the spices, as the custom of the Jews is to bury (John 19:40)*. They placed His wrapped, lifeless body in a hole-in-the-ground and rolled a stone over the entrance.

To accomplish our salvation, Jesus must leave the tomb and be about His Father's business. Death cannot keep Him and on the third day He rose again from the dead, leaving the hole-in-the-ground. Neither tomb nor stone nor the rough linen strips of cloth that bound the Lord Jesus were strong enough hold Him forever. And here is the Good News: what could not hold and bind and keep Jesus, is also not able to hold and bind and keep His disciples, whether they be faithful shepherds who come to a stable to view the Lord of Life Who, while in swaddling cloths, is the silent Word pleading for them, or be it Lazarus being summoned from his cemetery plot, or be it the fisherman and the Jewish mother standing in the shadow of the cross on a day when the sun's light was extinguished, or be it the disciples who took Jesus' Body down from the accursed tree and wrapped Him, once again in the fabric of this world, or be it you and me who have followed the Good Shepherd to that humble hill and to that grave-garden outside of Jerusalem where we have beheld this thing that God has done, which the Lord has made known to us.

How marvelous and wonderful it is to hear the old story again and know that it sustains us for as many days as we walk this earth. Therefore, as we continue to follow Him, we stand here this night in the House of the Lord and hear of the Good News of a great joy which has come to all the people, and hymn our Hallelujahs, sing our Glorias, and express our Joy to the world, to each other, and to the Lord God. Like the shepherds of old, we glory and praise *God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told to us*.

From beginning to end it is the true account of our salvation. There was no room at the inn; there was a rock-hewn grave in which no one had been buried. His mother and Joseph laid her Savior-Son in a manger; His mother was nearby when another Joseph laid her Savior-Son in the tomb. At both events He was bound by strips of cloth. Those swaddling cloths represent a continuous, common thread of salvation that runs from the rough strips at Bethlehem when Jesus drew His first breathes, to the linen strips outside Jerusalem after Jesus breathed His last. They could not keep Him bound. He left them behind both times -- the first time when emerged from and left His infancy; the second time when He arose from and left the tomb. "Oh, Those Swaddling Cloths!" Amen.