

From Cradle to Grave and Beyond

Luke 2:7

The Nativity of Our Lord

December 24, 2001 -- Christmas Eve

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Boise, Idaho

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I. And she brought forth her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

Dear hearers of th' Incarnate Lord,
Rejoice to hear His holy Word!
The greatest gift this Christmas Eve
You do not see, but yet believe:
That Baby is your soul's reprieve
From cradle to grave and beyond.

And so the firstborn son is born. Born to Mary. Conceived by the Holy Ghost nine months before. Begotten of His Father before all worlds.

Oh, this Baby is not just any baby. Nor is He just a symbol of peace and life today, as the world would have you believe. He does not symbolize peace and life: He is your peace and life. And even as He spends His first night out of the womb, He is already at work for your redemption.

II. And wrapped Him in swaddling clothes

There He is, wrapped up tight in swaddling clothes: And while the sight may be cute, it is far more amazing than that. Of this Infant, John says, "All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made" (Jn 1:3). Though impossible to fathom, it is still true: Mary has given birth to her own Creator. The Maker of heaven and earth is now wrapped tight and immovable, bound firm by strips of cloth.

All you see is an Infant, but do not be deceived. He is helpless there only because He permits Himself to be, like a father who permits his child to best him in a footrace. He appears powerless and immobile; and according to His human nature, He is. Yet, the mysterious miracle is true that In Him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28).

So there He is, this Baby who is both God and man: He is the Son of God from Eternity, but He has just been born. He is all-present throughout the heavens and earth, and He's lying immobile in a manger. He is all-knowing according to His divine nature, but according to His human nature He has yet to find His toes. He is all-powerful, and the earth melts when He utters His voice; yet He lies helpless in a manger, held immobile by a little bit of swaddling cloth. This Child is a mystery far beyond our understanding; for as one pastor wrote with utmost reverence, this Baby is nothing less than God in diapers.

He's not just a Baby and He's not just a symbol. He's the Son of God incarnate, "in [human] flesh." And He is born and wrapped in swaddling clothes for a reason.

The reason is your redemption. Mankind is helplessly lost in sin and is facing death-physical and eternal-because of it. Jesus is born a helpless infant, as infants are until they grow up. He will grow up, and He will redeem the world by His death on the cross, for only He can. As the only human being without sin, He can pay the wages of sin for somebody beside Himself. As the Son of God, He can pay the price for the whole world. That's why He's born-to redeem us by His death. That's why He's lying in the manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes.

Wrapped in clothes: As His life begins, so it ends. When He is all grown up, He will be wrapped up, helpless and immovable, again: There was a man named Joseph, a council member, a good and just man. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen, and laid it in a tomb that was hewn out of the rock, where no one had ever lain before. (Lk. 23:50, 52-53).

It may seem a bit gruesome to speak of the cross and death on Christmas Eve. But that is why the Baby is born: To live a perfect, sinless life so that He can credit you with His holiness. To die and pay the price for the sins of the world. To rise again three days later to deliver us from death. To wrap you in a robe of righteousness in your Baptism so that you might be assured of your salvation.

So behold the Infant wrapped in swaddling clothes, and remember:

The Infant's swaddling clothes foretell
The Savior's shroud at burial.
This Babe will Kingdom-tidings tell
From cradle to grave and beyond.

III. and laid Him in a manger

A manger. Hardly a place for any baby, much less the King of kings and Lord of lords. Kings have palaces and silk and pillows stuffed with down; they have servants and chambers and warmth. This King is the Son of God, and His birth is announced by heavenly hosts of angels as they sing glory to God. He deserves a royal bed; He deserves to be worshiped by all.

But His humble birth goes unnoticed by the powers that be. His arrival is greeted by a ragtag band of faithful shepherds who crowd into the stable. He's laid in a manger, and thus a cattle trough becomes His first bed. Not much of a crib, I'm sure: the workman who put the manger together likely didn't use the same care as a master craftsman assembling a wardrobe. The Savior lies in a bunch of rough boards slapped together for use by animals.

Given the quality of care in our lifetime, a baby in a manger isn't a romantic vision: It's shockingly crude and unsanitary. One would think that placing the Son of God into a manger would do nothing else than anger His Father in heaven.

But this is part of His Father's will, that the Savior have such a beginning, for it sets the tone for much of His humble, inauspicious life. He will never live in anything remotely resembling a palace. From Bethlehem, He will be taken to Egypt because King Herod wants Him dead. He'll return to

grow up in backwater Nazareth. When He grows up, He will be a traveling teacher who has no place to lay His head (Mt. 8:20). It's not much of a life for a King who deserves to be served by all mankind.

But there's a reason for this, a reason that Jesus Himself gives: The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many (Mt. 20:28). This Infant is not placed in the manger to live a life of luxury and be catered to by all. If He desired simply to be worshiped, He could have stayed in the far more comfortable heaven. No, He came to serve-to serve by giving His life as a ransom for many. It is why He is born, wrapped in swaddling clothes, and lying in a manger.

As humble as his birth and life are, His death is far more humiliating. The Son of God dies stretched on a cross for the sins of the world. As His life begins, so it ends: The throne of His nativity is a crude wooden manger. The throne of His victory over sin is a crude wooden cross.

That's why the Baby is born-to go to the cross for you. So behold the Infant in the manger, and remember:

The manger's rough-cut wooden case
Portends the cross-shaped throne of grace.
This Infant runs redemption's race
From cradle to grave and beyond.

IV. because there was no room for them in the inn.

There's no room in the inn. The Savior comes to save mankind; but in all the inn of Bethlehem, not one can be found who will give up his room for the mother in labor with the Lord. So the Son of God is born in a stable, certified completely acceptable for use by animals. Given the area around Bethlehem, some scholars believe that the stable may not have been a building at all, but rather a small cave. In any event, building or cave, that stable is a dank, dark grotto and no place for the newborn Infant. Right off the bat, the Savior is kicked out of the house and assigned to a far worse place. Right from the start, His own receive Him not.

But that is the lot of the sinless Savior on earth, and He will endure many inhospitable places. He will battle the devil in the wilderness for forty days and nights for us. He will announce to His hometown that He is their Savior, and they will respond by trying to throw Him off a cliff; yet rather than abandon ungrateful sinners, He persists in His saving work for us. He is invited to a nice meal with the Pharisees, only to be rejected by them because He tries to give them salvation. He stands before Pilate and speaks the truth about sin and grace, only to be scourged; as He bleeds, He still endures because He sheds His blood for us. His next stops are only worse: a hill called Golgotha and a cross, so that He might suffer the hellish punishment for our sin; and a borrowed tomb after sinful man puts the Savior to death.

As His life begins, so it ends. The Infant who first rests in a cold, dark stable is laid to rest in a tomb carved out of rock. There is a reason: He endures the cross in your place, so that you are delivered from the eternal punishment of sin and delivered to the glory of heaven. For Him there is a tomb, that He might be raised and make yours and empty grave for eternity.

So behold the Infant in the stable, and remember:

The dank and drafty stable-room
Predicts the rock-hewn borrowed tomb.
This Child is born to rout your doom
From cradle to grave and beyond.

V. The Greatest Gift

And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Behold the Child in the manger. With your eyes you can see a newborn, but there is so much more we know by faith. That Baby is the Savior whose name is Jesus. Conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary, He is fully both God and man. The all-powerful Prince of Peace is in the cradle to go to the cross and win salvation for you. He is born to make your cross His cross, to suffer for your sin in your place. Therefore, there is no cross left for you to suffer, because He shares His with you in your Baptism. By water and the Word, you are born anew, wrapped in a robe of righteousness and cradled in His care. You are nursed by His Word and fed by His Supper, that you might have a far better resting place than a tomb: For the sake of this Child Jesus, you have life everlasting.

Behold your Savior. He is by far the greatest gift.

The Infant's swaddling clothes foretell
The Savior's shroud at burial.
The manger's rough-cut wooden case
Portends the cross-shaped throne of grace.
The dank and drafty stable-room
Predicts the rock-hewn borrowed tomb.

To Bethlehem, Jerusalem,
To grave and hell and back again,
He passes on the honor due
And runs this Passion course for you.

Dear hearers of th' Incarnate Lord,
Rejoice to hear His holy Word!
The greatest gift this Christmas Eve
You do not see, but yet believe:
This Infant is your soul's reprieve

From cradle to grave and beyond.